



Local Education Agency (LEA) COVID-19 Rapid Response Transition Toolkit

Resource 2: Communicating with Stakeholders

Developed through a partnership between the
California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) and WestEd

Acknowledgments

This resource is an adaptation of guidance shared within the Stakeholder Engagement Guide from the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) (December, 2014), specifically Resource 1: Four Key Steps for Equitable Access Communication Planning: <https://gtlcenter.org/learning-hub/equitable-access-toolkit/stakeholder-engagement-guide>.

The extended resources included in the links within this toolkit were not developed by WestEd or CCEE. The valuable work of many organizations and agencies are included here in order to address the range of challenges presented by COVID-19 for district and school planning. We would like to thank Entangled Solutions, the American Institutes for Research and their affiliated Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, the California Department of Education, the Tennessee Department of Education, The Education Trust–West, and others, for providing resources for local leaders to use during this time. Additionally, we would like to thank the local education agency (LEA) representatives who participated in a preview webinar and who provided feedback on the first iterations of these tools.

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Introduction

The public health crisis resulting from COVID-19 has caused schools and districts to rapidly shift to a distance learning environment while also attending to necessary services and operations that cannot be handled virtually. Shifting to distance learning requires infrastructure changes, new methods of teaching and learning, and adaptations to lesson delivery, assessment, collaboration, and family engagement. Furthermore, this transition has highlighted tremendous equity gaps, including wide disparities in students' access to necessary resources, including food, housing, digital devices, and the internet.

CCEE and WestEd have partnered to develop a toolkit to help school and district leadership understand, prioritize, and address their system's immediate needs through the end of the 2019-2020 school year and then plan for the 2020-21 school year. Each tool supports intentional systems-level planning and assessment of urgent priorities while applying an equity lens. The toolkit covers the following:

- » **Resource 1: Planning for Immediate Needs**
<https://ccee-ca.org/documents/distancelearning/Planning-for-immediate-needs.pdf>
- » **Resource 1A: Facilitating District Planning Sessions**
<https://ccee-ca.org/documents/distancelearning/Facilitating-district-planning-sessions-1A.pdf>
- » **Resource 1B: Facilitating District Planning Sessions**
<https://ccee-ca.org/documents/distancelearning/Facilitating-district-planning-sessions-1B.pdf>
- » **Resource 2: Communicating with Stakeholders**
<https://ccee-ca.org/documents/distancelearning/Communicating-with-stakeholders.pdf>

Resource 2: Communicating with Stakeholders

Communication Strategy Basics

COVID-19 presents new challenges to schools and districts, which require a new approach to communication strategies. Without in-person opportunities to convey plans, priorities, or needs between districts and school communities, effective communication can be more challenging. **Local leaders must keep in mind access to information, including language and digital access, as well as the need to communicate quickly and effectively while maintaining stakeholder trust in an ever-changing environment. Additionally, planning for two-way communication is critical during this time.** There is much that can be learned from stakeholders (including students, families, and staff) as district planning teams identify and plan for the shifts required to provide educational services and the eventual, safe return to school.

This guide is intended to support district leadership in developing a strategic approach to stakeholder communication in the COVID-19 context, with a focus on ensuring equitable access to timely information for all stakeholders.

Communication Tips

The following are communication best practices for districts to consider when reaching out to stakeholders:

- **Be proactive.** Provide information as it becomes available, but offer it in a purposeful way so that audiences feel supported and are not overwhelmed.
- **Be responsive.** Listen to and promptly address questions and misconceptions.
- **Be consistent in messaging, including communication of changes or updates.** Use the proper terminology and branding for all materials. Add a DATE/TIME and “updated as of DATE/TIME” to the top of each communication.
- **Be consistent in both where and how information becomes available.** For example, if you create a section of your district’s website devoted to COVID-19 updates, ensure that it becomes a reliable repository for downloadable documents and other information. Reserve mass emails for important announcements that affect a large number of people and are time-sensitive.
- **Avoid jargon.** Keep the language simple and clear for intended audiences, and ensure translation is available as much as possible. Remember: access to information is an equity issue.
- **Ensure that all communication is accurate, timely, succinct and reliable.** Remember that over-communication is better than under-communication, especially when updating previously shared information.
- **Keep in mind that myths spread quickly,** so proactively counter them with reliable and clear messages.
- **Ensure equitable access to information.** Know what your stakeholders need to access important information, including, but not limited to, interpretation, translation, and digital access.

Note: All included resources are active as of May 15th, 2020. Links to resources in these documents are meant to provide a starting point. Although the links have been reviewed, WestEd and CCEE will not be held responsible for any changes to information in those websites, including broken links.

Key Communication Elements by Section

[Section 1: Identifying Audiences](#)

[Section 2: Communication Strategies: Channels of Communication and Key Messages](#)

[Section 3: Differentiating Communication to Stakeholders](#)

Section 1: Identifying Audiences

Who are the primary stakeholders within your district? Consider the following list.

- Families
- Students
- Teachers
- District Staff and School Staff
- Local Business and Community Partners
- Union Representatives
- Parent-Teachers Association
- Principals
- Vendors
- Service Providers
- Dept of Public Health
- County Offices of Education

These stakeholders (and possibly others) require coordinated and strategic communication throughout the school year, and particularly during the changes brought on by COVID-19. For each audience, communication strategies and tactics may differ based on the content of information shared and the timing of the communication. Differences in communication strategies across stakeholder audiences should be due to actions required on the part of the stakeholder and should not differ in the essential facts being shared. For example, classroom teachers and school-level administrators may require a greater level of detail on the technical aspects of distance learning than the general public. This next activity focuses on tailoring messages based on the audience, purpose of the message, and level of frequency.

Instructions: Using the identified stakeholder groups as a starting point, please respond to the questions in the space below to help determine the top three most consistent audiences for communication planning. **Note:** The Section 3 Activity, Differentiating Communication for Stakeholders, will expand the stakeholder groups.

Top Three Audiences

Stakeholder Audience Group	What is the group's connection to this action, event, or plan?	Will this group need to act or respond as a result of this communication?	What channels of communication might work to reach and involve this group?

Section 2: Communication Strategies – Channels of Communication and Key Messages

After identifying key stakeholder audiences, the next step is to identify channels of communication and key messages for each audience. Whenever possible, communication should be two-way, including both disseminating information and gathering input.

Five Common Channels of Communication

Following are five communication channels and specific considerations for their use. LEA leaders should consider both existing channels (e.g., an electronic mailing list of teachers) and other new channels that may need to be arranged (e.g., a virtual gathering of parents/guardians).

- **Collateral.** Create print and digital materials that can be shared in hard copy, in virtual meetings, posted on a website, and disseminated through social media.
- **Virtual Meetings:** These can include both one-way and two-way communication. If recorded, virtual engagements can be posted online and shared as updates.
- **Digital Media.** Create instant, anytime access to documents and information through digital media (such as websites, databases, webcasts, and podcasts). To drive audiences to these materials and information, implement electronic communication strategies, such as email blasts, social media blasts, or texting. The purpose of such digital media is to create a central and accessible location for all materials and information related to the work.
- **Social Media:** Use multiple social media platforms to engage in an online dialogue about the important issues. Social media can be used not only to disseminate information but also to collect input and feedback on issues and challenges of any action or initiative.
- **Traditional Media.** Use traditional media—television, radio, newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and other print publications—particularly when communicating to the public and general community. Use these media strategically, at the right time and for very specific purposes. The purpose of this strategy should be to communicate the “what” and the “why” to the public and to foster public support in ensuring equitable access to information. Phone-based communication, such as robo-calling, can also be an effective way to quickly reach a wide audience with urgent and important messages.

Use the following table to list possible communication tactics related to the five channels of communication. This activity also provides a space for indicating additional considerations and action steps.

Communication Tactics

Instructions: Please review the five channels of communication and their associated considerations. Then brainstorm action items for your team to ensure that you have the necessary capacity to respond to communication opportunities in a timely and effective way.

Collateral: Create print and digital materials to serve as key content.

Considerations:

- A one-page overview document or a brochure could be distributed in the mail.
- A single, consistent PowerPoint could be used for sessions with multiple types of audiences, with minor modifications to ensure message clarity.
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents could be shared via the mail, posted online, and emailed to families.

Action Steps

Virtual Meetings. Provide opportunities for personal interactions to exchange information, engage in productive dialogue, and gather input and feedback.

Considerations:

- Develop a calendar of opportunities for virtual face-to-face meetings, including both those planned by the district (e.g., small-group strategy meetings, town halls) and those convened by others (e.g., large professional association meetings, district wide professional development sessions).
- All opportunities for virtual meetings should be designed to serve two purposes: (1) disseminate or clarify information, and (2) gather input and feedback from stakeholders about both the initiative and the communications strategies.
- Ensure that questions and concerns are addressed both accurately and in a timely manner by assigning one knowledgeable person within your district to field questions. Ideally, inquiries should receive a response within 24 hours.
- Consider selecting individuals from each stakeholder group to serve as liaisons to their peers.

Action Steps

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Digital Media. Create instant, anytime access to documents and information through digital media (such as websites, databases, webcasts, and podcasts). To drive audiences to these materials and information, implement electronic communication strategies, such as email blasts and texting.

Considerations:

- If capacity allows, consider creating and regularly updating a website that has basic information about the latest developments locally, along with reliable links to the county and state context. On this website, include a FAQ page, links to resources that can inform district decision making, and downloadable collateral (see “Collateral” in the first box of this activity).
- Consider developing an electronic mailing list of interested individuals and even an online community of practice. Online communities can exist in the form of social media, online forums, and webinars. These platforms are helpful because they can be used to collect and organize input and feedback.

Action Steps

Social Media. Use multiple social media platforms to engage in an online dialogue about the issues.

Considerations:

- You may want to consider using current blogs, Facebook, or Twitter accounts to update audiences about the equitable access planning process.
- If your team decides to use social media, designate someone to monitor comments and discussion that might ensue. Look especially for opportunities to direct people to the central website and to address misconceptions.
- Social media can be particularly effective for advertising updates to the website, new information, data points, and newly available resources.

Action Steps

Traditional Media: Use traditional media—television, radio, newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and other print publications—particularly when communicating to the public and general community. Robo-calling can also be used to quickly reach a wide audience with urgent and important messages.

Considerations:

- Media should be used proactively at strategic points to further the goal of stakeholder understanding and support beyond those directly affected.
- Any teachers or school leaders who are called upon to provide background or direct quotes should be prepared in advance.

Action Steps

Develop Key Messages

For many stakeholders, concerns about returning to school vary from fears of personal health and safety to concerns about academic progress. Additionally, a shift to digital learning poses a new set of challenges. Leaders must not only understand diverse perspectives on the issue, but also communicate key messages that will promote accurate information about district plans and priorities, prevent misunderstanding, and maintain the support of key parties.

Generally, key messages should be focused on basic questions of *who*, *what*, *why*, and *how*, with special considerations for messaging about learning strategies, data collection, assessment, and health concerns.

Using Key Messages

Following are general tips on effective messaging, common key messages, and ways to counter myths and misunderstandings.

General Tips for Effective Messages

All key messages require some basic checks to ensure that they are clear, effective, and sensitive to the perspectives of each stakeholder group. Following is a checklist that should be considered when drafting any key messages.

Checklist for Key Messages

- Is the language understandable (simple and clear) for the intended audience? (Ask one or two stakeholders from the intended audience to read through the key message. Check translations with multiple readers, if possible.)
- Is the terminology used correctly and consistently?
- When and how do you plan to revisit your key messages to ensure that they are working as you intended?
- Is the message accurate? Key messages must not be created based on what you believe the audience wants to hear! Instead, they must reflect the reality of your district priorities, needs, and/or plans.

Sample Key Messages

Key messages likely will differ somewhat for each group—such as students, families, teachers, principals, community organizations, or other stakeholders. However, some key messages—such as messages about health data or school schedules—may apply to all stakeholders.

Key Messages About COVID-19

- Sample Message 1: “Safety is our first priority.”
- Sample Message 2: “We are monitoring the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) situation and working closely with state and agency partners.”

Key Messages About Engaging Stakeholders

- Sample Message 3: “Engaging [enter stakeholder group(s)] is important to our district because our [enter stakeholder group(s)] are directly affected by [stay at home orders, return to school, digital learning]. Their perspectives will help make these policies stronger.”
- Sample Message 4: “Our district is committed to creating two-way feedback loops with individual stakeholders to strengthen our ability to accurately explain and effectively implement plans for the best possible education experience for our students.”

Countering Myths and Misunderstandings

In addition to developing strategic, positive messaging, it is important to consider the common myths and areas of misunderstanding about COVID-19 and to develop messages to directly counteract them. These myths will become more apparent during the course of your engagement with stakeholders. In your messages, confront the myths, misunderstandings, and areas of concern in your community with empathy for why a myth may have taken hold and provide clarity in the counter-message. Including data points can illuminate a path of action or illustrate the rationale for a district decision.

Guiding Questions for Using Data in Messages

Following are five guiding questions that should drive the process of developing messages supported by data. For example, you may consider sharing health data from the county, assessment data, or digital learning access data as part of your planning process. Sharing data can boost stakeholder trust and clarify a rationale for district actions, but it may also be confusing. Consider the following as you include data sources in key message development:

1. **What is the source of the presented data?**

- It is important that the source of data is fully transparent and communicated to all stakeholders. The data source has implications for data quality and puts the information into context.
- Stakeholders may have misgivings about the story that the data reflect and may not understand where the data come from or who has ownership over the data collection process. If the source of the data is perceived to be biased in any way, these perceived biases should be acknowledged. In addition, stakeholder concerns should be addressed whenever possible.
- Concerns about biases can be addressed by the following: outlining the data collection process to demonstrate that the data were collected in good faith, giving an overview of the rules and regulations in place to ensure data quality, and inviting those with concerns to submit questions to those responsible for collecting the data.

Sample Key Message: "This health data profile was provided by the County using data from [enter source]. The purpose of this data is to help us better understand what COVID-19 looks like in our school community."

2. **Why were these data produced, and how will they be used?**

- Creating a compelling message about the significance of the data can engage stakeholders constructively in district actions and plans.
- If sharing locally collected student data (assessment figures, for example), efforts should be made to anticipate stakeholders' greatest concerns about how the data will be used, who share these concerns, and what would relieve them.

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- Efforts also should be made to clarify the ideal outcome after the data are used in your district. Are these outcomes agreed upon by your stakeholders? What will it take for your district to achieve them?

Sample Key Message: “The data are based upon X, and are useful for informing Y.”

3. What story (or stories) are the data telling?

- With so much information available, sometimes interpreting and communicating its meaning can be challenging. It is especially important that the meaning of the data be developed into a story that is accessible to stakeholders.
- Begin by asking the following guiding questions:
 - » Do our data allow us to discern whether we have been moving in the right direction—or have we fallen further behind? Why do we suspect that is the case? What are two or three main takeaways from these data?
 - » How do our data compare to those of our neighboring districts? Are we doing better or worse than them? If the latter, what can we learn from them?
 - » Are there certain regions of our state that are doing particularly well? If so, what specific steps have they taken? How can we bring those strategies to scale in our district?

Sample Key Message: “The data are showing X, which leads us to believe Y.”

4. Are there any conflicting stories or contradicting trends present in the data?

- Given the changing nature of COVID-19 and the related impacts on district data collection, it is entirely possible that the data present contradictory implications. The story may seem clear when only a subset of the observed trends is considered but becomes muddled when all of the data are included. The process of disentangling these contradictory trends and determining a clear story is perhaps the most challenging aspect of communicating data. In fact, to accurately interpret the data and get the story right is a process of continuous improvement.
- Therefore, the story you communicate to stakeholders should be transparent about these inherent contradictions. The perspectives of stakeholders will provide the context underlying the observed data and may even contribute to resolving the conflicting stories and producing a more accurate interpretation. These perspectives can “breathe life” into the quantitative data analysis.
- The goal of authentic engagement is to capitalize on the knowledge and perspectives of your stakeholder groups to assess and identify solutions for contradictions. With this goal in mind, be sure to pose these contradictions with an open-ended question and encourage stakeholders to help come up with an answer.

Sample Key Message: “Although the situation presents a significant challenge for our district, we know XYZ. We are looking into why..... Our planned course of action is X.”

5. **Are there any missing data that are needed to tell the whole story?**

- » Missing data make it more challenging to get the data's story right.
- » It is important to communicate what your district is doing to fill gaps in the data. What additional sources of data already are available? What, if any, new data will the district begin collecting?
- » Any assumptions resulting from unavailable data must be made transparent to stakeholders and limitations must be made clear. The combined knowledge of stakeholder groups can go a long way toward producing more accurate and comprehensive assumptions.

Ongoing Messaging

After developing strategic messages about a planned action, consider how best to incorporate and continually build on these messages at later points in the school reopening process. Regularly convene your team to ask questions such as:

- What are the main messages about our planned actions?
- Who should hear these messages?
- How would these messages be best delivered?
- When should these messages be delivered?

Key Messages Activity

Instructions: In the following chart, develop sample key messages. Keep in mind that these messages will likely evolve as the COVID-19 situation evolves. Section 3 will help you tailor these messages to specific groups.

Key Considerations

For all questions, consider:

- Checklist for Key Messages, Countering Myths/Misconceptions

For questions involving data, also consider:

- The source of the data and possible perceived biases
- The primary challenge identified by the data
- The guiding questions to develop an accessible narrative
- Contradicting trends in the data
- Any assumptions made as a result of missing data

Specific Information to Communicate/Elicit	Key Message

Section 3: Differentiating Communication to Stakeholders

Instructions: Please complete the following chart to determine strategic approaches to communication for each stakeholder group. Consider your district’s specific context, and add specific relevant parties as you complete the chart. Various stakeholder groups are listed as placeholders. Use the audiences named in Section 1, page 4 of this guide to begin completion of this chart. From completed tables in Sections 1 and 2, add the key messages and communication channels.

Stakeholders	General: Key Messages	What They Need To Know (tailored message(s))	Questions: What We Need to Learn From Them (if a two-way communication)	Communication Channel and Timing (how and when)
[Students]				
[Parents/Guardians]				
[Teachers]				
[Principals]				
[District administrators]				
[Local school board members]				

Stakeholders	General: Key Messages	What They Need To Know (tailored message(s))	Questions: What We Need to Learn From Them (if a two-way communication)	Communication Channel and Timing (how and when)
[Teachers union or union representatives]				
[Teacher leader/ teacher voice organization members or fellows]				
[Professional organizations]				
[Civil rights groups]				
[Local business leaders]				
[Higher education partners]				
[Policymakers, state and local education leaders]				

Stakeholders	General: Key Messages	What They Need To Know (tailored message(s))	Questions: What We Need to Learn From Them (if a two-way communication)	Communication Channel and Timing (how and when)
[Technical assistance providers, researchers]				
[Other (legislators? media?)]				
[Other]				
[Other]				