



The Complete District Communications Playbook

Part 2: Forming a Communications Strategic Plan

November 2022

Introduction

Schools and districts across the country are finding that effective communication with families is more important than ever before. But developing a communications plan is time consuming. Our playbook provides **real examples, helpful tools and practical solutions** to address foundational needs to help your school or district create an effective communications plan.

With the insights and support of school communications leaders throughout the United States, along with our years of learning about what works and what data tells us, ParentSquare has developed this playbook to support every level of the profession. It may be used as a guide for new district communications leaders, a reference and refresher for existing leaders or a primer for superintendents that are juggling it all. This playbook will focus on four core themes for creating a successful district communications plan, including:

1. Elevating Your District's Brand
- 2. Forming a Communications Strategic Plan**
3. Utilizing Communication Channels
4. Preparing for Crisis Communications

Wherever your school or district is on its journey with school-home communications, this playbook will serve as a valuable resource and will hopefully inspire your team. This is part two of four pieces that will be released over the next few months. Once completed, the four parts will be compiled into one complete playbook.



Forming a Communications Strategic Plan

A district communications strategic plan should outline who your stakeholders are and what channels you will use to communicate with them. It should also include the district’s communication goals. Done well, this plan will serve as a roadmap for your district’s communication efforts.

In this section, we’ll help you, as the communications leader, create a communications strategic plan and cover:

1. Identifying your audiences and determining your goals
2. How to develop your tactical communications plan
3. Sharing your plan with leadership, your board and stakeholders

We’ll also share specific examples from a well constructed plan. For success, **you need buy-in from all stakeholders and should involve them from day one.** Establish a committee and get to work. We’re here to help.

Step 1: Identify your audiences and determine your goals

Many school communications fall short of hitting their target audiences because the time wasn’t invested in considering *who* you’re talking to and *how* you can best reach them. Developing your strategic plan is a great way to think through your processes and define them.

In the format that is most helpful for you, we suggest listing each stakeholder group with an additional column for the best communication channels to reach them and another to identify the sender. We’ll discuss these other columns more in step 2. Here is a brief example with some sample stakeholders:

Stakeholder	Communication	Sender
Staff		
Parents/guardians		
Community		
Students		

Lodi Unified School District Public Information Officer Chelsea Vongehr in Lodi, California, took a holistic approach when creating the district’s communication plan and began by conducting an audit with stakeholders.

“We determined that our communications audit would target both internal and external stakeholders,” Chelsea said.

“We sent a communications survey to parents, staff, and opened it up to our community at-large.”

The survey was sent through their normal communication channels to families and staff, but in order to reach their community members, the Lodi team shared the survey directly with local chambers of commerce, local elected officials, local government leaders, and local news outlets. They also published the survey in local community forums on social media.

“We wanted each community member to have an opportunity to respond to the communication survey,” Chelsea added.

Lodi used one simple, open-ended question for their survey:

“How do you feel about Lodi Unified School District’s communication?” If you’re wanting to conduct a more comprehensive survey, you could include questions like:

- What information do you wish you had more of?
- What information do you wish you had less of?
- What is a recent example where internal communications worked really well?
- What is a recent example where internal communications failed?
- What other suggestions do you have about improving our communication strategy going forward?

Communication Audit

Lodi USD conducted a communication audit via ThoughtExchange. ThoughtExchange uses a unique process for collecting input in a way that is convenient for stakeholders and then analyzes the data to determine common themes and priorities for those stakeholders.

ThoughtExchange has three simple steps:

1. SHARE: Participants are invited to participate in the process. If they accept the invitation, they will be given background information and then asked to answer open-ended questions regarding the main topic. They may share as many thoughts as they would like in response to each question. Participants remain anonymous but thoughts will be shared publicly.

2. STAR: Participants are invited to review their thoughts and those of others before being asked to “star” ideas that resonate with them the most.

3. DISCOVER: The results of the “star” ranking process are analyzed to identify common themes and ideas. A report presents the thoughts and star rankings in an anonymous manner.

In November and December 2019, Lodi USD conducted a ThoughtExchange to get feedback from staff, parents/guardians, students, and the community regarding the District’s communication. The following pages outline the results of the ThoughtExchange.

To determine their communication strategic plan goals, Lodi Unified School District leadership conducted an audit. While there are many ways to conduct your audit, make sure you’re asking open questions that will allow participants to leave quality feedback.



With ParentSquare, your survey invitations can be shared via email, text, app notification and voice calls with families, staff and even students with StudentSquare. Data collected from these communications can be tracked and analyzed to see who received it, when they received it and if it was opened. Everything you need to make sure you’re hitting your target audience is kept in one convenient place.

Results from the communications survey should be the foremost starting point for the development of your communication plan. While you may have general ideas of what themes will arise from the audit, you need to have that baseline information before you start to craft a plan. You will also want to make sure that every stakeholder had an opportunity to share what was important to them regarding communication from the district or school.

“There is no greater tool than having a thoughtful and mission-aligned communication plan for your district.”

CHELSEA VONGEHR Lodi Unified School District Public Information Officer

“We learned that we were doing a number of things well but, unsurprisingly, we had room for growth. The top themes and key takeaways from the audit helped us determine what our goals would be in the communication plan,” Chelsea said.

At Lodi, the 10 top themes from the communication survey directed the development of their communication plan and goals. **The goals of your communication plan should be aligned with the district’s overarching mission, vision, and goals, and be reflective of what your community voiced during the communication audit.**

Chelsea said the communications strategic plan at Lodi has given her a vision and a number of material goals. Likewise, you should allow the direct feedback from your stakeholders to guide your processes.

“It leads my work and it helps guide the district’s focus when it comes to communication strategy,” Chelsea added. “There is no greater tool than having a thoughtful and mission-aligned communication plan for your district.”

Step 2: Develop your tactical communications plan

Now that you know who your stakeholders are and what they need, and you’ve identified your goals, it’s time to dig down into the details. For Lodi, Chelsea said the top themes from the communication audit provided a strong starting position for the development of the district’s goals and implementation strategies.

ThoughtExchange Results





Top Themes

- Safety
- Communication getting better
- Modes/frequency of communication
- Communication is good
- External communication
- District communication
- School site communication
- Internal communication
- Communication needs improvement
- Other

Top Thoughts in Themes

- **Safety**
"I want quick knowledge of danger."
- **Communication getting better**
"I'm happy, I'm happy because I'm going to be more informed about what's going on at school."
- **Modes/frequency of communication**
"I'm a very busy parent and I need a way to keep me updated."
- **Communication is good**
"It's great. I believe it is important to stay on top of current events."

Strategic Goals

- 
Goal 1
Develop a comprehensive crisis communication plan and supplemental safety communications.
- 
Goal 2
Improve and strengthen external communication with students, families, and the community at-large.
- 
Goal 3
Improve communication from the District to all staff.
- 
Goal 4
Revise policies and procedures regarding public relations and media relations.

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Lodi Unified School District analyzed feedback from their audit and developed a list of top themes that reoccurred. From those themes, leadership determined their four strategic goals.

“Based on the themes, we developed four major goals that responded to the needs of the community,” she explained. “Each outlined goal has corresponding implementation strategies so that we have tangible activities and steps we can take to fulfill each goal and metrics that the community can follow and understand.”


Each goal’s implementation strategy should include an outline with the steps your team plans to take. Each step can be broken down further to provide more context and direction.

Goal 2: External Communication

Goal: Improve and strengthen external communication with students, families, and the community at-large.

Implementation Strategies

- 2.1 Redesign website to be more user friendly and easier to navigate for all stakeholders.
- 2.2 Hire webmaster to maintain and support maintenance of the District’s and school sites’ websites.
- 2.3 Establish a clear brand identity for the District to build its image.
- 2.4 Refresh brand identities of school sites to build their images.
- 2.5 Create key messages and talking points about the District to establish consistency throughout all communication channels.
- 2.6 Supply District administrators and staff with fact sheets and other easy-to-use communication tools when issues arise.
- 2.7 Produce digital and video media to increase awareness and support of District initiatives and programs, to highlight staff and student achievements, and to inform the public regarding important changes.
- 2.8 Grow and expand reach of social media channels to inform the public with timely and relevant information about the District.
- 2.9 Organize community engagement opportunities to inform the public about District initiatives and programs.
- 2.10 Build and maintain positive media relations.
- 2.11 Build and maintain partnerships with business and community leaders.


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2.1 Redesign website to be more user friendly and easier to navigate for all stakeholders


The District’s website serves as a primary communication tool for staff, parents/guardians, students, and the community at-large. Visitors need a positive user experience and the ability to quickly locate information that is important to them. The District will redesign the website to:

- Improve functionality and usability across all platforms (browser and mobile devices)
- Increase search engine optimization (SEO) and site performance
- Ensure accessibility
- Establish guidelines on content maintenance

The redesign of the District’s website will be implemented across all school websites.

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This example from the Lodi Unified School District communications strategic plan shows leadership’s second goal and the breakdown of the implementation strategies that will help them accomplish that goal. Then, each step is broken down further for more context and direction.

 **Stay organized by utilizing ParentSquare’s groups feature to discuss plan development with your team.** This allows users to create a group inside the platform so all communications pertaining to your plan can be found in one place.

Here are five tips to consider to ensure success:

 **TIP 1**

Decide what communications you want to send and how frequently. Will you be sending monthly newsletters to families and staff? Will you be sending community mailers quarterly? Clearly defining a schedule will help you stay on track. Revisit the chart you started in step 1. Include regular communications, like monthly newsletters, as well as annual items, such as back to school information. It will also be helpful to identify who the sender is for each communication piece and develop a strategy, if necessary, so you’re not bombarding stakeholders with multiple or repetitive communications. Here is an earlier example, now filled in with channels and senders:

Stakeholder	Communication	Sender
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly newsletter • Internal meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications leader • Principal
Parents/guardians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly newsletter • Board meetings • Social media • School events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications leader • Leadership team
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mailers • Social media • Local events • Local media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications leader • Leadership team
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly newsletter • Social media • School Events • Flyers/posters displayed at school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Teacher • Communications leader

TIP 2

Determine who is responsible for each piece. Who owns the implementation strategy for goal one?

If your team is larger, it may not always be the same person. Without a designated team member, it's likely not to get completed or done correctly.

TIP 3

Ensure each department is trained. Every member of your team that is communicating with stakeholders should know how to communicate with the appropriate persons and which channels should be used.

Don't leave room for them to guess; that's when mistakes are made.

TIP 4

Get direction from leadership to refine and finalize your strategies. Share the draft goals and implementation strategies with the leadership team, including principals and other administrators, and the superintendent's cabinet. At Lodi, Chelsea said their feedback was used to refine and finalize their goals and implementation strategies prior to her presentation to the board of education.

TIP 5

Be consistent across the school or district. Consistency is key. It shows your stakeholders that you can be trusted and it builds loyalty. A unified plan will help.

Step 3: Sharing your plan

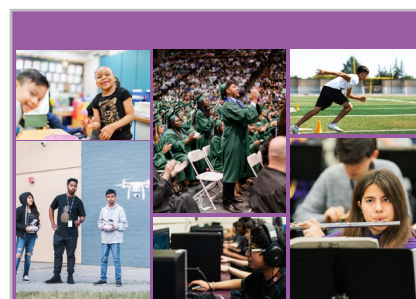
You put in the work and you've got a clear plan. Now what? Take a page from Lodi's book and create a public facing document so all stakeholders can be invested. This should include your...

1. Leadership team - superintendent, principals, directors, etc.
2. School board
3. District staff
4. Families (and secondary students if you involved them in the audit)
5. Community at large

This document should contain your school or district branding and be available on your website. It doesn't need to contain the list of stakeholders you created in step one if you prefer to keep that information for internal use only.

We previously discussed the importance of sharing your stories. Don't miss the opportunity to include images in your plan to remind readers why your team is here and what all the hard work is truly accomplishing. This is your opportunity to make it visually appealing for all stakeholders.

Give your leadership team a look at the completed document before you present to the board and share with the public. As with all communications, you should start with your leadership team to make sure they are ready to answer questions they may receive from their specific staff and families.



Lodi Unified School District Strategic Communication and Marketing Plan

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The cover page and table of contents for Lodi Unified School District uses district branding and include beautiful photos of students.

FREE DOWNLOAD

Getting started from scratch? [Click here](#) to access a basic outline for a communications strategic plan to get you started.

Depending on the size of your team, we recommend that the person identified as the responsible party for the goal in step two presents their section. That may not always be an available option, as many districts have a communications team of one. The strategy behind this is to show ownership and expertise on that particular goal and plan.

Be prepared to answer questions regarding the goals you developed from the audit. While everyone is sure to have a different opinion on which feedback is most important, having data on hand will help strengthen your choices. Keep in mind that the cost of implementing your plan's goals may be top of mind for your board and you'll need that knowledge before you present.

Finally, a vital part of any successful plan always comes down to reviews and updates for continuous improvement. You should be checking in with your plan often, reviewing with leadership annually and completing a comprehensive overhaul every three to four years.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ **Make sure you know what your goals are when creating your plan.** A good starting point is a communications audit or survey to learn how stakeholders want to be reached and what's most important to them in terms of communication.
- ✓ Consider the different audiences you are communicating with and how you can best reach each of them. **Different stakeholders require different forms of communication** and it's important to distinguish what each audience should receive, when, and from whom.
- ✓ Sharing out your plan is a process—be open to feedback and revisions. **Take care to review your plan every three to four years.**
- ✓ **Your school or district communications strategic plan can be your go-to guide** for communicating with your stakeholders.

About ParentSquare

This best practice guide was developed by ParentSquare (www.parentsquare.com), provider of the premier unified school-home engagement platform for K-12.

ParentSquare is the only fully unified product that engages every family with school communications and communications-based services — all the way from the district office to the classroom teacher, and all in one place. Schools know who's not being reached, and they have the reports and tools to improve contact and communications equity while maintaining privacy and security. ParentSquare is relied upon by millions of educators and families in 48 states for unified, effective school communications, and its technology platform features extensive integrations with student information and other critical administrative systems, translation to more than 100 languages, and app, email, text, voice, and web portal access.

If you're ready to discover more effective and equitable school-home communications for your district or school, [click here](#) to schedule a ParentSquare demo or call **1 (888) 996-4156** to speak with our team.