

# What You Need to Say

## A Practical Communications Planning Framework for Districts and Schools

Prepared by Stephen Abbott, director of communication, Great Schools Partnership

<p><b>Goals</b> The most important communications objectives for this school year</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. ...</li><li>2. ...</li><li>3. ...</li></ol> <p>*GUIDANCE: Establish your communications priorities. The recipe for success: make sure your goals are specific, practical, and feasible. You can't do everything, so what are the most important goals you need to achieve this year? For example: Do you need to build greater understanding of or support for proficiency-based learning among particular stakeholder groups, such as your school board, PTA, or business community? Do you need to promote and build support for a new pathway program? Do you need to assign communication leadership to a specific person? Do you need a new website?</p>
<p><b>Messages</b> What you want your community to know about your district/school</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. ...</li><li>2. ...</li><li>3. ...</li></ol> <p>*A "message" is a central idea that you want people to know about (or associate with) your school. If you could tell people in your community three things about your school—and <i>only</i> three things—what would you say? Keep your messages simple, concise, and jargon free (e.g., "Sample High School is committed to graduating every student prepared for life—no exceptions" is a stronger message than "Sample High School provides a personalized environment for every learner."). These messages should be incorporated in some way into all your communications, whether its in the student handbook, on your website, on presentation slides, or in conversations with parents and interviews with journalists.</p>
<p><b>Challenges</b> The major communications challenges you need to overcome</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. ...</li><li>2. ...</li><li>3. ...</li></ol> <p>*Reflect on your primary challenges and clearly identify them—knowing what you need to overcome or improve will inform your communications plan and strategies. For example: Do you need to dispel misinformation about proficiency-based grading or transcripts among parents? Do you need to improve the clarity, coordination, and accessibility of information because teachers, students, and parents are regularly confused or frustrated? Do you need to share communication responsibilities because your time is too limited and your responsibilities too numerous?</p>
<p><b>Strengths</b> Your top-three</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. ...</li></ol>

<p>communications assets</p>	<p>2. ...</p> <p>3. ...</p> <p>*Identify your primary strengths and assets—what your school does well and what you can build on. For example: Are you a compelling and persuasive public speaker? Do you have a strong relationship with your local newspaper, the school board, or local business leaders? Have you executed communications strategies that have worked in the past? Do you have someone on your staff skilled in communications, writing, design, photography, videography, or social media?</p>
<p><b>Success Stories</b> What positive stories can you tell—and how can you making them compelling</p>	<p>...</p> <p>*Educators often fail to tell positive stories about their school. What specific success stories can you <u>make sure</u> your community hears this year? Is it an increase in graduation rates, attendance, or achievement scores? Is it a fascinating class project or a program that’s turning students’ lives around? How can you make these stories exciting and engaging so that journalists, parents, and community members take notice? And—critically—how can you use these stories to educate your community about the school, how it operates, or the improvement work that’s underway and why it matters?</p>
<p><b>Community Influencers</b> Who needs to be engaged, informed, or enlisted</p>	<p>...</p> <p>*Which individuals, businesses, organizations, or groups are influential in your community? Who do you need to talk to, and what do you need to say to them? Which influencers can help you convey your message and build support for your work? Can you form an advocacy coalition that meets regularly to strategize? Can these champions and advocates be enlisted to speak out in support of the school, endorse your programs, write letters to the editor, or participate in community forums? Can they volunteer their time, services, or expertise to enhance your communications strategies?</p>
<p><b>Roles &amp; Responsibilities</b> Who will do what</p>	<p>...</p> <p>*In most New England districts and schools, primary responsibility for internal and external communication typically falls to the superintendent or principal. But can other staff members take on specific roles and responsibilities? For example: Can someone be assigned responsibility for collecting and organizing email lists? Can someone write press releases, news items for the website, or posts for blogs, Facebook, and Twitter? Can you make someone with relevant skills the “staff” photographer, writer, videographer, or designer? Can you find modest stipends for these roles?</p>
<p><b>Website</b> What needs to happen, how will it be used</p>	<p>...</p> <p>*While most districts and schools have websites, they are often underutilized as communications assets—for example, important information is often outdated or unavailable. How can your website be used more effectively as a communications asset? What important information or documents are not posted on the website? How can the website be used to promote your message, not just archive information? Can you start actively promoting success stories on the site or on a blog?</p>

<p><b>Email</b> What needs to happen, how will it be used</p>	<p>...</p> <p>*Email should be a central part of your communications strategy because it is a cheap and relatively easy way to reach and influence a large audience. Emails will only be effective, however, if you have addresses to send them to—so make sure you are collecting the email addresses of parents, supporters, journalists, and event participants (i.e., have email sign-up forms at every school event and actively ask for email addresses). Consider putting an email sign-up form on your website, and assign someone the task of collecting, organizing, and updating addresses so that your lists are ready to go when needed. You also need to develop an email strategy. Focus on high-impact information and compelling stories, regular news updates, and integration with the website and social media. Even six or eight well-designed emails a year can make a difference. Recommendation: Consider using an email system that lets you integrate photos and track how many recipients opened your email.</p>
<p><b>Social Media</b> What social media does your target audience use</p>	<p>...</p> <p>*Social media such as Facebook and Twitter can help you get your message out. That said, social media can also be time consuming or ineffective if you don't have a plan, so make sure you have a feasible strategy focused on achieving specific goals—for example, using social media to profile interesting class projects, student work, and teaching techniques that will help parents and community members better understand what happens day-to-day in your school. Use lots of photos to make your posts more enticing, or share interesting stories and resources that will give your community a stronger understanding of your academic program or improvement plans.</p>
<p><b>Engagement Events</b> How many, what type, why they are needed</p>	<p>...</p> <p>*Schools and community events are important communication opportunities—a chance to deliver your message in-person and face-to-face. How can you use or create events to enhance your communication strategy? Do you need to develop a compelling, exciting, and funny PowerPoint presentation? Do you need to seek out training in effective public speaking? What materials are you going to hand out? How can you better advertise school events? What new events do you need to hold? Can you use student projects, exhibitions, or capstones as opportunities to build understanding of and support for more innovative instructional strategies?</p>
<p><b>Communication Needs/Actions</b> What do you have to do, prepare, or purchase this summer</p>	<p>...</p> <p>*Based on the reflections and plans above, what are your specific communication needs? This is your to-do list between now and September. For example: Do you need to organize or begin building your email lists? Do you need to purchase an email system or a nice digital camera? Do you need to find funding for a new website, start a new blog, or create a social-media account? Do you need to develop an overview of communication roles, responsibilities, assignments, and deadlines? What materials or webpages need to be updated? Make sure your to-do list is achievable with the staffing, time, and resources you have, and prioritize your list so that the most important and high-impact actions are undertaken first.</p>

# Communications Timeline

In busy schools, it can be useful to map out specific activities by month and set deadlines. When building a communications schedule, remember that less is usually more. Doing two or three important things each month, and doing them well, is far more effective than writing down twelve things that never actually get done.

<b>July–August</b>	...
<b>September</b>	...
<b>October</b>	...
<b>November</b>	...
<b>December</b>	...
<b>January</b>	...
<b>February</b>	...
<b>March</b>	...
<b>April</b>	...
<b>May</b>	...
<b>June</b>	...
<b>Summer 2015</b>	...



What You Need to Say by [Great Schools Partnership](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).