

School Communication Planning Guide

Your how-to guide for making the most of today's communications channels



School Communications Planning Guide

Using today's communication channels to engage your entire school community.

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Introduction

As modern communications channels expand and evolve, it's important that a school's communications plan keep up with the ever-changing landscape. Factor in keeping up with the technology, staffing, privacy and confidentiality issues, and it can be challenging to put together a relevant, effective plan.



For public schools that are under increasing scrutiny to be fiscally responsible with public funding, to private schools that need to be marketing savvy in competition for enrollment, all institutions need to make the most of the precious resources allotted for communications budgets.

Reaching your entire school community in today's digital, mobile world requires a mindset and the tools to **connect how and when your audiences prefer**. Your staff, students, parents and other key stakeholders need to get the information – and you're at the center of this critical connection. Websites, school notification systems, mobile apps and social media form the foundation that is absolutely pivotal to this connection.

From the crisis to the lunch menu, schools need to be prepared to connect 24/7 with accurate and timely content. For parent engagement, media relations, and nearly every school communications challenge, success depends on a **steady stream of fresh, targeted school information and news at the district, school and classroom levels**.

The scopes of plans are as varied and diverse as the 130,000-plus schools across America. While each school is unique and has its own communications challenges, every school can benefit from the collective knowledge of those schools practicing progressive methods. That's why we created this guide. In it, you'll find links to sample plans, templates, articles, resources and the ideas that can align your school with modern, online communication practices. Use it to create your own plan to enhance your school's image, and engage all the right people with all the right information

Making your school communications strategic

Making certain your communications plan is strategic begins with a well-conceived, well-articulated mission statement. Be sure that mission is shared – verbatim and in practice – with all the key audiences you’re trying to reach. Every communication tactic and message you develop should serve to connect with staff, students, parents, news media, or the community at large.

Don’t fall into the rut of merely maintaining the status quo and simply repeating what you did or did not do the previous school year. Times are changing, your plan needs to as well. Some schools work on a multi-year planning cycle, creating a two- or three-year plan. Many schools do this as a matter of course, others don’t.

It’s important that your strategic communications plan be revisited annually to keep up with rapid pace at which communication tools emerge.

Know your mission

A sound communications strategy starts with a mission. One that’s clear, practical, shared, and practiced. Developing a mission statement is critical to your school communications plan. If you begin with the end in mind, your entire school community will have clarity as to what it is you’re trying to accomplish as educators.

A solid mission statement **helps your administrators and teachers develop and align their goals with consistent focus.** It’s that overarching mantra that should be visible at every turn in your communications. A clear mission statement can serve as a positive reminder to keep everyone who’s involved in educating your students on course.

A mission statement can and should reflect what your school stands for, what it values, and serve as a standard for behavior for the staff, students and other stakeholders. Everyone at your school should be prepared and equipped to walk the walk that your mission espouses.

How to 'live' your communications mission:

Involve school leaders.

While your mission statement needs to first have the full support of the school leadership, it shouldn't be developed in isolation from your key stakeholders. Have your communications or public relations director take the lead on this assignment, but seek input from – or at least bounce some ideas off – your communications committee if you have one. Also involve instructors, other school staff, parents and even students.

Keep it academic.

When crafting your mission statement, keep in mind the task at hand. Don't get too far afield from the realistic impact your school can have on its students. It's okay to think big, be altruistic and global and all, but academic achievement should drive the bus here.

Make it accessible.

Avoid jargon and eduspeak. You're creating this not for academicians with advanced degrees in learning methods, but for students, parents, staff and others who want to get a feel for the goals and culture of your school and rally around it. If there's too many syllables, reconsider word choice.

Spread the word.

Don't create a mission statement then bury it on an obscure web page. It should be communicated in classrooms, school lobbies, student handbooks, websites, online profiles, gymnasiums, auditoriums, emails, videos and other school touch points.

The many facets of your school are no doubt unique to the people, location, resources and all that contribute to your school's or district's persona. But with over a hundred thousand schools out spread across the United States, there's no need to try to reinvent the wheel when it comes to creating your school's mission statement. *Education World* includes some [examples of school mission statements](#) you might want to borrow for your own school.

Mission statements built as a team have a head start for ready assimilation into the school environment. For help in developing a mission statement unique to your school, use this [free mission statement planner](#) made available by the performance improvement experts at Franklin Covey.

Know your audience

Mission in hand, it's now important to review your key audience groups. As with any communications endeavor, you have to first know just who it is you're trying to reach. Then you must segment and tailor your communications tactics and messages accordingly. Often, school leaders think only in terms of trying to reach parents and only parents with school communications. While parent engagement is key to school success, there are other key groups that are essential to success.

Your internal audience – students, instructors and non-teaching staff – are perhaps your most important group. Within this broad group there will be times when you need to address subgroups, but, as a whole, these should be the first to receive that initial volley of communications on most school matters. They're the 'foot soldiers' after all, who can carry or drop the messages going to your other audience groups.

Especially in terms of policy and procedural changes, **an informed staff is a prerequisite to supporting communications with your other audiences**, helping execute your message delivery. Conversely, an uninformed staff can obfuscate, blur an intended message – or sometimes even resent not being made aware of communications to other school stakeholders.

Outside your school's staff and students, parents, media and the community at large form the foundation for most school communications. Other specific groups within the community that also deserve targeted attention include other schools, nearby businesses, elected officials, civic organizations, senior centers, churches and community groups.

When sharing content, keep all your audiences in mind, and develop strategies, goals and tactics targeted just for them.

Setting realistic goals

The communications goals you establish for your district or school will vary, of course, on strategic initiatives. Give your goals a lot of thought before setting them, make sure they align closely with overall objectives, and give them a chance to be met.

Know your school's strengths and weaknesses. Confirm them through stakeholder surveys. Consider your current communications with staff, parents, and students.

- What are the barriers to improving dialogue with your parents?
- Have there been misunderstandings because event information isn't transmitted as smoothly as it could be between staff and parents?
- How can you better engage staff, parents, and students at your school?
- What makes parents decide to enroll their children in your school?
- Are there any disconnects you need to eliminate?
- Are you reaching prospective students effectively?

Perhaps your communication with staff is excellent, but there have been issues with enrollment. Maybe you're finding it challenging to connect with parents regularly. Identify the main target groups that you need to communicate with more effectively and set your goals accordingly.

Overall objectives might include:

- Increase opportunities to share good news about staff, students and school issues with the entire school community; or,
- Increase amount of content being pushed to parents with regular information on important district-level, school-level, and classroom-level information; or,
- Better gauge and be more responsive to the communications needs of school community stakeholders.

Some examples of specific, achievable goals you might set:

- ☐ Redesign school website
- ☐ Establish/enhance communications advisory committee
- ☐ Increase social media following
- ☐ Adding or enhancing communications channels (cont'd)
- ☐ Create a superintendent's blog
- ☐ Establish a school Youtube channel
- ☐ Expand social media
- ☐ Establish a social media internship
- ☐ Recount popular retired teachers and staff
- ☐ Develop school mobile app
- ☐ Enhance uniformity of classroom (teacher) websites
- ☐ Increase social media content (more postings)
- ☐ Better integrate social media onto website
- ☐ Use technology to survey stakeholder groups
- ☐ Increase messaging around key programs
- ☐ Show the fun side of your school
- ☐ Highlight featured teachers and non-teaching staff members
- ☐ Better utilize intranet for inservice and professional development
- ☐ Develop social media ambassadors
- ☐ Create a school style guide for staff emails
- ☐ Launch a school Instagram account
- ☐ Form a communications advisory committee
- ☐ Highlight successful alumni

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) website has some [excellent resources for this stage of your planning](#). There's even a [sample outline of a strategic communications plan](#).

Understanding today's communications channels

In your school communications planning, you should have a sense of urgency to get up to speed on all the modern channels available. Not to discount the role of traditional non-digital communications, but **online methods really should be driving your strategy.**

Pursuing digital channels cannot come at the expense nor supplant good old-fashioned personal small- and large-group meetings, phone calls, signage, take-home packets and the sundry tools you use to otherwise connect. **An integrated approach merging progressive technologies with time-tested tactics is your best formula for success.**

Powerful websites featuring responsive design; notification systems that automatically trigger voice, text and emails; native mobile apps and ubiquitous social media that are connecting us from anywhere – these are the channels your school needs to embrace. Working together, they can form the communications foundation for your school. Understanding and using these channels will make the job of connecting with all your audiences more effective than ever.



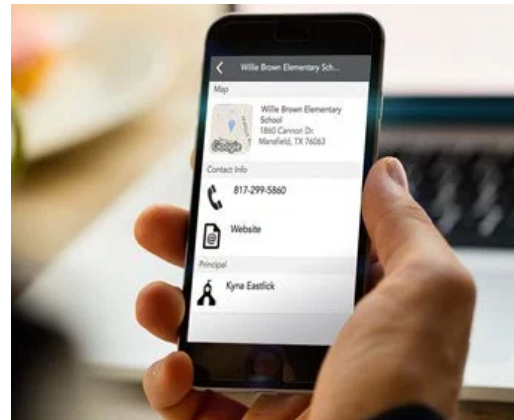
1. District and school websites

A website serves an important purpose for school districts and its schools: to be a self-service portal for all information for the school. Websites have changed over the years in how they are designed. A good one is accessible on mobile devices and serves as a hub for social media and other channels. This entails creating a website with responsive design featuring tools that make it easy to manage and share content. Many schools also use their websites to conduct e-commerce for a variety of payments. In addition, submission forms can be easily facilitated by school websites to gather information or conduct registration for events or enrollment.



2. Mobile app

Mobile apps are becoming a very popular method for schools to communicate. A mobile app can make it efficient to access common information like alerts, calendars, directories, news and lunch menus. While the mobile app is not ready to replace the website, the website content needs to be accessible through the app. Another key benefit of the mobile app is the ability to deliver push notifications. There are other [key features a school mobile app should have](#), but one of the most important is the ability to segment your notifications to the specific users respectively. For example, if the middle school football game is canceled, you should not be notifying the elementary and high school parents.



3. Notifications and alerts

Critical emergency information and important reminders need to be communicated through a notification system that provides SMS (text), voice and email. These types of systems may or may not integrate with other channels but serve a purpose for time-critical messages. Parents typically have the ability to customize their preference and receive the preferred method of communication. Schools need to be sensitive to how this type of messaging is utilized.



A word of caution: Like alerts via mobile apps, you do not want to overuse notifications. It is an extremely effective means of communication but can become annoying – and possibly illegal (see Legal Considerations section) – if you are getting voice messages about not-so important information. Emphasize careful user setup and preferences selection when your users consider the kinds of content they want pushed to them.

4. Email

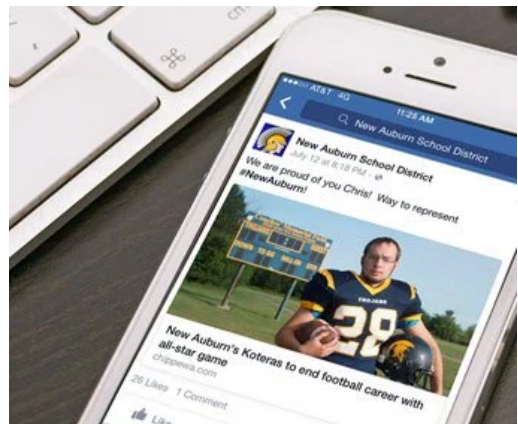
The email channel is a key channel for schools because it is a great form of one-to-one personal communication. Most parents have email accounts, and it allows the school to provide information of all kinds, in detail if needed. Email also features a very high open rate, which translates into an informed community.



The use of email can range from reminders, policies, registration, newsletters and a variety of announcements. A majority of the content sent in email needs to exist on the website and be easily linked to. Email can be the messenger for your website content – still the hub of much of your school information. Most third-party email blasting systems (e.g., MailChimp, Constant Contact, etc.), which provide a [higher degree of email security than one a school handles itself](#), enable important metrics that can help you improve your communication.

5. Social Media

These [popular social media channels](#) are driving how many businesses and organizations are sharing information. They need to be a big part of your communications mix as well. Understanding which social media to use and when to use it requires understanding the limits and life cycle of the content posted to each of these channels. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube are the key channels we're talking about here. There are others, but these are what your school should be using to reach the increasingly digital and mobile stakeholders your school serves.



The beauty of social media is how easily the content can be linked to other social media channels, and how easily it can be shared with many people. Regardless of which media you're utilizing, building a following and, in turn, encouraging sharing (see viral) is what it's all about. For a solid drill down on making the most of social media at your school, check out this [article and a link to the Social Media Guide for Schools](#).

6. Blog

A blog can be one of your school's best opportunities to engage parents and the community. Many schools prefer to position it as a superintendent's blog, which gives you a forum to reinforce the school brand, strengthen ties with media, and depict your school leadership precisely the way you want. You have total control of the messaging, and can use it to articulate, support and clarify policy, and spark dialogue. Note too that not all posts have to be serious. Some posts can be lighter than others. Simply sharing thoughts, photos, anecdotes, and other's content can all help personalize your school's leader.

If properly promoted, your superintendent's blog (or school blog) can deliver the messaging priorities that can boost public confidence in your entire district. Promote it on your website homepage, share it on your school's Facebook page and other social media, promote it through your non-digital school communications as well.

7. Video

Videos and the favored channels to share them – Youtube, Vimeo, Vine, and Periscope – are becoming popular because we all love the medium. Video is a crowd-pleasing way for schools to capture, chronicle and archive great school content. When it comes to a how-to video, a personal message, highlights from an event, something humorous, touching or otherwise entertaining, video rules. Video is not, however, the best way to depict something time critical.

Some schools are even showing live streaming events or [creating their own Youtube channels](#), using them to post everything from football highlights, to school productions, to superintendent's messages. Even if you don't have a Youtube channel, you can create video galleries and archives of your school events. Like all the channels there's a time and place for video.

Planning and gathering your communications content

How you organize and assemble your plan depends on many factors. Size of district, communications staffing levels, school leadership, culture, technology plans and other considerations all create opportunities and sometimes, limitations.

Some plans are quite formal (and lengthy). Choose a format that works for you. Make it manageable and make it work. Whatever format you choose to follow, your schools are sure to abound with communications content possibilities. The real challenge is prioritizing what to communicate, then finding and gathering the content.

When creating or revising your plan, be sure to tap the [current list of planning resources](#) made available by the National School Public Relations Association. The NSPRA website also offers up a [communications plan template](#). For a pretty comprehensive, completed communications plan, you might want to refer to the [Bloomington Public Schools' plan](#). It follows the NSPRA general guidelines for best practices in plan development.

The big four communication content hubs

At the highest level, there are four major content hubs that you should include in your communications plan, each one requiring its own set of objectives and specific goals:

1. Crisis communications

Fail-safe preparedness and response for school emergencies, lock-downs, cancellations and postponements, bullying initiatives.

2. Internal communications

Perhaps your most important audience: your students, instructors and non-teaching staff. They help you live up to the school mission.

3. Media and community relations

Being proactive with good news, being available with clear, consistent messaging. Using all the media – print, digital, social – to reach your audiences.

4. Parent engagement

Steady stream of targeted school information and news to construct 'dialogue' with parents and guardian. Think district level, school level, classroom level.

District communications directors should surround themselves with designated communications lieutenants at each school to serve as the eyes and ears of the vast 'field' of building-level communications opportunities. These designees can be principals, admins, teachers or any staff member who can serve as a champion for school communications. Some schools create communications 'ambassadors programs' which can even include students and parents.

Make it easy on yourself and your contributors by using technology to solicit ideas:

- Create a dedicated email address for such requests. (goodnews@oakschool.edu)
- Create a specific submission form on your website.
- Routinely ask for news and story ideas through your school's social media channels

How to share school information has changed dramatically in recent years, but what haven't changed are the kinds of information that need to be shared. Some broad examples of information you want to share:

- Promotion of school happenings and news (e.g., achievements, events, etc.)
- Time-critical school information (e.g., emergencies, closings, policies, etc.)
- Ongoing, procedural communications and information exchange
- PTO events and other important parent-related issues
- Leadership and education improvement ideas (e.g., parent resources)
- School funding and community outreach (including fundraising and levies)
- Stories and imagery of the school's successes and impact on the community (cool human interest content, alumni, photos, videos)

Not all channels are meant for every kind of communication from your school. While a text or voice message to a parent is helpful when there's a one-hour weather delay, the score from Friday night's football game is hardly news that needs to be pushed via notification – unless, of course, your user wants it.

Therein lies the beauty of today's channels and tools. User preferences allow for a customization of the content your user wants to receive. Content delivery can be as immediate as each and every user desires.

Consider the following chart for recommendations on when to use what channels depending on the type of information being delivered:

Type of Information	 Website	 Mobile App (Push notifications)	 Notification & Alerts	 Email	 Social Media	 Video
Emergency alerts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Public relations	✓				✓	✓
Event promotion	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Special announcement	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Important reminders	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Forms/documents	✓			✓		
Campaigns	✓			✓	✓	✓
PTO information	✓			✓	✓	

Legal consideration in communications planning

Time was when a handwritten note or a permission slip would get the job done, but those days left with the polished apple for teacher. Protecting your school and school information has taken on larger dimensions, as schools scramble to keep pace with the increasing regulations required to communicate legally.

If a student or staff member's image might show up on your website or in a social media post, you'd better have his or her permission. When it comes to using images, to protect your school and your students make sure your school's Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) and consent forms are made readily available on your website. They can even be integrated into the school registration form.

There are several laws that every school should be mindful of when it comes to planning their school communications. Here's a rundown of the most important ones:

Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA)

This one is fresh off the wire. Designed originally, in part, to protect us all from those pesky telemarketers and such, the TCPA recently was expanded by the Federal Communications Commission to regulate automated voice and text messages many schools are using.

Pay special attention if you have, or are considering implementing a notification system at your school. The key here is consent. If your school uses a notification system, you should require all recipients who subscribe to the notification service to provide consent. Otherwise, your school is legally exposed to potential fines for contacting subscribers without their consent. Especially since more and more schools are using notification systems for much more than emergencies (when health or safety issues are not in play), be safe, and be certain to gain permission from all your users.

Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

Under FERPA, families have the right to request and receive their child's education records, and they have the right to submit those requests via email or an online submission form. Your school should have the systems in place so that parents can easily make those requests, and you can respond to them in a timely manner. Consider creating a dedicated email address for such requests or, better yet, creating a specific submission form on your website. School officials can [start here for information and resources on making and keeping your district FERPA compliant](#). You can also check the government's [FERPA FAQ page](#) that answers questions you or parents might have.

The Americans with Disabilities Act

Besides ramps, handrails, parking spaces, etc., the Americans with Disabilities Act extends to your website. Because your website is the online proxy for your school, [disabled students and parents need to have access](#) to it just all other members of your community do. This applies to screen readers, which are often used by individuals with poor vision. Your website should be designed in such a way that it's easy for the screen reader to scan. That means the reader should have the option to skip over unnecessary text, like navigation. It also means your site should have clear headings and text structure so the reader can announce any breaks in the text. Yes, [protecting students with disabilities](#) includes your website, so be certain your website is ADA and 508 compliant.

The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment

This regulation protects minor students from disclosing personal information if their parents don't wish to disclose the information in question. This extends to electronic surveys, polls or other questionnaires. Under the [Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment](#) regulation, schools must get consent from parents before asking children about specific personal information. One way to do this is to have an email system that can quickly send consent forms to parents. Once the parents consent, the email software can record the answer and you can then move forward with any survey or questionnaire.

The Freedom of Information Act

As government institutions, public schools are required to respond to requests for information, just like any other government agency. Under the [Freedom of Information Act](#), you must make available copies of all records, regardless of format. That includes emails, blog posts, and more. You also must respond to requests within 10 days. Of course, this means that you need to keep your records and emails in an easily accessible form of storage. Ideally, a database that is searchable and sortable could help you quickly find any requested pieces of information.

Toss in [HIPAA](#), [Title I](#), and the [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act](#), and it's no wonder school administrators need a regulatory attorney to get through the day. These regulations should factor into your communications planning. Involve your district's chief information or chief tech officer to be keep your school information management on the right side of these laws.

Measuring results

Evaluation is the ongoing part of your communications planning that enables you to keep your planning and execution responsive and agile. Fortunately, many of today's modern channels allow you to learn in pretty short order what's working, and what's not. This measurement and evaluation allows for flexibility in everything from methods to messaging.

Some of the measurement tools include:

Google Analytics

One of the best ways to get good data on how people are accessing your website is to use Google Analytics. It's free to schools and is relatively easy to set up on your website. If you're not already using it, put it in gear and start collecting valuable data, like:

- What are your popular pages?
- What are visitors searching for when they come to your site?
- How users really interact with your pages.

To make analysis easier, Google Analytics includes a variety of charts to display information just as you want to see it. Google analytics is the best way to assess your website.

Email

Still among the most popular and effective ways schools reach parents and other key stakeholders, email is a flexible channel where one-to-one personalization and details can be readily exchanged. While you have a built-in, captive audience with your school community (unlike some email 'marketers'), measuring your email activity can improve your effectiveness:

- Track how many people open your emails.
- Monitor bounce trends.
- See what they clicked, and help you increase engagement.

Metrics included with many third-party email services make it easy to manage any email campaign your school conducts.

Text/voice

Notifications are necessarily time-sensitive and often critical, so when you have huge volumes of messages through voice and text channels, you need assurances that they're getting through. Most school notification systems provide real-time reporting from a dashboard that enables you set up reports by broadcast types.

Social media

Part of the charm of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and other popular social media channels is the immediacy of interaction and sharing. Facebook has built-in page performance tools that enable you to see how people discover and respond to your posts.

Likewise, Twitter comes with basic analytics that measures visits, mentions and tracks your follower counts. There are several third-party tools such as Hootsuite and SproutSocial that help you both analyze and manage your social media content.

Surveys

Just like the trucks that ask, “How Am I Driving?,” surveys are a wealth of performance data you can use to measure your communications. Parents surveys especially are great ways to start and maintain dialogue on any number of communications issues. Your website and social media channels provide continuous opportunities to survey any and all of your audiences. Many CMS providers make it easy to create a form or survey that can help spark or confirm communications initiatives. Here are some [good tips to follow for building an effective parent survey](#).