



Indicator: The school provides a broad spectrum of communication to the community through meetings, announcements, newsletters, and a consistently updated website. (5189)

Explanation: Effective school communication must be an intentional process to connect with, and build strong relationships with families and other community stakeholders. School communication tools include newsletters, websites, and social media; these tools should offer concise and organized information that is targeted to various stakeholders within the school and community, and that allows opportunity for two-way conversation. Comprehensive school communication plans require a school to carefully reflect about messages and audiences to target, and can help schools effectively “get the word out” about upcoming initiatives or changes, and acquire valuable stakeholder feedback.

Questions: Is your school newsletter developed and distributed in a way that increases the chances that it will be read by the school community? Is your school’s website kept up-to-date, and does it contain organized and relevant information for various audiences? How does your school use social media for communication? Is there a balance between face-to-face time and electronic or paper communication? Is two-way communication occurring? Does your school have a communications plan used to guide how the school connects with stakeholders within the school and community?

Positive two-way communication between home and school and/or community, which involves listening as well as informing, sets the stage for developing a relationship built on trust and respect (Byrk & Schneider, 2003; Hiatt-Michael, 2010). Two-way school-home communication that is linked to student learning is a key component of effective family engagement, and schools must have candid and supportive ongoing conversations with families about how they can support their student’s learning outside the school day.¹ Unfortunately, many parents complain that they rarely hear from their child’s school unless there is a problem with behavior or student grades (NEA, 2008). Meta-analyses suggest that educators who consistently show love and respect for students and their families, and communicate frequently and effectively will be successful (Jeynes, 2010).

Overloaded teachers and busy parents may face a variety of barriers to beneficial communication, but wise school leaders will establish a healthy climate and find ways to promote ongoing, candid, supportive, bidirectional communication (Epstein & Salinas, 1992, as cited in NEA, 2008; Redding, 2006). In addition, building a base of support through effective communication with other community stakeholders who do not have school-aged children is critical as they pay taxes and contribute through fundraisers, donations, and business partnerships (Carr, 2005). Effective communication does not happen accidentally; school leaders must be thoughtful and intentional in their commu-

¹Recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires each district to reserve at least one percent of its Title I funds to carry out parent and family engagement activities, with priority given to “high need” schools (Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016).

nication processes, and build strong personal relationships with their colleagues and community stakeholders (Porterfield & Carnes, 2014). This brief will describe best practices for schools' use of communications tools and discuss how to develop an effective communications plan.

How can schools effectively use common communication tools?

Schools must use a broad array of communication processes and tools to ensure that the school community receives important information and has opportunity to provide feedback. Porterfield & Carnes (2014) provide suggestions for maximizing the impact of schools' communication tools:

- **Newsletters:** Most parents do not read school newsletters. To enhance a newsletter's relevance, start with a calendar, allow for easy skimming by providing headlines so parents can locate information they need, prioritize information by establishing regular column headings to organize content, be concise and use jargon-free language, and allow for two-way communication by providing a way for parents to comment.
- **Website:** A school's website should be an up-to-date tool that provides essential information and is focused on user's needs. Information should be easy to find and organized into segments, with opportunities for users to learn more about events, projects, curricula, etc. if desired. Websites should also be consistent; consider having a single trained website leader who can leverage resources and keep the website up-to-date. Schools should also evaluate how the website looks on mobile devices and ensure that it remains user-friendly on these devices.
- **Social media:** These tools (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, blogs) are powerful ways for school leaders to engage in two-way communication and increase transparency with stakeholders; balancing face-to-face communication with use of social media tools has become a requirement, rather than an option, for administrators (Carr, 2012; Cox & McLeod, 2014). A recent study of principal use of social media found that it allowed for greater interaction and stronger connections between principals and stakeholders, and significantly impacted principal's personal and

professional growth (Cox & McLeod, 2014). Principals from the study recommended that others first observe how other school leaders manage their use of social media, and then pick one or two tools to get started. Blogs offer a way to share a school's strategies, ideas, and success stories, and garner feedback; in addition, the transparency and open dialogue can allow a principal to build stakeholder support for initiatives (Sheninger, 2015).

What are components of a school's communications plan?

Schools should develop comprehensive school communication plans that describe intentional communication goals and strategies. These plans allow leadership to disseminate information about a school program or initiative, build supportive and collaborative stakeholder relationships, and impact stakeholder behaviors on behalf of the school (Porterfield & Carnes, 2014). Communication plans should include a description of the array of the school's communication tools and practices, such as newsletters, meetings, announcements, the school's website, and social media communication, and how these tools and practices are used to convey information and engage feedback. A comprehensive school communication plan as described by Porterfield & Carnes (2014) contains the following :

1. **Mission:** State what the school is trying to communicate. For example, "The goal is to introduce and build support for our school's new after-school program."
2. **Research:** Conduct an environmental or cultural scan to determine how community members may feel, how information travels fastest throughout the community, and who can be an effective spokesperson. Focus groups and online surveys are simple ways to collect information about any new initiatives or programs.
3. **Audiences:** Identify who will be affected by the project and/or who should be reached by communication efforts (e.g., parents, staff, business leaders in the community, religious leaders, etc.).
4. **Messages:** Identify the various messages needed within the communication, and target different messages to different audiences, if needed.

5. **Delivery systems:** Ensure that the delivery system matches audience needs (e.g., Gen X parents prefer short and focused information on the web rather than long, printed newsletters).
6. **Timelines and responsibility:** Develop clear deadlines for task completion and specify who is responsible for components of the plan.
7. **Available resources:** Consider costs for communication strategies up front; e.g., designing posters with a new school motto does no good if there is no money available for printing.
8. **Evaluation:** Consider what changed as a result of the communication. Measure progress continuously to ensure that audiences are receiving messages (e.g., monitor web traffic, create simple surveys).

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