



Talk about people, not systems

Tell Stories about Students

Even well-crafted messages can seem hollow and artificial if you don't ground them in real experience. When talking about data such as graduation rates or about student data privacy, helping people understand what it means for students is important. Embed in your communications stories about how different policies and practices affect real classrooms, students, and families in your community. Doing so will create an environment in which people understand and trust that data can be used as a tool to make the best decisions for students.

To get started, consider these key communications questions:

- Whom am I talking to?** Know your audience. Stories or ideas that hit close to home for people will have the most impact.
- What are my audience's concerns about data in education?** Build trust by using stories to proactively address concerns and reinforce the value of data.
- Does my audience know what this data point means?** Use clear, jargon-free language to help people understand exactly what the data point does—and does not—measure.
- Have I shown how this data point is connected to what happens at the school level?** Be sure to talk about data policies and practices that are helping individual students (while protecting their privacy) wherever possible—and be specific!
- Am I already telling success stories that can be used to show how data helps students?** You may already be talking about successes in your state or district that have a data component. Make that connection explicit to show how data is already being used to improve learning.
- Does my story help people understand how our state or district is working to improve student learning?** Connect your story to the bigger picture by showing how it relates to your policies and practices.
- Have I engaged with my audience—such as parents and the public—to ensure that my story speaks to their values and concerns?** Communication is a two-way street. Be sure that your storytelling is part of an ongoing conversation that listens and responds authentically to your audience.

TRY IT!

Take something your state or district is doing and turn it into a story of impact. Practice by filling out the following sentence with real examples of how data, policies, and practices will affect people:

Here's how this [XXX] will [XXX] your [XXX]:
[XXX].

Here's how this **data point** will answer your questions:

It shows how many students are graduating on time at your neighborhood school and provides information about how that school compares to others in the state/district.

Here's how this **policy** will affect your child's learning:

Teachers will start the school year knowing more about your child's strengths and weaknesses and will be better prepared to meet his or her individual needs.

Here's how this **practice** will help your child's teacher:

It can pinpoint your child's reading level and help the teacher make reading suggestions for home.

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Sample Story (and Why It Works!)

This sample is formatted as a letter from a district office to parents in the community explaining why the state has chosen to include chronic absence as a new measure on its school report card and how the information can be helpful for them.

Wacoma Valley District Families,

Attendance is crucial to your student's success. Missing class can cause him or her to fall behind. Because we take student attendance very seriously, the report card with information on student and school performance across the state will include a new piece of information called the *chronic absence rate*.

Chronic absence means missing too much school for any reason, including illness, behavior, or just cutting class. Students are chronically absent if they miss 10 or more school days in one year. Our school year is 182 days long. That means a student who misses 10 school days will miss almost 6 percent of learning time that year.

Chronic absence causes students to fall behind their peers in math and reading ability and can even lead to failure and dropping out of school.

How many students in Wacoma Valley District were chronically absent last year? Twenty students per grade. That's above the district average (16 students per grade). Here's how we're working to lower the chronic absence rate and how you might see the efforts affect your student:

- We will begin sending home letters that let you know if your student is missing too much school and risks falling behind.
- For students who are chronically absent, we will work with families to set up a plan to turn things around and get the student back on track to graduate.

We're confident in the success of these strategies and the benefit they will have for our students. Last year, a similar program was introduced in Washington County. One parent who received a letter said she knew that her daughter had been absent a few times but underestimated how quickly those absences added up. It was the wake-up call she needed to work with her daughter and the school to ensure that her daughter didn't fall off track academically.

Tell us what you think. Please feel free to reach out to my office at superintendent@wvps.org or comment on our Facebook page.

Para obtener información sobre la ausencia crónica y el boletín de calificaciones del estado en español, vea esta carta aquí.

Sincerely,
Superintendent Green

Make sure the audience is clear.

Explain what terms mean and put them in context.

Bring the story back to how this affects the people in your community.

Be sure to ground your communications in strong policies and practices.

Explain what policies and practices will look like with real, specific examples.

Ask for feedback. And be sure to follow up by letting people know how you are using that feedback.

Make information available for the languages spoken in your community.