

More Than a Number



Tools for
Talking about
Education Data



Why Talk about Data?

Proactive, two-way communication is the best way to create an environment in which people trust, value, and use data to help students excel.

High-quality data is essential to achieving education goals, yet it is often discussed only in terms of data systems and accountability. Data is most valuable when it is providing useful information to support students. Communicators should not shy away from talking about why data is necessary and explaining how it is used and protected. For educators, parents, and the public to support data use, they must see how that information is fostering their students' learning.

We hope that these resources will help policymakers and advocates communicate about data collection, use, and protection in their state—and why data is valuable to support student learning.

The toolkit will emphasize three core components of any strategy for talking about education data:



Talk about people, not systems

Behind every data point is a student. To ensure that data is used in service of student learning rather than only as a tool for compliance, states must show how data is used to support student success and all of the people working to improve student success. What questions are educators able to answer using data? How is data use supporting families' individual learning needs? Authentic stories about students and educators—in jargon-free language—will go a long way to show how data helps real people. Be sure your storytelling is part of an ongoing conversation that listens and responds to your audience.



Equip your messengers

Effective communication is more than a press release. It's about listening to people and meeting their information needs—and it does not come from only communications professionals. Think about people who are already talking about data to communities, and make sure they are equipped with messages that speak to families' concerns. Teachers, school leaders, and even parents and community members can also make effective messengers for data.



Be proactive

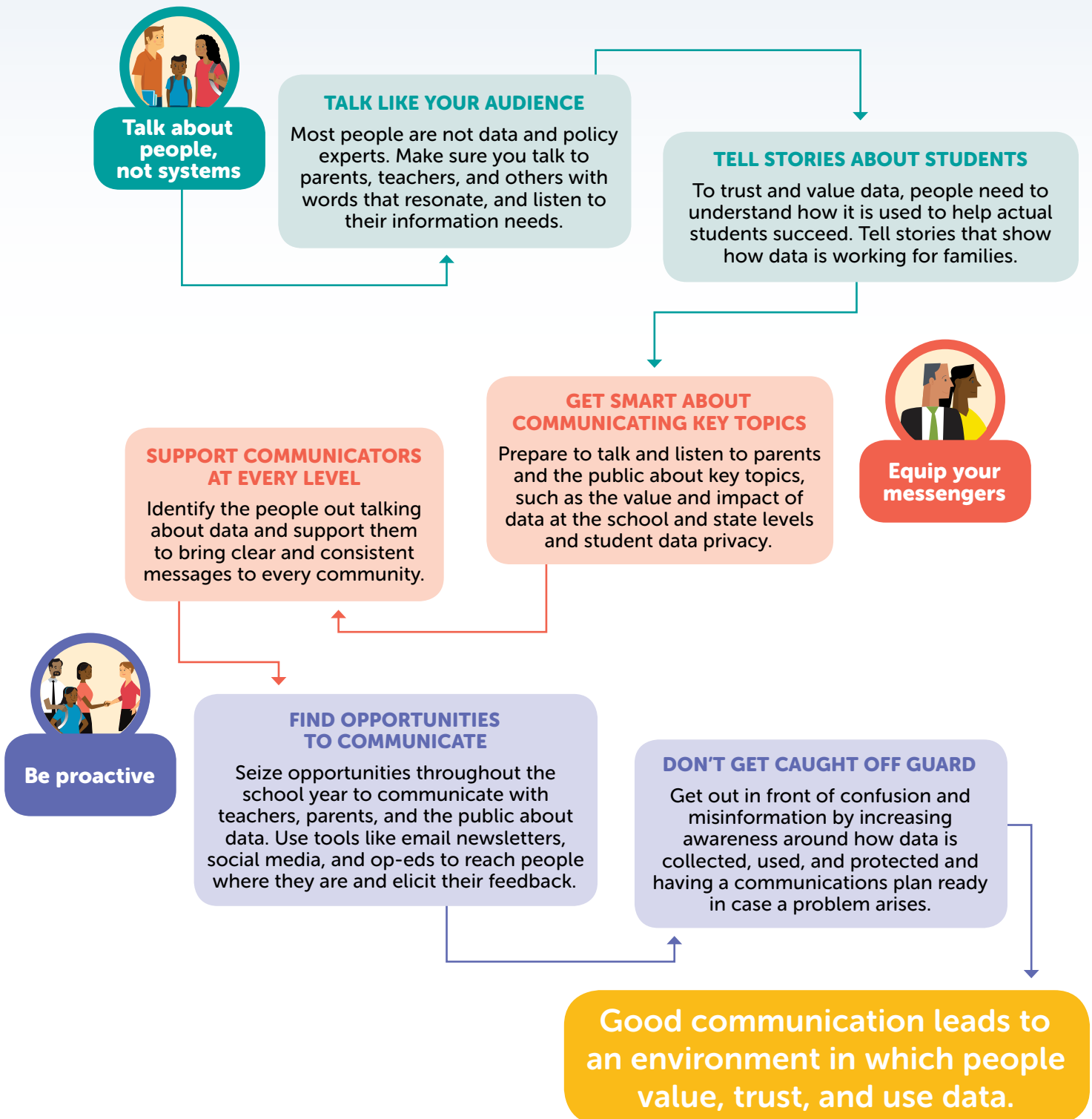
People should not hear about data for the first time when there is a problem. True transparency means proactive communication, even when the topic is difficult. Find out what questions your community has about why states and districts collect data, how data informs teaching and learning, and how students' information is protected. When discussing your policies, include information about how data is used to support those policies. Make sure the lines of communication are open to get feedback from your audience.

Good communication is rooted in strong data policies and practices.

You cannot talk about what is not happening. Data must be put to work for students to get people to trust and value it, and that has everything to do with the policies and practices your district and state have in place to ensure that data is used to support student learning. For more policy guidance, see our state recommendations in [Time to Act: Making Data Work for Students](#).

Using This Toolkit

The pieces of this toolkit are organized into the categories outlined below. Use tools from each section to develop a comprehensive communications strategy that meets your audience's needs.





Talk about
people,
not systems

TALK LIKE YOUR AUDIENCE

Parents

Parents deserve the best information possible to make education decisions for their children, but we often talk about data systems and policies in ways that don't answer parents' questions and address their concerns. Earn parents' trust by being honest and transparent about what data is collected and how it is used and protected to help their child succeed.

Keep in mind:

- Parents already use data to support their child's academic success. In national polls, the vast majority of parents say they rely on data to understand how their child is progressing in school and to make education decisions.
- Parents trust educators to use their child's data appropriately. But they become more skeptical of data use as it moves further away from the classroom to the district, state, and national levels. Be transparent about what information is collected, who has access to it, and how it is used and protected.
- Parents need to see how data affects their child. Conversations about systems and policies will not resonate unless there is a clear link to how those things actually affect students.



GET TALKING

Use plain, straightforward language.

- Avoid jargon and terms that have little meaning outside of government offices. Acronyms are not your friend.
- Help people make meaning of the numbers by connecting them back to students and their progress in meeting achievement goals. (See "You Don't Have to Go It Alone in Communicating about Data" in this toolkit.)

Spell out what *education data* means every time you use it, and provide examples.

- Parents don't necessarily know what you mean when you say *data*—they may have their own definition. Be specific about the kind of information you mean and how it supports students.
- The term *data* itself can seem vague, technical, and impersonal. Show how data is simply information that helps people make decisions. Consider including an example of data use in a classroom in your state or district.

Talk about data in the context of a broader set of tools and practices to promote student success.

- Emphasize that data is a tool that can enable parents and educators to make better decisions to help students learn; it is not a panacea or replacement for teaching.
- Show how data use contributes to larger goals, such as measuring which programs are most effective and making sure that all students get what they need to succeed.

Think about *how* parents get their information.

- Identify the best messenger for parents and what vehicles parents use to get information. (See the "Equip Your Messengers" section of this toolkit.)
- The best way to reach parents may be to equip educators and school leaders with effective, factual ways to talk about the value of data. (See "Why Data Matters" in this toolkit.)

MORE →



FIND THE RIGHT VEHICLE

When engaging parents, dissemination is not enough. Parents are critical partners, and your communication must be designed to meet them where they are, not the other way around.

- ✦ Think about using new channels of communication that parents may prefer, like social media platforms.
- ✦ Leverage communication avenues already being used by districts as well as less official networks used by parents, like community email lists.
- ✦ Talk about data use at events, such as a back-to-school meeting, and solicit parents' feedback.
- ✦ Create an online FAQ to answer difficult data questions with parent-friendly language.
- ✦ Open a space for dialogue for parents to share their questions and concerns about data use.



Talk about people, not systems

TALK LIKE YOUR AUDIENCE

Teachers

Teachers want and need data to support their students' learning, but teachers worry about the burden—especially of time—that collecting and using data can create. Have ongoing conversations with teachers about how they use data and the supports they need to best use it in their classrooms. Teachers have the most direct communication with parents, and they will talk about what they value and use.

Keep in mind:

- Teachers view data as worth it. They generally see data as a valuable tool to improve and inform instruction, assess student and classwide needs, and support individual students' progress.
- Teachers have concerns about data being used to judge them or their school unfairly.
- Teachers value data more when they are provided time and support to use it to help their students.



GET TALKING

Be an advocate for teachers.

- Acknowledge that teachers know best how to support their students with data and that they already use data in multiple ways to help their students. Messaging should convey that data use and good practice go hand in hand.
- Talk about data as a tool to inform, not replace, teachers' professional judgment.
- Amplify the voices of teachers who already value and use data in the classroom. Teacher-to-teacher communication is a powerful way to share best practices.

Acknowledge and address teachers' real concerns.

- Teachers have valid concerns about the added burden that data use may place on their workload. Communications with teachers should acknowledge these concerns as worthy of being addressed.
- Use these opportunities to highlight priorities and focus on actions the state and district are taking to address concerns, such as easier access to timely, secure data and more opportunities for quality training.

Talk about data use beyond accountability and compliance with the law.

- Illustrate how as a state or district you are making it possible for teachers to use data to support student success.

Spell out what you mean by the term *education data* every time you use it, and provide examples.

- Be specific about the different types of data you're talking about (e.g., ninth-grade course completion, chronic absenteeism) and how they can help teachers in the classroom.
- Data is much more than just test scores. Take the opportunity to show that data can come from a variety of formal and informal sources, including data collected by teachers themselves.

MORE →

Teacher–Parent Communication

Parents trust teachers the most to use and interpret their child’s data, making teacher–parent communication a critical opportunity to garner parent investment and support. Think about whether the teachers in your state or district are equipped to talk with parents about data in accessible language in ways that build trust. (See the “Equip Your Messengers” section of this toolkit.)



FIND THE RIGHT VEHICLE

When engaging teachers, dissemination is not enough. Teachers are valuable partners, and your communication must be designed to meet them where they are, not the other way around.

- ✦ Think about using new channels of communication that teachers may prefer, like social media posts and webinars.
- ✦ Create an online FAQ to help teachers answer difficult data questions with parent-friendly language.
- ✦ Leverage communication avenues already being used by districts as well as less official networks used by teachers.
- ✦ Create a facilitation guide to help teachers effectively lead conversations with families about how they use data.
- ✦ Consider hosting an annual data summit to hear directly from teachers about what’s working and what’s not.
- ✦ Open a space for dialogue for teachers to share their questions and concerns about discussing data use with families.



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.

MORE →

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.



Equip your messengers

GET SMART ABOUT COMMUNICATING KEY TOPICS

Why Data Matters

Data is usually talked about only in the context of accountability and portrayed as something separate from day-to-day learning. That leaves parents, educators, and even state leaders with a limited, or even skewed, understanding of data's value in education. Everyone who has a stake in education—especially families and educators—needs the right data in the right format at the right time to serve our students along their unique journeys.

Include the value of data when you talk about your state or district's education goals. By proactively talking about data as just one part of what success looks like, you can demonstrate how it is actually being used by people and change its perception from blunt instrument to instrumental tool.

To get started, keep in mind:

- Data does not exist in a vacuum. It's essential to meeting education goals.
- Behind every data point is a student—talk about people, not systems.
- Data is more than test scores. It is a whole host of information that creates a fuller picture of student and school performance.



Talking about the Value of Data

These messages will help convey the value of data to meeting your state or district's education goals. Each place has a specific context, so add detail about your own state/district efforts.

We have ambitious goals for the students in our state/district, and we need information to make sure we're meeting them.

We want to be sure we're using our resources wisely and getting every student ready for life after high school.

TIP Reinforce your state's education and workforce goals.

People empowered with information can better support student success.

Data in the hands of parents and teachers helps them identify where kids are excelling and where they may be falling off track.

TIP Remind people about something specific your state/district is doing to get useful data to teachers and parents.

We need information to know what is—and isn't—working for all of our students.

Information helps personalize learning for individual students, and it shines a light on inequalities affecting whole populations of students. We need data to ensure that we're meeting all of our students' needs.

TIP Talk about specific state/district strengths, and don't be afraid to also talk about where data has illuminated weaknesses that must be addressed.

When it comes to helping students succeed, data is just the beginning of the conversation.

Data alone does not drive decisions. It is most powerful when teachers and parents have information that helps them answer their questions and take action.

TIP Highlight real examples of teachers and school leaders in your state who have used data as the jumping-off point to make changes that support student learning.

Student privacy is always a priority.

Using students' information and keeping it safe go hand in hand—we take our responsibility to protect students' information seriously.

TIP Your commitment to safeguarding students' information should be a key part of talking about data. Don't let people wonder about what you are doing to keep student data safe.



Equip your messengers

GET SMART ABOUT COMMUNICATING KEY TOPICS

Student Data Privacy

Data is necessary to meet your education goals, but parents and the public are not always familiar with how data is collected, safeguarded, and used. They have legitimate concerns about the safety of their child’s information. Whether or not those concerns are voiced, people are looking to you to demonstrate your commitment to protecting student information.

It is important to be proactive and transparent about how your state is safeguarding students’ information. State and district education leaders need to talk about why data is valuable and how it is safeguarded to prevent confusion and mistrust.

To get started, keep in mind:

- Any time you talk about strategies to meet education goals—especially if they involve data or technology—talk about how important the data will be to teachers and parents and emphasize the importance of safeguarding that information. Don’t wait to be asked!
- State and district officials aren’t always the best messengers to communicate the value of data. Teachers and school leaders, for example, talk to parents and can communicate how data is supporting individual students’ learning. (See “You Don’t Have to Go It Alone in Communicating about Data” in this toolkit.)



Talking about Student Data Privacy

Here are some major messages to include when talking to the public about student data privacy.



Student safety is always a priority.

- Using student information and keeping it safe go hand in hand—we take our responsibility to protect students’ information seriously.

TIP Not everyone has the same understanding of what data is or how it is used. Provide specific examples to make clear what you mean by *data* and *data use*.



Student data is firmly protected under the law.

- Our state/district has strong policies and practices in place to protect student information.
- Federal laws, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment, and the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Rule, protect student information in classrooms and online.
- We are focused on continuously improving data collection practices, and our methods go beyond mere compliance with the law.

TIP Remember that talking about the law is important but not sufficient for demonstrating your commitment to protecting student information.

TIP Consider creating FAQs for parents about education data laws (like FERPA) to explain their scope and limitations.



Student data should be used to support students’ success.

- We view data primarily as a tool that informs teachers and parents in supporting their own child.
- We are committed to ensuring that data foremost informs practices to help every child in our state be successful.

TIP Never talk about privacy and security in a vacuum—always include context about how student data is used to support students.



Equip your messengers

SUPPORT COMMUNICATORS AT EVERY LEVEL

You Don't Have to Go It Alone in Communicating about Data

As a state or district leader, it's essential that you set the tone for policy messages and talk to people about education data use in your communities. However, you are not the only person who can—or should—communicate about the value of data and how it is used and protected. Often the people talking about data are teachers, parents, and school or other community leaders. These communicators play a vital role by meeting people where they are and addressing how data use affects them and their students.

Identify the best people to talk to about data, and make sure they are equipped with clear, consistent messaging for a productive conversation.

When considering which messengers to engage, think about the audience you are trying to reach and who may already be talking to them about data use and other education issues. Think about who that audience trusts and who has the most relevant knowledge and experience to address their questions and speak to how data use directly affects them. Make sure your messenger is equipped to speak without falling back on confusing jargon and eduspeak.

Messengers to consider include the following:

Teachers can tell stories about how they have used data to help students.

TIP If your state has a teacher council or a teacher fellowship program (such as Hope Street Group, Teach Plus, or others), work with those teachers to elevate their voices and experience.

Parents can talk about how they have used information to make the best decisions about their child's education.

TIP Local parent teacher associations (PTAs) and parent teacher organizations (PTOs) are great resources, as well as organizations like Urban League and UnidosUS.

School and district leaders can communicate how data is informing goals for all students.

TIP You can tap leaders from suburban, rural, and urban districts to show the power of data in multiple settings.

Business leaders can talk about the power of evidence to improve outcomes in education.

TIP Business leaders are especially powerful messengers for policymakers. From performance management to return on investment, business leaders understand the value of data.

Community leaders and activists can talk about the need for evidence to make change and support schools.

TIP Community leaders and advocates have their ear to the ground in local districts and may even be able to help you identify additional messengers.

MORE →



ACTIVATING YOUR MESSENGER

Many people in your state or district can talk about the power of data. Support them through existing communication channels, and consider developing new ones that better meet people where they are. Whether providing direct training or just engaging different audiences with your messages, consider the following strategies:

- 📶 advertisements on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms targeted to specific audiences, especially parents and teachers
- 📶 newsletters for district and school leaders—some pieces can also be posted on social media for a broader reach
- 📶 local media—both formal and informal, like blogs or listserves—to push out important ideas or initiatives
- 📶 virtual town halls on Twitter or Facebook Live to engage directly with people in real time
- 📶 state data conferences that allow you to bring educators and leaders together to dig into data, solve problems, and provide feedback
- 📶 collaboration with critical friends, like state and community advocates, to highlight bright spots and get feedback on what's not working

For information on how you can center your communications on stories of real students and schools, see "Tell Stories about Students" in this toolkit.



Be proactive

Find Opportunities to Communicate

Don't wait for a crisis to start talking to people about data use and why it matters to student learning. Communicate proactively—and make sure that communication is a two-way street—to foster trust and value in your communications. Look for opportunities in the calendar and as you listen to the public conversation to communicate about your priorities.

Get Started





- Think about the best ways to communicate with your audience. Avoid jargon and meet people where they are, such as on social media. Be sure to open channels of communication that audiences like parents and teachers can use to share their values and concerns with you. (For more tips on language and communications vehicles, see the “Talk Like Your Audience” section of this toolkit.)
- Make sure your communications lead is involved in external communications about data to maintain consistency of messages, alignment to the priorities of the agency, and alignment with the overall communications calendar.
- Use stories in the news as opportunities to highlight what's working in your schools and create urgency around issues you care about. When topics in the public conversation relate to your priorities, tee up your leaders and spokespeople to comment. (See “You Don't Have to Go It Alone in Communicating about Data” in this toolkit for more.)

Plan Your Communications Calendar

The school year provides plenty of opportunities to communicate with your education community and the public. Following is just the start of a list of events that you can consider as part of your proactive communications planning:






Late Summer: Back-to-school season

-  Remind parents, students, and educators about changes in standards, curriculum, and other policies and whether their students' or school's performance data may look different this year.
-  Spotlight the importance of school attendance to students' success. Discuss chronic absence and how it hurts student learning.
-  Raise awareness about promising initiatives, like parent and teacher dashboards, that will provide better information to support student learning.
-  Promote newly released information about school and district progress on state report cards, and explain to parents and the public what that data says about student learning.



Fall: Parent-teacher conferences

-  Highlight the value of regular conversations among parents, teachers, and students and how important student data is to those conversations.
-  Discuss how access to student data through state and local dashboards provides teachers a more robust understanding of their students' progress than snapshots like grades or a single test alone.
-  Spotlight the types of data your state makes available to parents to help inform their decisions about their children's education.

MORE →



Winter: Beginning of the new semester

- Use the time after winter break to remind parents, teachers, and students about changes to standards or curriculum that will be assessed in the spring and what that means for their students' performance data.
- Begin discussing graduation rate successes and challenges.



Spring: Assessment season

- Highlight the importance of your state's assessments (like the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium exams or end-of-course exams) and college readiness assessments (like the SAT and ACT), and discuss your state or district's progress on those assessments.
- Discuss how your state or district is using student test results to improve how it prepares students for college and careers.



Highlight information, such as the information reported on state report cards, that provides a picture of student postsecondary success, and discuss how your state or district plans to use that data to improve learning.



Start reminding parents and the public about the state report card, what types of information they will be able to find there, and why it's important.



Discuss how data helps teachers better understand and improve their own performance. If your state report card includes a teacher quality metric, talk about what that metric means.



Early Summer: Graduation season

- Celebrate graduation successes, and discuss the graduation rate and what your state or district is doing to improve it.
- Talk about the value of summer professional development for teachers.
- Discuss the role of data, like assessment results and grades, in helping identify the right summer learning opportunities for students.

SPECIAL DATES

Look out for special recognition times to highlight specific issues and celebrate educators and schools (check exact dates each year):



October: National Principals Month



January 28: Data Privacy Day



February: Digital Learning Day



May: Teacher Appreciation Week

Days throughout the year (varying by state and district):



important assessment windows



release of assessment results



parent-teacher meetings



professional development (especially dedicated days)



school and academic program choice windows



notable awards or achievements

See also the "Tell Stories about Students" piece of this toolkit, which includes a sample letter to parents. The letter seizes an opportunity to communicate—the inclusion of a new metric on the state report card—and uses it to talk about how the district is using data to better serve students.