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A Communication Toolkit

Communicating About Current Issues

A guide for Michigan's Public School Leaders

Helping schools communicate with families, staff, media and the community.

A Guide to Communicating About Current Issues

Background

Periodically, controversies arise that impact how we communicate with our constituent audiences - students, parents, staff, board members, community members and the media. How should school leaders approach these issues? What should we consider when developing statements? How will we share the impact on learning? Whether sparked by a change in approach, a new idea, updated materials, or another catalyst, a seemingly commonplace item can quickly grow into a hot-button issue. This toolkit is designed to help you use communication best-practices and two-way communication strategies to foster a mutual understanding between your schools and your audiences.

Important Note: This toolkit is designed to be a communication guide. It highlights some of the ways school districts may choose to communicate about a current issue. Remember:

- Always consider your school's policies, codes of conduct, local community needs and local climate as you address the information needs of your stakeholders.
- Seek content guidance from subject-area experts, as needed.
- Check with your district's legal counsel about related laws or pending legislation, as appropriate.



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MSPRA is an award-winning chapter of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) recognized for its communication tools and professional development. This statewide membership association includes public relations and communication professionals, superintendents, board members, community educators, teachers and others assigned to the role of school communicator. MSPRA and its members work to advance education through responsible communication.

This document has been reviewed by representatives from the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA), Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB), Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP), Michigan Association of Superintendents and Administrators (MASA), Michigan Department of Education (MDE), and the Michigan School Business Officials (MSBO).

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This Tool Can Help You Communicate

Regardless of the current issue, as school communicators, it's our job to accurately and truthfully communicate about how our schools are educating our children. Use this guide, along with your knowledge of your district and community, subject-area experts and other available resources, to help you.

This guide is organized according to the RPIE (Research, Planning, Implementation and Evaluation) process used by school communicators across the nation. This process enables schools to design and maintain a comprehensive, planned, two-way communication program that helps build mutual understanding and support between the schools and its audiences.

The RPIE process involves four steps:

1. **Research:** Identify the issue and gather relevant information—through your own investigation/first-hand experience and/or that which is reported by others.
2. **Planning:** Use your research to develop a communication plan and messages; use identified tools to communicate with your target publics/audiences.
3. **Implementation:** Follow the steps in your communication plan to manage the information/seek input.
4. **Evaluation:** Examine your communication efforts to determine if communication goals were met. Use evaluation results to modify your communication plan, if needed.

If you have questions about the RPIE process or school public relations, please contact MSPRA by visiting www.mspra.org.

1. Begin with Research.

- Identify information (re)sources.
 - Seek out and use information from existing resources.
 - Identify and reach out to experts in the topic area.
 - Glean information from existing district documents and procedures.
 - Does your district follow certain curricular processes or standards that would provide guidance about the issue? (For example, [Michigan K-12 Social Studies Standards](#), [Essential Instructional Practices in Literacy Birth to Grade 12](#), [Essential Instructional Practices in Early Mathematics](#), [Early Childhood Standards of Quality](#), [Career Ready Practices](#), [Michigan World Languages Standards and Benchmarks](#), [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#), [Michigan Department of Education Social and Emotional Learning Competencies and Indicators](#), [Michigan Model for Health](#), [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) or district-approved health curriculum.) What do those resources contain that could assist in your responses?
 - What does your board policy say? What do your strategic plan, your mission, your vision and your goals say?
 - What does your curriculum guide for each grade level cover? (What are your teachers teaching?) What is your curriculum review process?

- What have been your past practices related to similar issues? What systems are in place that support your decision-making process?
 - Has the district reviewed the issue through a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion lens?
 - What related training have staff recently had/do they plan to have?
 - How can a resident of your school district comment about your materials/policies/processes?
- If needed, conduct your own research (surveys, focus groups, polls).

2. Plan your Communication. (See the *Basic Communication Planning Guide*.)

- Identify target audiences and key messages. What do your audiences need to know?
 - **Internal audiences:** Board, administrators, teachers, support staff, bus drivers, volunteers, key communicators, and any others.
 - **External audiences:** Parents, parent groups, cultural and community organizations, community members, media, social media followers, and any others.
- Identify effective communication tools. How does each audience receive its information?
 - You can list several methods per audience. (e.g. email, voicemail or text message, notification system, social media, district website or app, meetings, announcements, fliers, newsletters, news releases, etc.).
- How can you include the student voice in your planning?
- Assign tasks and establish a timeline. Who is going to do what, when?
- Identify a primary contact person. Who will coordinate the overall communication effort?

3. Implement your Plan: Develop Talking Points/Key Messages. (See the following examples and see *Strategies for Delivering Key Messages*.)

- This is the district's educational vision/mission for our students:
 - We believe that ALL students can be successful and should feel safe and included in their place of learning.
 - We've always focused on Equity for ALL children. It isn't anything new. It's our standard of practice.
- This is what we want our students to know and be able to do. (e.g. "We want our students to thrive, lead and manage in a multicultural/diverse world," or "We strive to equip students with the knowledge and critical thinking skills to thrive in a complex, diverse, and information-based society.")
- We are teaching students how to think critically (not what to think); building on their inquiry skills. (e.g. "We believe students must have opportunities to explore the complexities of our nation's history from multiple viewpoints. We value instruction that focuses on the development of academic skills, knowledge, and also critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity and values and honors each student.")
- We are working in the best interest of our students. We have an engaging, relevant curriculum.
- If it's so, and pertinent, you can say, "Our district follows the (insert Standards of Practice name)." [Depending on the issue, one or some of these may apply: [Michigan K-12 Social Studies Standards](#), [Essential Instructional Practices in Literacy Birth to Grade 12](#), [Essential](#)

[Instructional Practices in Early Mathematics](#), [Early Childhood Standards of Quality](#), [Career Ready Practices](#), [Michigan World Languages Standards and Benchmarks](#), [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#), [Michigan Department of Education Social and Emotional Learning Competencies and Indicators](#), [Michigan Model for Health](#), [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) best practices, or any other standards of practice.]

- We support the teaching of (insert topic) even though it may involve some delicate conversations.
- We have a board-approved curriculum and review process. Here is where you can learn more about our curriculum and the approval process.
- We welcome constructive comments. Here's where you can submit/express them.

Communicate With Your Audiences (See *Communication Strategies and Additional Tips.*)

Board/Administration

- Review your board policy on the topic.
- Remind involved parties about curricular review processes.
- Share and review key messages.
- **See *Strategies for Board Meetings.***

School Staff

- Provide talking points to staff to share with community members who may ask questions. Include front office staff (those who answer phones/greet visitors).
- Encourage staff to direct community members back to official sources of information (district website, FAQs, board policies, etc.).

Parents

- Repeat your key messages.
- Remind parents how to share perspectives/concerns or ask questions using appropriate school channels.

Media

- Designate a spokesperson. This could be the topic-area expert, a school communicator or school leader. Use your key messages.
- **See *Strategies for Working with the Media.***

Community Members

- Repeat your key messages. This is what we want our students to know and be able to do: _____.

4. Evaluate Your Communication.

- Keep track of issue-related phone calls, posts and inquiries.
- What worked?
- What didn't work?
- What would you do differently?
- Adjust your communication plan based on your evaluation.

Communication Strategies

Communication Strategies

Consider these strategies as part of your plan.

1. Start with Internal Communication; it is key. Make sure all your internal audiences are included.
 - a. **Assume that all internal communication is or will become public.**
 - b. Talk with teachers and others; gather and share information and key messages with them
 - c. Help teachers know and understand the support they have and can expect.
 - Union support
 - Clarity on what the district is doing and ways it talks about the issue
 - Parent group support
2. Engage in **civil** external discussions.
3. Share, publicly, what your district is doing.
 - a. Lead with the big picture; start with the vision of what you want students to accomplish.
 - b. State what's true: **What is it that we want students to know and be able to do?**
 - c. Use the terms you've already been using to talk about the specific work you've been doing in your district.
 - d. Express your support for teaching.
 - e. Say: We have a board-approved curriculum and review process and welcome constructive input. Here's where you can constructively comment.
4. Draw a contrast at the academic level but avoid political posturing. We are teaching students how to think (not what to think); building on their inquiry skills.
5. Reframe the conversation—Position the school district as a reasonable partner in the conversation and bring in the persuadable middle. “We’re on the side of students. We have an engaging curriculum and we’re making it relevant.”

Strategies for Delivering Key Messages

Once you have your district's key messages, here's how you can deliver them.

1. Share them with all staff members via internal communication vehicles.
2. Develop FAQs that include your key messages that are reviewed, approved and posted publicly.
3. Share the FAQ link with parents, families, the community and media.
4. In conversations or discussions, use bridge statements to help make a key-message point. “I hear what you're saying...” or “I'm glad you asked that question...”
 - a. We're focused on our students':
 - Healthy emotional development
 - Healthy cultural identity
 - b. Our schools are about building our students' skills, abilities and future.
 - c. We believe all students should feel included.
5. If appropriate in your area, engage students as messengers.
6. Stay calm. Avoid taking the fear bait.
7. Never parrot another speaker's question or statement.

8. Go back to the basics; share your district's curriculum goals from your district's plan.
9. Say what you're doing and why it's important.
10. Show the books/materials your students are reading/using. Highlight their day-to-day work.

Strategies for Working with the Media

1. Share your vision for every student.
2. Educate the media on what your district is teaching—at all levels.
3. Hold briefings for editorial boards.
4. Hold briefings for reporters.
5. Use student voices.
6. Avoid acronyms.
7. Don't parrot media questions or argue their points; use bridge statements to make your point: "I hear what you're saying..." or "I'm glad you asked that question..." and then say your point.
8. Remember to use your key messages.

Strategies for Board Meetings

1. Establish ground rules. We are committed to **constructive dialogue** where all are heard and respected.
2. This is what we are doing, want to do, will do, and how people can help.
3. Welcome those who wish to comment at your school board meetings. (Hearing community voices and standards is important.)
4. Review your public comment expectations and procedures for board meetings. Do they include having speakers identify their district of residence? (Note: Those who seek to make public comments may not always be district residents.)

Additional Tips

1. Talk with other school leaders about what they are doing.
2. Build coalitions with other like-minded groups/organizations.
3. Establish an email, web address, or phone number where people can register their constructive input. (If there are ways to make it better, please share your constructive comments.)
4. Monitor social media. Redirect online comments back to source information.
5. Develop these tools as soon as possible:
 - a. An opinion or editorial piece on your vision for your students.
 - b. A message stating what you are teaching.
 - c. Information that can be sent to parents before—rather than after—a challenging board meeting, sharing your communication hierarchy chart or other form of communication with your district outside of Board meetings.
 - d. Approved FAQs that can be placed on your website and used as core information in other pieces.
6. Consider all the other communication opportunities in your area. Consider all other public forums.
 - a. Assume opponents will be there and that they will be vocal.

- b. Keep emphasizing how you're helping students.
- c. Always maintain your frame/perspective/focus:
 - o This is our priority...
 - o We're achieving it by...
 - o It's in the best interest of students because ...
 - o Here's how you/the community can help...

Additional Resources

Here are some resources that we have found to be helpful.

- [Community Conversations](#)
- [Frameworks Institute](#)
- [How to Approach Student Walkouts](#)
- [How to Approach Student Activism](#)
- [Justice Leaders Collaborative](#)

Sources:

- MSPRA Members
- NSPRA's June 25, 2021, Insights Webinar on "Navigating Equity Communications in a Divided Community"
- Previous [MSPRA Toolkits](#)

Basic Communication Planning Guide

If you are responsible for school communication, you can use this guide to assist with your two-way communication via the development of common key messages, communication strategies, and a communication plan targeted at essential audiences (e.g. staff, students, parents, community, and media). The resulting communication may be achieved via individuals or teams, using a variety of communication tools. The following steps will help you produce a focused, deliberate and impactful communication plan. (See sample template below. Numbers correspond to this planning guide.)

- 1) **Identify/define project or issue.**
 - What's the purpose?
 - What are the goals and objectives of sharing information about this program/project/issue?
 - What action do we want the audience(s) to take?
- 2) **Identify target audiences.**
 - Who really needs to know about this? (Who cares?)
- 3) **Identify communication needs.**
 - What does the audience need to know about this program/project/issue?
 - What will get them excited/make them care?
- 4) **Identify information (re)sources.**
 - Who has the information that you need to share?
 - Who understands this program/project/issue best?
- 5) **Identify the most effective communication tools.**
 - How do each of the audiences prefer to receive information?
 - You can list several methods per audience. (e.g. email, voicemail or text message, notification system, social media, district website or app, meetings, announcements, fliers, newsletters, news releases, etc.).
- 6) **Develop key messages.**
 - Develop overall key messages.
 - Tailor messages for each of the tools you use.
 - Different tools necessitate varying levels of detail.
 - While not all messages may be directed to every audience, basic messages must be consistent.
- 7) **Assign tasks and develop timeline.**
 - Who is going to do what, when?
 - Record it in a Communication Plan.
 - Use a different page for each audience.
- 8) **Implement plan.**
 - Work the plan; do the work!
 - What other resources are needed?
- 9) **Evaluate.**
 - What worked? What didn't work?
 - What would you do differently?
- 10) **Revise plan.**

Use what you've learned to revise your communication plan.

Communication Planning Template

Communication Plan for: _____

Date: _____ Page _____

(Corresponds to 10 steps in “Basic Communication Planning Guide” – courtesy of MSPRA members)

Audience (2*):

Key Message(s) (3, 6*):

Goal(s)/Objective(s) (1*):

Communication Tools/Activity: (5*)	Primary Responsibility: (7*)	Timeline/Deadline: (7*)	Resources Needed: (4, 8*)	Evaluation: (9, 10*)

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For more information about school communication, please visit www.mspra.org.