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

Most people are not data and policy experts. Make sure you talk to parents, teachers, and others with words that resonate, and listen to their information needs.

TELL STORIES ABOUT STUDENTS

To trust and value data, people need to understand how it is used to help actual students succeed. Tell stories that show how data is working for families.

GET SMART ABOUT COMMUNICATING KEY TOPICS

Prepare to talk and listen to parents and the public about key topics, such as the value and impact of data at the school and state levels and student data privacy.

Equip your messengers

SUPPORT COMMUNICATORS AT EVERY LEVEL

Identify the people out talking about data and support them to bring clear and consistent messages to every community.

Be proactive

FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO COMMUNICATE

Seize opportunities throughout the school year to communicate with teachers, parents, and the public about data. Use tools like email newsletters, social media, and op-eds to reach people where they are and elicit their feedback.

DON'T GET CAUGHT OFF GUARD

Get out in front of confusion and misinformation by increasing awareness around how data is collected, used, and protected and having a communications plan ready in case a problem arises.

Good communication leads to an environment in which people value, trust, and use data.

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