

Communicating Key Shifts

One thing is certain in public education: change is inevitable. Schools and systems are ever-evolving institutions and there are key shifts in both policy and procedure that happen almost daily. However, by developing a proactive plan to ensure families and community members are consistently receiving updates and engaged as co-decision makers best positions districts and systems for effective communication during times of change. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic districts were forced to reconcile guidelines from different levels of government – guidelines that sometimes changed rapidly. Districts that had established systems for sharing information quickly, transparently and via multiple modes were able to reach families with far greater ease than those that relied on traditional one-way communication.

Oftentimes you have incomplete information or know that a situation may quickly change; other times you must share information that you expect will be unpopular. Often school districts, eager to avoid conflict, respond to those situations by simply not communicating at all. But that is a huge mistake. Honesty and transparency are cornerstones of a strong relationship with your community. And, while they are uncomfortable at times, these hard conversations are both necessary and vital for long term success. Before going into specifics, here are a few key reasons for effectively communicating change.

It creates **shared accountability and a better understanding of goals**. Families and communities need to understand your vision for student success and how the proposed change will help you reach your goals. They should also be aware of the potential impact and how they can support the new policy, practice or initiative.

Districts often must act quickly and without complete information. Having an ongoing communication plan not only helps **create trusting relationships** but also **reduces misunderstanding**. Families and community stakeholders are also more likely to support implementation when they have a clear understanding.

This document provides high-level guidance for how to approach communicating change with families, caregivers and community stakeholders both when change is anticipated and when it is unexpected.

Best Practices for Consideration

Develop a tiered system for communications by first identifying the stakeholder groups that should be engaged. Next, you should seek out feedback to identify the areas that are most relevant to those groups and what they value and prioritize. Don't judge what your families and community members value but instead seek to understand and align their values with key solutions.

Establish a healthy feedback loop. It is critical to ensure that the community's voices are heard. As part of your announcement, share how community members can provide feedback. Use a variety of venues; email, phone calls, and virtual or in-person town halls can all be useful options. As part of this, explain how the district will be incorporating this feedback in decision-making. And if this feedback ultimately does influence policy changes, be sure to acknowledge that when the changes are announced. Be sure to identify the areas where families are being informed of updates versus scenarios where their input will be used to drive decisions. State how and when you will share additional information. It is important to commit to a specific date, regardless of whether you will have the situation entirely clarified. If community members know when they will hear more, it will help to alleviate their anxiety.

Commit to transparency.

Communicating well can help make situations easier and build effective relationships with your stakeholders, but it is ultimately the content you're communicating that matters most. If the situation is fluid, directly explain why. For instance, if you are still waiting for additional state clarification or guidance, say that, and if possible, share when you expect to have that additional information. Describe the situation as you currently understand it, including any relevant background information. Resist the temptation to speculate.

Case Study: Memphis-Shelby County Schools

When faced with a new state law that would require Memphis-Shelby County Schools to cede ownership of four schools, many families were left unsure of how this legislation would impact their students.

To help families navigate through the uncertainty the district launched a feedback survey and held a series of community meetings and presented three options provided under the law to families, answered questions and solicited feedback. The goal was to translate the practical impacts of the law to the communities whose students will be most impacted by the change.

When asked "What's next?" district officials were clear with parents about the future: schools were likely to close under at least one of the options provided by the law. The district also let families know that they would use feedback garnered through the surveys and community meetings to drive the decision on which option they would select.

Source: The Commercial Appeal

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Lead with the "why" rather than "what." Sometimes you must communicate information that you expect will be unpopular. The impulse for silence is understandable—after all, nobody likes inciting anger, frustration, or sadness. But remember that the information will reach your community regardless. If you start the conversation with the need for the upcoming change and how students will ultimately benefit, you can help to ensure a productive dialogue that has you working with your community—not against it.

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