

RESTART AND RECOVERY

Communications Tool Kit





The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is the leading organization of and voice for principals and other school leaders across the United States. NASSP seeks to transform education through school leadership, recognizing that the fulfillment of each student's potential relies on great leaders in every school committed to the success of each student. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development, NASSP administers the National Honor Society, National Junior Honor Society, National Elementary Honor Society, and National Student Council.

*Principals,
Communicating up is
just as important as
communicating out.
It is critical that your
voice is heard, as you
are the first recipients
of “community
feedback”.*

COMMUNICATE EARLY AND OFTEN



Make time for communications with you

Create forums for people to communicate with each other



Develop a Shared Language

Develop on-going mechanisms to collect feedback from school personnel and community

When you do not have an answer, be transparent about that

Be transparent about the situation (if there is conflicting advice, say so)



We have to collectively “learn our way” through this situation

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INTRODUCTION



The 2020 back-to-school season is unlike any principals have experienced before. We are challenged to renew the learning program amid the dual challenges of a global pandemic and a resurgent consciousness of racial injustice. And with political leaders unable to reach consensus, principals are finding ways to do more and reinvent education on the fly with one hand tied behind their back.

Yet, so much of the success of your efforts relies not just on your ability to execute the work, but on your ability to communicate it. In many districts, the superintendent has been the source of information for your community, and there is a lot of value in a single messenger for maintaining a consistent message. As the school year begins, however, your community

will look to the much more proximate and familiar principal as the representative of the district. In addition to the leader of learning, you will be the face and voice of the school to a community that is hurting, fractured, and in some cases politically polarized.

Fortunately, you are well-suited for this work. Whether or not you have any formal communications training, research tells us you possess two natural assets: Credibility and trust. A 2014 public survey for the Center for American Progress revealed that 82 percent of the American public finds their local principal credible on matters of education, second only two teachers and higher than other school organizations or policymakers.

HOW CREDIBLE DO YOU FIND EACH OF THE FOLLOWING GROUPS ON PUBLIC EDUCATION?

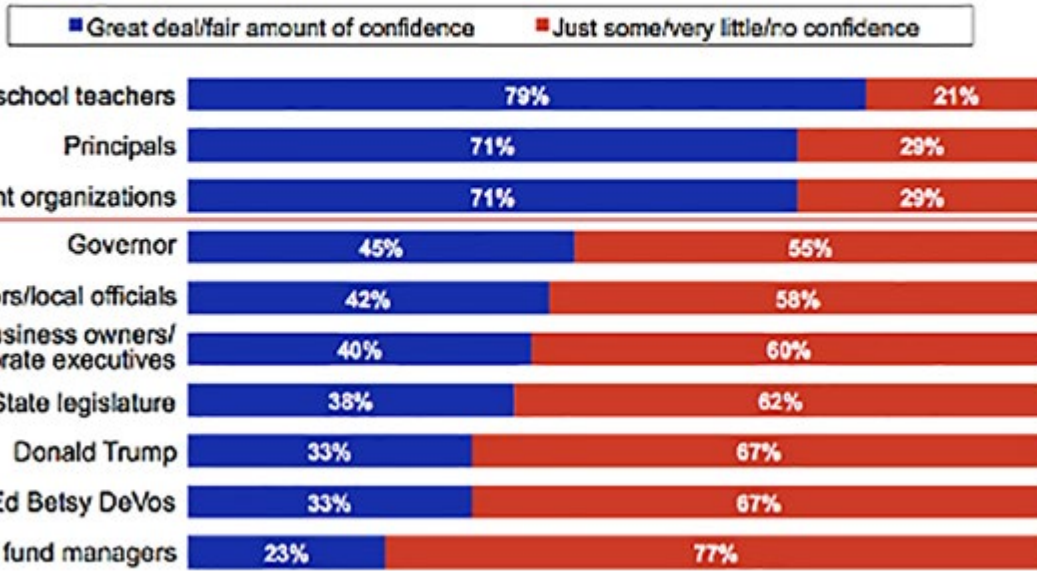


A 2017 SURVEY BY THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS FOUND SIMILAR RESULTS.



Who Has the Right Ideas for Public Education?

Confidence in People/Organizations to Have Right Ideas for my Public Schools



Public School Parents on the Value of Public Education – August 2017 – Hart Research for the AFT

But more than credibility, the American public trusts that you are acting in the best interest of those entrusted to your care and that you are a trustworthy steward of public funds. A [2019 study by the Pew Research Center](#) looked at Americans’ views on eight groups of people who hold powerful positions: members of Congress, local elected officials, K-12 public school principals, journalists, military leaders, police officers, leaders of technology

companies and religious leaders. In all three categories--empathy, transparency and ethics--public school principals came out on top.

Principals have never needed to draw on those reservoirs of credibility and trust more than now. This guide is intended to assist you in using those assets to your school’s best advantage while tensions are running high and confidence is running low.



DEFINING AND UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCES



Many different groups have a stake in the success of their schools. They all have different needs and prioritize different values. When those needs and values inform not just what we say but how we say it, our message stands a much greater chance of being understood. In communications science, we call that strategy framing. The FrameWorks Institute has done a great deal of research on framing in education and provides guidance, especially on [framing education as a public good](#) that benefits everyone. But for our immediate needs, we should focus on the admonition to activate a shared value when addressing any audience. With parents, for instance, the shared value is that you both want the best possible education for their student. That shared value can help you defuse a potentially acrimonious conversation:

Parent: *I demand to speak with you right away. Virtual learning in this school is a disaster. My son is learning nothing, and that's completely unacceptable.*

Principal: *I would have to agree that it's completely unacceptable if your son isn't learning anything. I find that very distressing. We both want the*



best education for your son, so tell me what you're seeing, and let's figure out the best way to address it together.

By re-framing the conversation with a shared value, you have the chance to recast a confrontation as a partnership toward solving a common problem.

At the same time, we have to recognize the peculiar circumstances of the pandemic era and empathize with stakeholders who have been particularly affected by it. Former



NASSP principal of the year finalist Paul Kelly of Elk Grove High School in Illinois illustrated it best when schools first closed in March:

I saw teachers circulating memes with the message that “now parents will see how hard it is to teach their kids all day.” Meanwhile, that parent with the child now at home might have just lost their job while my teachers and —who are there to provide a public service—are still on full salary. We can’t be smug. Our families were already hurting and it compounded their pain when school closed down. Empathy has to filter every interaction we have with a parent or community member.

Of course, parents are just one stakeholder group—let alone the diverse groups among

parents. You have to think about teachers who want to do well by their students but are frustrated by the ambiguity of the reopening status and genuinely fearful of contracting a potentially fatal virus should they be forced to return to school. You have local businesses that are forced to remain closed and resentful that “their tax dollars are paying educators to stay home.” Empathy won’t solve those problems. But by (1) acknowledging their pain, and (2) finding a common value to activate, the chances increase of a constructive rather than a confrontational encounter.

When speaking with multiple stakeholder groups, it is often helpful to map out who they are and what shared value you can activate to frame your message.

| Stakeholder | Identified Challenge | Shared Value to Activate |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

YOUR INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

Communicating with teachers provides both unique opportunities and unique challenges. A crucial element of collaborative leadership, the quality of your internal communication can either set up a school effort for success or doom it right out of the gate, as several school leaders describe in a [series of real-life scenarios](#). The easier-said-than-done guidance is to consult and do with teachers rather than to them whenever possible.

DEVELOPING YOUR KEY MESSAGES

With your stakeholders clearly identified, your next step is to determine what you want them to know. Building your key messages in advance empowers you to communicate consistently and confidently, even under adverse conditions. A key message is a simple sentence, often supported by statistics, stories, and sound bites. You want to keep them brief and develop no more than three to you can easily remember them and weave them through all of your communications. [An article in NASSP’s Principal Leadership magazine](#) provides a comprehensive look at how principals can develop and apply key messages. And

And with so many communications flying so quickly during an unusual back-to-school season, make sure teachers are at least aware of any developments before they are communicated outside the school. Teachers hearing news about their school from parents—or worse, being asked about it—will build resentment among teachers who are already stressed and frustrated. [More information on grieving communities here.](#)

he underscores the point that, once you have your messages on hand, you will recognize endless opportunities to reinforce them.

Delivering consistent messages is more important now as we resume school in the context of a pandemic than ever before. Suboptimal experiences of emergency virtual learning in the spring disturbed many families and shook their faith in their public school’s ability to execute virtual learning in the fall. In many districts, the principal’s primary communications goal will be to restore that trust. A solid message alone cannot achieve that goal, but it can help a principal assert the goal publicly to key stakeholder groups



EXAMPLES



KEY MESSAGE:

The pandemic shook all of us, but it also strengthened our commitment to providing the best education possible to each child in our school.

SUPPORTS:

- *School is not closed. The school building is closed, but our hearts and minds are always open.*
- *Our teachers were already great in the classroom. But during the summer, they spent of total of X hours—that's Y hours per teacher—learning how to be great teachers on-line.*
- *We're discovering virtual learning is providing opportunities we didn't have before. [Share a story.]*

DELIVERING YOUR MESSAGE

As noted previously, once you are equipped with your key messages, you will see endless opportunities to deliver them in person, in print, and on-line. It is impossible to cover the complete breadth of media available to you. But some key considerations apply to many categories of media.

Be where your stakeholders are. With new social media platforms appearing every year, no principal could possibly maintain a meaningful presence on each one. Fortunately, you don't have to. Gain a sense of the top one or two platforms your stakeholders use and focus on those. Then consider how those platforms help you reinforce whatever message you want to deliver. NASSP Digital Principal Carrie Jackson gained renown for her use of image-driven Instagram at Timberview Middle School in Fort Worth, TX, to demonstrate that the school emphasized active, hands-on learning. Principal Paul Kelly, mentioned earlier, makes himself relatable to his community on his TikTok account. Let the medium be guided by the persona you want to project and the goal you want to meet.

Enlist "ambassadors." Many principals avoid social media entirely for fear of trolls, often anonymous social media users who take joy in attacking and denigrating people on-line. Do I respond? Do I delete? Do I just ignore it? Unfortunately, these questions repeated often enough can be sufficient to sour anyone on a social media platform that could otherwise be used for a constructive purpose. Yet both on-line and in person, many principals have found success by cultivating ambassadors to deliver their message and clarify misinformation in the community. It's not a formal role, but a series of relationships the principal builds with people who possess social capital in your community. Likely, you already have relationships with well connected parents, business leaders, or influencers in other important stakeholder groups. Recognize them as an asset. Ask them to respond on social media and in conversation when they hear the school being attacked or misrepresented. It multiplies your reach and relieves a great deal of pressure.

Don't forget conventional media. Perhaps to the chagrin of Mark Zuckerberg, people still read their local community newspapers. It's always likely they will encounter someone they know on the pages. Perhaps that someone should be you. Consider inviting a reporter to visit a virtual classroom with you so they can get a firsthand look at virtual learning. Or submit an opinion piece that highlights some of the great learning happening even though the building is closed.

Send a video message. These days we all spend more time on Zoom, WebEx, Google Meet, and BlackBoard Collaborate than we do with our own families. If you feel the medium is suited to you, draft a brief script, hit Record, and capture a video that reinforces your message to a stakeholder audience. If you find it easy to do, follow the lead of [NASSP Digital Principal Brian McCann](#), who weaves his messages into each morning's video announcements.

Always follow district protocols. Larger districts often have a communications office with procedures for engaging in social media, speaking with reporters, writing opinion pieces, and so forth. Even smaller districts might require clearance from the superintendent before engaging in those activities. Always follow those procedures. And you just might discover your district communications office has some resources you were not aware of.





ADVOCATING FOR CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

Just as important as communicating out is communicating up. You don't have to look long to find a headline about a superintendent who is under attack or caught in the unmanageable intersection of policy, practice, and public will. They are making hard decisions—and yes, unmaking them, then remaking them as conditions change. And they unfortunately make those decisions sometimes without consulting principals who are the first recipients of “community feedback.”

How can a principal engage more deeply in creating the district-level conditions for their school's success? First, ask. Your district leaders might leap at the opportunity to have you involved if you just make your interest known. Consistent with the theme of this guide, how you ask might make all the difference. While your messages might be different, the framing

strategy still applies. You could say to the superintendent some version of “Your decisions are wreaking havoc here on the ground. I need to be involved in those decisions so I'm prepared for how parents will respond,” but then you become just another in a universe of demanding stakeholders. So consider what shared value you can activate. Likely, you both recognize the same challenges and problems to be solved, so start there: “I am hearing X and experiencing Y in my school community, and I suspect my school is not alone in that. If you can bring me into those district-level conversations, I would like to help you find the solution.” Much like the parent conversation above, you have re-framed the conversation from a potential confrontation to a partnership toward a shared goal. You're proposing to relieve a burden rather than add to the list. Even if the superintendent declines, you have likely built your social capital.



CONCLUSION

With so many priorities competing for a principal's time, it's easy to lose focus on communications. But here is the reality: You are delivering a message in everything you say and do. By remaining silent, you communicate a lack of transparency. By not

involving your team in crucial decisions, you communicate their opinion does not matter. Our intention with this guide is to help you make your communications more intentional. It's not difficult; it just requires some attention.

TEMPLATES

VIDEO





VIDEO TIPS:

- Select a simple, natural background
- Solid colored jewel-tone or dark clothing works best on screen.
- Avoid tight, small patterns in clothing.
- Keep light sources in front of you, not behind you.
- Rule of thumb for video length: 160 words per minute.

VIDEO SCRIPT TEMPLATE

Hello (school) family. I just wanted to take a moment to update you on our progress at (school). The pandemic has shaken all of us, and we know that it has touched many families in our community both personally and financially. At the same time, it has strengthened our commitment to providing the best education possible to each child in our school.

[Share highlights and positive stories.]

And we are even discovering that virtual learning is providing opportunities that our students would not otherwise have. [example]

Of course, we would all love to gather back in school. The teachers and I miss seeing the kids, And they might not admit it, but I'm pretty sure some of them miss us too. But the school is not closed. The school building is closed, but our hearts and minds are always open. Thanks you for your ongoing support, and stay well.

[Download Microsoft Word Template](#)

TEMPLATES

LETTER



Communications Strategy

- ✓ purpose
- ✓ current situation
- ✓ identifying stakeholders



LETTER TO TEACHERS TEMPLATE

Dear (school) team,

I want to say how incredibly proud I am of all of you for the way our school has begun the school year. It has not been easy, and the outside world will probably never know just everything we did to make sure each student in our school has the best education possible under these extraordinary circumstances. But we know, and we can be confident that our students are better off for our efforts.

(Announcements/Reminders)

There is still a lot of recovery ahead of us. None of us anticipated a pandemic. Personal and economic tragedy hit many of our families hard. And even their stalwart public schools—on which they rightly depend as a steady source of support—were forced to scale back to a light version of virtual learning. That experience shook their faith in their school. And it's up to us to restore that faith. We do that by projecting how fortunate we know we are to teach their children and ensuring that every encounter with our parents and community members is positive and constructive.

Thank you for all you're doing toward our mission of educating every student to high levels.

Sincerely,

(Principal)

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POSITIVE COVID CASE LETTER TEMPLATE



Dear (school) family,

I regret to inform you that (school) has identified its first positive case of COVID-19. Consistent with CDC guidelines, the school will be closed for x days for disinfecting while (describe local contact-tracing process). The infected individual (share status if possible).

While we hoped the occasion would never come, (school) planned carefully for the need to immediately close school and switch to short-term emergency virtual learning. Our teachers are prepared and committed to continuing the learning program for each of our students while we ensure the building is the safest learning environment possible.

Student safety is an essential condition for the high-level learning our school always aspires to provide. That condition includes more than physical safety. This incident might be the closest your child has yet encountered COVID-19. In any case, the pandemic has elevated many students' anxiety levels to the point at which it interferes with their ability to learn. As always, the (school) team welcomes the opportunity to partner with parents to remove that obstacle. I encourage you to watch this [five-minute video](#) by our nation's leading expert of student anxiety and grief to inform your ongoing conversations with your child about their pandemic concerns. I also invite you to take advantage of local resources available to all of us:

(list local resources)

I know the news of a positive case is disappointing and concerning. The wellness of every member of the (school) community remains our highest priority, and I look forward to a return to school consistent with that commitment.

Sincerely,

(Principal)

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FOSTERING WELLNESS WITH SCHOOL STAFF LETTER TEMPLATE

Dear (school) team,

This pandemic has been hard on you. You experienced the grief of the sudden end to the school year—a closure without closure—and you spent the summer re-skilling yourselves to teach in a virtual environment. Yes, I am extremely proud of all you have accomplished. But just as important, I'm concerned that you are doing it all at the cost of your personal well-being.

Our students and our families need us now more than ever before. But you cannot pour from an empty pitcher. I want you to know that is always part of my message to our district office. I believe it is paramount that they understand that your talent is the greatest asset our district has, and that we must continue both to cultivate it and encourage you to recharge so you can be the best teacher your students deserve. District leaders share my concern, and I am pleased to see they have responded in the following ways:

(Describe how the district is supporting teacher mental health).

While you are considering how you might take advantage of these services, I also strongly encourage you to review this [document](#) and reflect on how you can incorporate personal wellness into your day-to-day lives.

You are the best hope for our students' success, and the leadership team and I stand ready to assist any way we can make sure that hope is realized.

Thank you for all you do for each student each day.

Sincerely,

(Principal)

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FOSTERING WELLNESS WITH FAMILIES LETTER TEMPLATE

Dear (school) family,

It's hard to identify all the ways this pandemic has affected our community. Some of our families have lost jobs and income. Some of us have lost loved ones. Some of us have lost our homes. And all of us have lost a sense of control over our lives and our surroundings. These realities hit students in unique ways, some of which are silent and not apparent for long periods of time.

And so, I want to share a bit about (school's) efforts to assist all your children as they work to manage the effects of the pandemic on their lives. To be clear, our school exists as a place of learning, but that learning is not limited to reading and math, biology and history. To become successful adults, the research is clear that students must also engage in social and emotional learning, often abbreviated to SEL. SEL, by definition, is the process through which both children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

At (school), we will weave SEL through our curriculum and activities in numerous ways:

(Explain how you are incorporating SEL)

SEL is important to include in school programming under any circumstances. But the pandemic raises the need to a new level. As always, our (school) team is poised to meet that need, however we can for the ultimate well-being of each of our students.

I look forward to your questions and I wish you all the best during this challenging time.

Sincerely,

Principal

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For more information

Dr. Beverly J. Hutton

Chief Programs Officer

huttonb@nassp.org



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