



# District Communications Collaborative

Lessons to Improve Your District's Image  
and Strengthen Community Relationships

District Leadership Forum

# Audio Options



## Using Your Telephone

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Phone Call   Computer Audio - Connected   Call Me

Dial: +1 669 900 6833  
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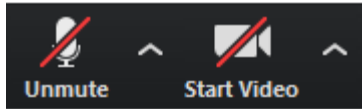
[Test Computer Mic & Speakers](#)

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# Using Zoom

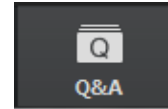
## Mic and Video Controls

Click the mic and camera pictures until they have a red line indicating they are both off.



## Asking a Question

To ask the presenter a question, type it into the Q&A panel and press send.



# District Communications Collaborative Timeline



## The Collaborative by the Numbers

**7** Participating districts

**~20**

Research calls with district leaders and experts

**3**

Final toolkits to aid district leaders in three distinct areas

*April - July*

*July 25<sup>th</sup>*

*Late August*

### Launch and Research

Interviews with collaborative participants and successful organizations across the U.S.

### Results Webinar

Presentation of research findings, ideas, and lessons from successful districts

### Communications Toolkits

Insights and actionable ideas for elevating district communications



Communicating the District's Value Toolkit



Building a Bond Campaign Plan



Safety and Security Communications Toolkit

# How to Get Your Story ‘Out There’?

## Districts Miss Out On the Value of Consistent, Positive Messaging

### ● Majority of PR Still the Job of Superintendents

- Superintendents often the only or most active public voice of the district despite having to focus on a host of other issues
- In a 2014 statewide survey in Wisconsin, only **13% of districts** employed a communication specialist, 49% of which were in a full-time role

### ● Most Communication Still One-Way, Paper-Based

- Most common strategies include printed newsletters, brochures, press releases, newspaper articles
- Districts rarely engage effectively online, where the majority of their families are

### ● “No News is Good News” Approach to Communication

- Typical district PR comes in when there’s a crisis that needs to be managed
- Communications often thought of as tool to mitigate bad press
- Districts commonly communicate in a limited, “announcements-only” fashion

“

*We encourage principals and schools to realize ‘hey, you’re living in this world today and you’re surrounded with social media and you’ve got to get your story out there. You can’t just pin a newsletter to the back of a child and send them home. That’s not how it works anymore. You’ve got to get your newsletters and posts out to parents so they can see the amazing things that are going on in your school.*

**Head of District PR, UT**



# Communications a Priority amid Growing Pressure

## Global Causes Drive Urgency to Improve District Image

1

### News Media Scrutiny

- School shootings and violent acts focus public education debate away from learning
- District funding and spending debates consume public's attention

2

### Increased Competition

- 110% enrollment increase in private school choice programs (2011-2015)
- 158% increase in public charter enrollment (2007-2017)

3

### Skepticism towards Public Education

- 19% decrease in Americans' confidence in public schools (1986-2016)
- Highly publicized scandals in individual districts call into question overall image of public education

4

### Demographic and Technological Changes

- Growing share of retirees and adults without children who may see themselves as having no personal stake in the success of public education
- Changing methods of communication mean districts need to adapt to a more frequent, two-way interaction with community stakeholders

Source: ["Estimated Charter Public School Enrollment, 2016-17,"](#) National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017; ["Confidence in Institutions: Gallup Historical Trends,"](#) Gallup News, 2017; ["Private School Choice Programs Are Growing and Can Complicate Providing Certain Federally Funded Services to Eligible Students,"](#) GAO Highlights, August 2016; EAB interviews and analysis.

# Areas of Greatest Concern

## What District Leaders Told Us Keeps Them Up at Night

### TELLING THE DISTRICT'S STORY

#### Demonstrating the Value of Public Education

*"Our community doesn't understand our school system anymore... We want to show them the value we are able to offer our students with limited resources."*

Superintendent, PA



### WINNING THE PUBLIC VOTE

#### Conducting Bond, Levy, and Referendum Campaigns

*"The public is saying 'You know, something needs to change, we need a reform, schools are broken...', but then any time we try to make that change and raise the funds for it, you get the same people screaming 'No, don't do that, that's horrible!'"*

Superintendent, IN



### SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS

#### Gaining the Public's Trust

*"One of the biggest things we're struggling with is to let the parents know that they need to trust us in a crisis situation and not bum rush the school when something happens."*

ED of Communications, MI



# District Communications Collaborative



## Lessons to Improve Your District's Image and Strengthen Community Relationships

### 1

#### Telling the District's Story



1. Streamline Branding and Messaging
2. Develop Extensive Partnerships
3. Ensure Fidelity through Staff Education
4. Build Out Your Online Presence

### 2

#### Winning the Public Vote



5. Set the Foundation for Success
6. Invest in Your Message Development
7. Build Your Network and Spread Your Message
8. Prepare for Election Day and Beyond

### 3

#### Communicating about Safety and Security



9. Embed Safety Communications in District Operations
10. Build an Incident Response Team
11. Develop an Incident Communications Plan
12. Assemble Library of Resources to Facilitate Rapid Response

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# Establish a Common District Voice

## Centralize Functions to Ensure District Projects Strong Image



### Appoint a Public Information Officer

*Ensure district has a point person different from superintendent*

- Responsible for managing all district communications and branding
- Focused on delivering consistency, timeliness, and accuracy of district's message



### Achieve Branding Consistency

*Ensure every school uses only approved district designs*

- Standardize district branding and collateral and set design and communication parameters for each school
- Ensure all employees are familiar with and adhere to standards



### Broaden Your Internal Branding Network

*Achieve consistency and buy-in by including staff in process*

- Create "identity" team with representatives from all schools to ensure branding choices are chosen by staff and are consistently used
- Appoint school liaisons to ensure accountability and a steady flow of stories to PIO<sup>1</sup>



### Centralize Key Functions

*Elevate district's role in managing overall branding*

- Centralize school visit scheduling through district to ensure consistency in information and provide excellent visitor experience
- Promote district role in school events and vice versa



### Key takeaways:

- Adopt district-wide branding to ensure all communications are consistent
- Instill and share accountability between central district and individual schools

1) Public Information Officer.

## Centralization with a Purpose

“

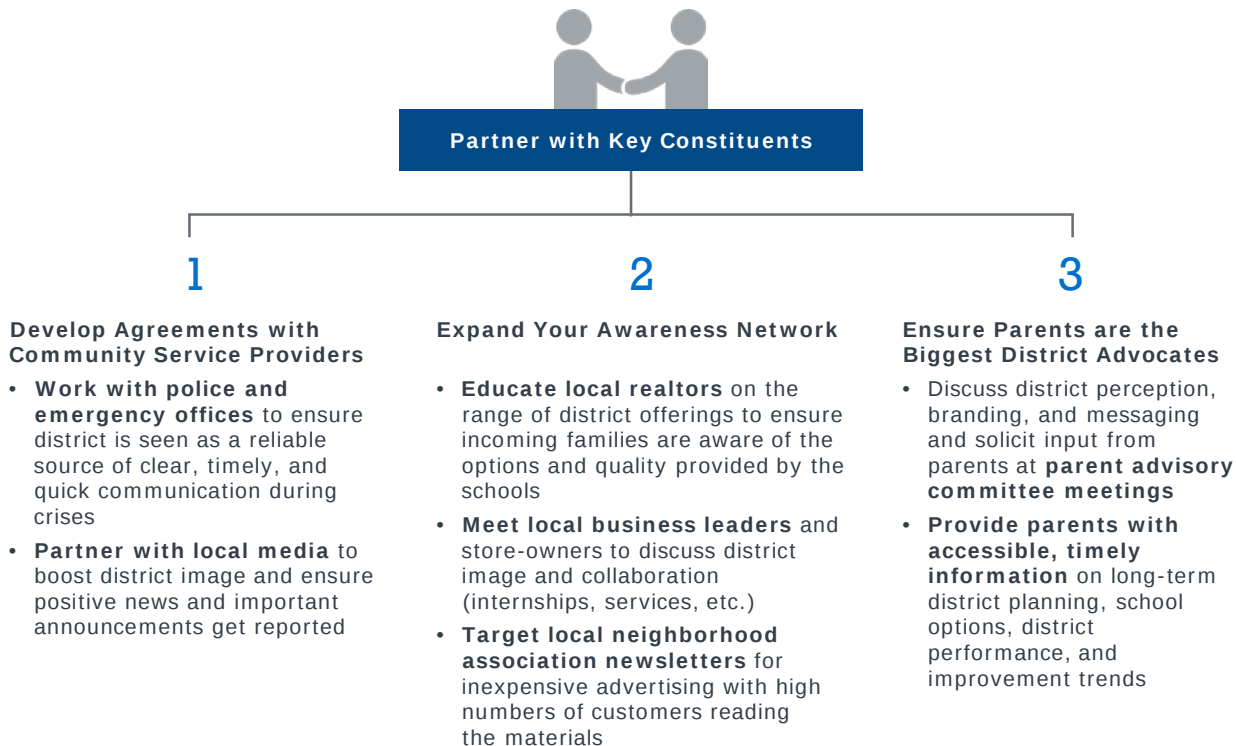
“It took years to get to this point, but the first thing we did was take over the design and development of all brochures across the entire district. We also established expectations that are communicated annually around use of social media, automated calls, emails, messages, etc.

The flyer home doesn't cut it. There are a lot of districts that think they just sent a flyer home and that's what they have to do. We take both a 'shotgun' and a targeted approach. So the first thing we did was to establish branding uniformity.”

*Executive Director of Communications, MI*

# Ensure Long-Term Community Support

Tap Into Your Existing Local Network to Increase Positive Image of District



# Turn Your Staff into Better District Ambassadors

## Key Ingredients for a Successful Cooperation with District and School Staff



### Establish Limited Social Media Red Lines

- **Do NOT** respond to any political comments
- **Do NOT** engage with negative comments; leave response to district
- **Do NOT** direct messages to any individual students
- **Do NOT** use social media as a vehicle or a tool for judgement or social commentary



### Secure Staff Buy-in to Guidelines

- Provide **social media policy training** for every staff member and school teacher
- Ensure staff is trained on **promoting the core goals and values of the district** through their interactions with the community
- **Highlight good examples from individual schools** and encourage exchange of ideas and best practices



### Allow Schools to Deliver their Own Messages

- Keep district office informed of what's going on at each school, **but don't strive to control every post**
- **Recommend frequency of communication** (1-2 posts a day), but let schools handle on their own
- Instruct schools to focus on **steady stream of good stories**

“In essence we put a fence around the yard but let schools roam around in that fence.”

*Head of Communications, WI*



# Harness the Power of Social Media

Use Online Communication Tools Effectively to Achieve Maximum Exposure



## Pick Your Battles

- Choose **3-4 platforms** to consistently carry your message across. **Don't** try to be everywhere at once
- Be aware of **different audiences for different platforms** (e.g., Facebook users are usually older, Instagram has a younger audience, etc.)



## Gather the Right Following

- **Post important announcements** on each medium to build your following
- Do not underestimate the **power of word of mouth** and engage parents on- and offline



## Develop Your Brand One Post at a Time

- **“Bad stories tend to linger, good stories are soon forgotten.”** Continuously push out good stories to combat a negative narrative
- Employ free **“buzz monitoring”** tools to track your performance across media and to adjust your message

Guide to Using Social Media available in the District Communications Toolkit.



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# Know Before You Go

## Critical Work Begins Before Referendum Question is Approved

### Before Approval of Referendum Question



#### Determine Community Receptiveness

Key questions to consider before moving the referendum<sup>1</sup> forward:

- Does the community believe the district provides quality education to its students?
- Can we determine community perceptions of district before launching referendum?
- What does our experience with past referendums tell us about our likelihood to succeed?

To answer these questions, use the Referendum Audit Tool in the Winning the Public Vote Toolkit.



### Create Conditions for Success



### After Approval of Referendum Question



#### Develop Your Campaign Plan

Back map from election day to determine what actions to take and when, including:

- Developing the initial collateral and FAQs about the referendum
- Assembling a Friends of the District Committee to run the campaign
- Developing a detailed communications plan
- Preparing for any election day outcome and next steps

Campaign plan available in the Winning the Public Vote Toolkit.



1) Referendum is used as an umbrella term here to encompass bonds, levies, and any other questions posed directly to a community vote.

# Details Matter in Messaging

## Clarity and Specificity of Communication Key to Voter Engagement



### Clarify Confusing Ballot Language

- Ensure voters know what the ballot language means so that they can make a fully informed choice
- Voters are more likely to vote “no” if they don’t know what they’re voting for

### Develop FAQs



- Build a preliminary list of questions and answers about the referendum
- Update the document continuously and promptly as new questions arise



### Define What The Money Will Do and When

- Provide details about what specifically will be done with the funds
- Provide a timeline for all projects so voters can see their money at work

### Show Individual Financial Impact



- Provide voters with a way to calculate, even roughly, the impact of the referendum on their budget
- Calculate the way people budget – weekly or monthly, not daily

# Engage Key Supporters to Bolster Messaging

## Identify Your Messengers

1

### Assemble “Friends of the District” committee



Committee members can be advocates. Consider including:

- Parents
- School board members
- Business leaders

2

### Identify community segments for outreach



Beyond current staff and families, consider:

- Neighborhood associations
- Religious congregations

3

### Prepare school staff to answer questions



Community members will talk to teachers they know. Make sure everyone in the school building is knowledgeable.

4

### Host meetings to build support



Meetings provide the community the opportunity to ask questions and be heard.

5

### Launch communications strategy



Communications can include:

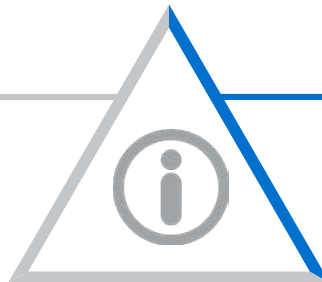
- An explanatory video
- Social media
- Print
- TV and radio ads

## Deliver Your Message

# GOTV<sup>1</sup> Reminders and ‘Thank You’ Messages Matter

## Pivot Final Week Strategy to GOTV

- Remind people when to vote and where
- Shift social media campaign from advocacy to election day reminders
- Provide district staff flexibility to vote



## Plan for Continued Community Engagement

- Prepare a “thank you” message for either outcome; you’ll likely need your supporters again
- If referendum passes, establish community update process to keep community informed, engaged and supportive

Final Week Checklist available in the Winning the Public Vote Toolkit.



Thank You Message sample available in the Winning the Public Vote Toolkit.



1) Get Out The Vote.

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# No News Is Bad News

Ongoing Safety Communication Keeps Stakeholders Informed and at Ease

## LEVERAGE THE WEB



### District Website School Safety Hub

- Provide space to submit questions, comments, and concerns
- Highlight district safety initiatives and procedures
- Link to emergency contacts and additional resources
- Answer FAQs<sup>1</sup>



### Social Media Updates

- Most common platforms: Facebook, Twitter
- Celebrate preventive efforts
- Engage community in conversation
- Address rumors, threats, concerns promptly

## REINFORCE EXPECTATIONS



### Communications Guidance in Emergency Drills<sup>2</sup>

- Review safety communications protocol
- Detail appropriate use of cell phones during crises
- Prepare a list of general text message guides and distribute to teachers and students

## SHARE GOOD NEWS



### Local Media Engagement

- Proactively share safety related events and news via:
  - Newspaper or radio interviews
  - Short blogs or content pieces
- Invite media to particularly important events  
*(e.g., town hall, launch of major safety program)*

More tips and sample communications available in the Communicating about Safety Toolkit.



1) Frequently asked questions.

2) Such as evacuation, lockdown, shelter-in-place, bomb threat, or active shooter drills.

# School Safety Takes a Village

## Collaboration Between Teams Allows for Effective Response

### Key Ingredients for a Successful Incident Response Team



#### Recruitment

- Recruit 10 to 20 members with knowledge of district operations, understanding of internal/external communications needs, and with subject matter expertise (e.g., legal, security, IT)
- Include school-level representatives and community partners



#### Strategy and Goal Setting

- Set and prioritize specific safety goals for district
- Leverage team meetings to engage community partners



#### After Action Review

- Conduct post-incident debriefing 3-5 days after a crisis occurs
- Plan and document follow up actions items to ensure accountability

Worksheets available for all elements shown on this page in the Communicating about Safety Toolkit.



# Standard Emergency Response Plan Not Enough

## Detailed Communications Protocol Prepares Staff to Respond

### Elements of an Incident Communications Plan

#### 1 Incident Communications Functional Leads

**Appoint individuals to key roles in incident communications** (e.g., district spokesperson, media coordinator, staff notification coordinator)

Outline specific responsibilities so individuals can quickly discern steps to take during an incident



#### 4 Local/Regional Contact Resource Page

**Maintain up-to-date list of contacts and telephone numbers** for those who need to be contacted immediately in the event of an incident

Include a complete list of media outlets (e.g., newspapers, television, radio) covering the district



#### 2 Communication Channel Resource Mapping

**Detail intended notification methods and expected response times** for internal and external incident communications based on district resources and incident severity



#### 5 Media Engagement Protocol

**Specify policies and procedures for communication with the media** to ensure district message to the public is thoughtful, accurate, and unified



#### 3 Rapid Response Telephone Tree

**Clearly delineate all organizations and individuals** to be contacted immediately in the event of an incident (e.g., school board, police, fire chiefs) and who is responsible for ensuring each contact is notified



#### 6 Incident Communications Plan Audit Protocol

**Describe process for plan audit**, ideally reviewed 1-2 times per year to ensure that contact information and procedures are up to date

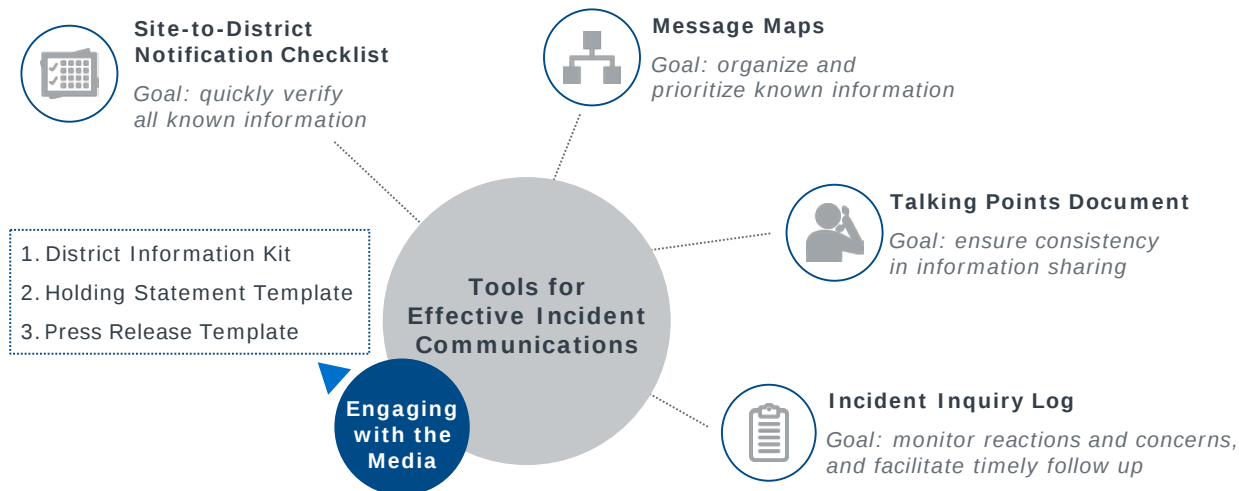


Worksheets available for all elements shown on this page in the Communicating about Safety Toolkit.



# No Need to Reinvent the Wheel

## Templates and Resources that Facilitate Accurate, Timely, and Consistent Incident Communications



Worksheets available for all elements shown on this page in the Communicating about Safety Toolkit.

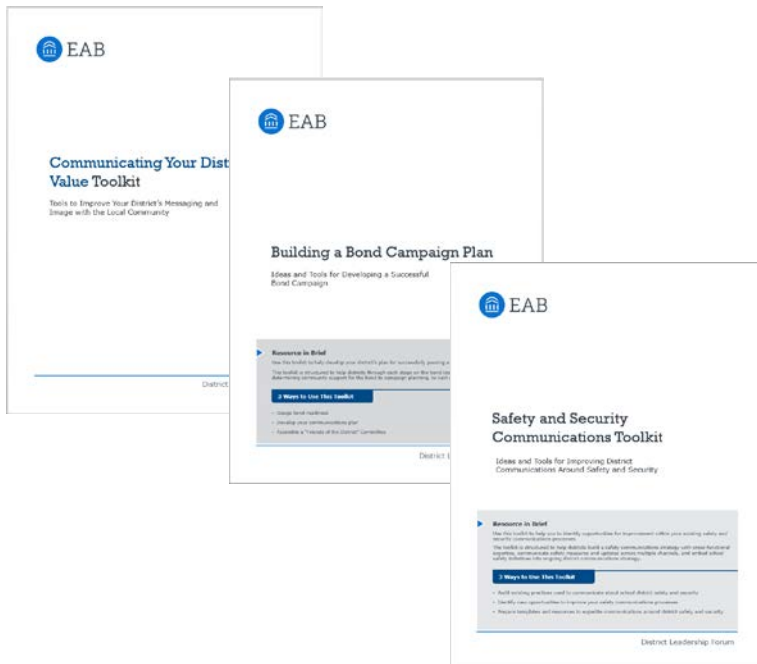


# Providing Continuous Support

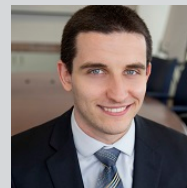


## Improve Communications in Your District

Upcoming DLF Publications: District Communications Toolkits



## Questions on Today's Material?



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