



The Complete District Communications Playbook

Part 3: Utilizing Communication Channels

January 2023

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 three of four pieces that will be released over the next few months. Once completed, the four parts will be compiled into one complete playbook.



Utilizing Communication Channels

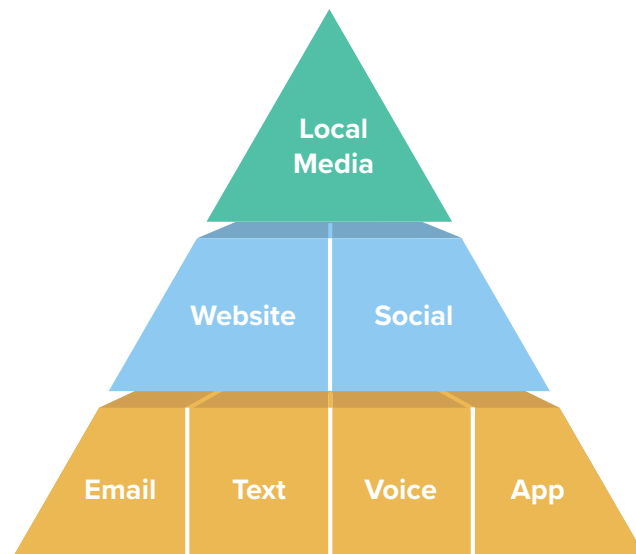
Using multiple channels of communication to layer district messaging is essential for success. Since each stakeholder has their own preference on how, where and when they want to receive communications, it's the job of the district communications leader to make sure that information is provided in multiple channels.

In this section, we'll explore the best use of a school communication leader's most important channels. Specifically, we'll cover:

1. Building your foundational channels
2. Extending connections with website and social media
3. Growing relationships with local media

It's important to remember that the way you prefer to receive communications may not be the way someone older or younger prefers to receive it. District information should be provided in multiple channels, yet not in a way that makes people feel overwhelmed. Your communications should be targeted to make sure you're reaching your intended audience at the right time. The idea here is to "reach people where they are."

To better illustrate our concept, we're going to be building a communications pyramid:



Step 1: Build your foundation

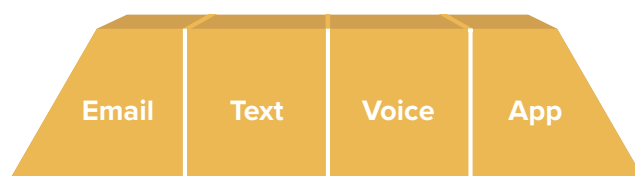
When working on your communications strategic plan in Part 2, we advised you to spend time thinking about your audiences. You created a chart with your stakeholders broken down into groups, and you listed the types of communication they should be receiving and who should be sending it.

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

Now it's time to think about the channels you're going to use to make sure those communications get to the right people at the right time.

Begin by having an open discussion with your district leadership team about best practices in your school community. What's working well for them? Where do they see the most engagement? Where are they struggling to connect? Every community is unique, so make sure you are doing what's best for your team.

From our experience with schools and districts across the country, however, we recommend first creating a solid communications foundation with your three primary audiences – staff, parents/guardians and students. The most direct channels to reach them are:

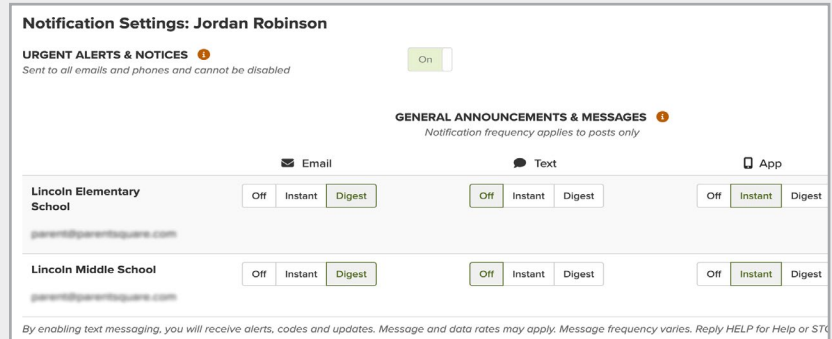


This strong foundation will begin your communications pyramid. From here you should break your communications down into two categories - general information and important information. This will influence the channels you use.

General information

Information that is not time sensitive should be sent via the user's preferred notification method. For some, this is an email, and for others it may be a text or app notification that they have new communications inside the district's communication platform. Modern communications platforms, like ParentSquare, allow users to set their preferences.

Every stakeholder will have their own preference for how and when they want to process information from the school district. With ParentSquare, each user can set their notification preferences inside the platform. We even have a “digest” option where users can receive all communications from the day in one convenient location at the end of the day. For parents/guardians with multiple children in the district or those that can't be disturbed at work, this is a loved feature. Emergency communications, of course, will be delivered immediately regardless of preferences.



Important information

Time sensitive communications should be sent through every channel available to make sure staff and families are receiving it immediately. We especially recommend sending voice messages for urgent matters. Communications such as school closures or natural disasters need to reach everyone as quickly as possible.

Here are a few more tips on important communications:

TIP 1

Leadership should always be the first to receive important communications. This gives them time to prepare for the questions they will receive from their direct team members and families.

TIP 2

When at all possible, **staff should receive important information before families and students.** As with your leaders, giving them an opportunity to read it first prepares them to answer questions, but it also shows them that they are valued members of the team. Even if it's only 30 minutes before families receive it, send it to your staff first.

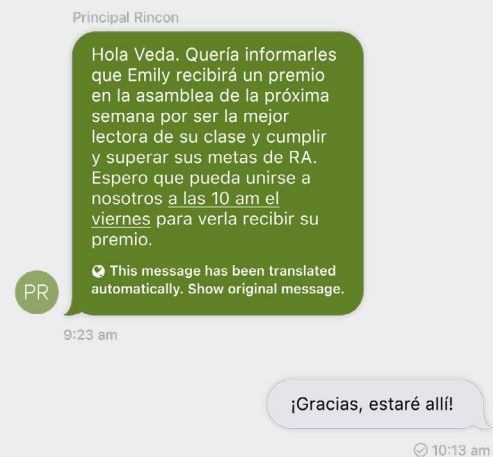
TIP 3

Make sure you set very clear expectations with those that have the ability to send important communications via voice or alert. They should know exactly what situations call for these channels. If every message from the school is sent in this manner, stakeholders will become desensitized to them and they may not pay attention when there is truly an emergency.

TIP 4

Another crucial factor in creating this solid foundation of communication is to **make sure everyone can understand the messages you're sending.** For many schools across the country, English is increasingly becoming the second language for students and families. These education leaders understand how important it is to ensure their communications are equitable and accessible.

 **ParentSquare makes language translation seamless with over 100 languages offered.** In their platform settings, users can select their preferred language. Communications are automatically translated into the language they selected for themselves. Private messages within the platform are also translated in real-time. For example, a teacher can send a message in English and it's automatically translated into the user's preferred language. The user responds in their preferred language and it is translated into English for the teacher.



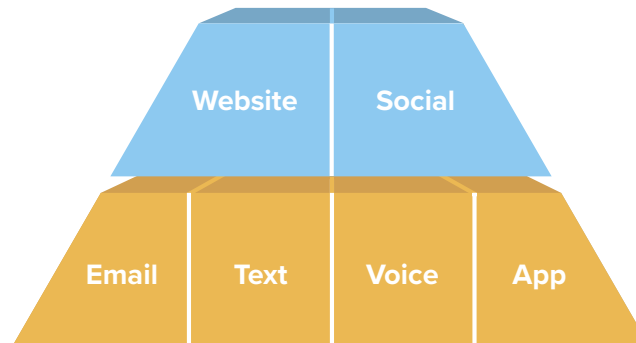
Brian Burke, executive director of communications, community partnerships and strategic planning with Bristol Public Schools in Bristol, Connecticut, said one size does not fit all when deciding how and when to send communications.

“We send most updates as Posts in ParentSquare at user-preferred times. I find that user-preferred times yield the highest open rates,” Brain explained. “However, if we do need to communicate a message quickly and effectively, we do use text/voice to connect with parents immediately. The seamless language translation is used often in our district as well.”

With this solid, equitable foundation for your three primary stakeholders, you're ready to expand into other channels.

Step 2: Extend connections with website and social media

The midsection of your communications pyramid contains:



Your district website and social media accounts should target several different audiences, including those we already have covered in step 1. In addition, you will utilize these channels to attract potential employees and families, and share information with your community.

Hopefully these are two channels you're already familiar with and using regularly. We've collected some best practices to ensure you're making the most of their capabilities.

Website

Invest in your go-to resource: your district's website. The purpose of your website is twofold. You should aim to find a balance between sharing necessary information with your stakeholders and showcasing your district to attract new families and staff.

Here are a few key points to help keep your website user-friendly:

1. **Design and color choices** - Most of your website design options will be discussed with your website provider. Make sure you're providing your visual brand guideline to ensure consistency across all webpages.
2. **Clear navigation** - The best way to accomplish clean navigation is to ask/find what your website viewers are coming to your website for. If you know what viewers are looking for, then you know what should be included in the website navigation. Grouping like topics and categories together helps to keep the structure simple. Typically the top 10 most viewed pages should be added to the navigation.
3. **Using negative space** - This is the space in between your text and graphics, between widgets and videos. Whitespace is one of the fundamental building blocks for web design. This space allows you to highlight important information creating visual hierarchy, and to provide visual breaks to the viewers.

4. Appropriate typography - Typography is the presentation of the text content on your website. The text should be formatted in such a way that the viewers can easily and quickly understand the who, what, when and where of the text. Refer to your branding guidelines here as well, but be aware that compliance issues may force your hand on some of these decisions.

5. Designing for your audience - The website is typically the first impression of your school. The most common reasons that people will visit your site are:

- Upcoming and current events
- Community engagement opportunities
- Potential transfers or new enrollments
- Employment opportunities
- Alumni resources
- Current staff and student resources

Once a positive first impression is made, the website can provide a wide variety of information in addition to communicating the school’s qualities and offerings. Essentially, the website should reflect the school or district personality.

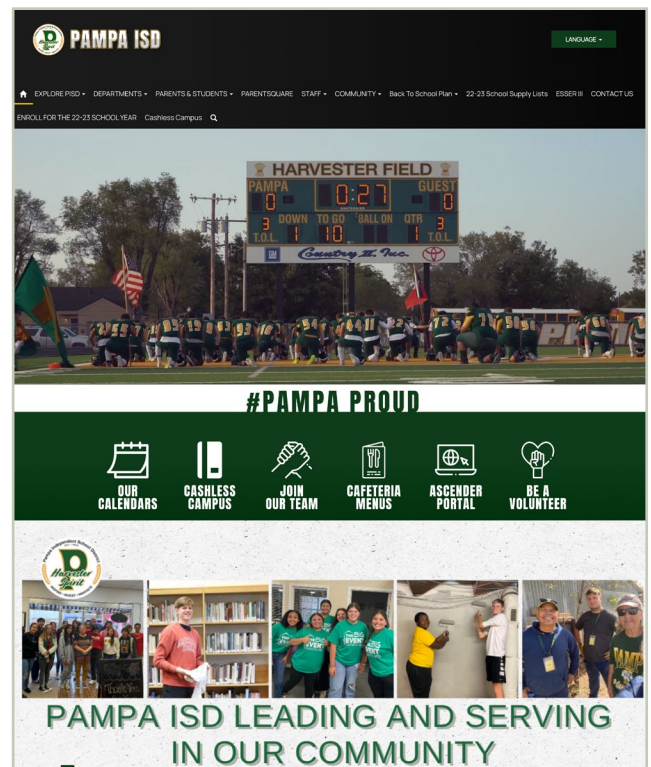
6. Graphic content - Graphics such as images and videos are a great way to display the school personality and the activities that staff and students are most proud of. This type of content works best when compression tools are used. Using high quality images and videos that are compressed creates the polished look without bogging down your site’s loading time.

7. SEO and analytics - Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of making your site better for search engines and ultimately viewers. The page titles and navigational links build your site map, and the site map can let search engines know what information can be found on your site. You can improve your SEO by using accurate page names, descriptions and custom URLs.

If you’re looking for inspiration for your website, here are a few we love:

Pampa Independent School District - Pampa, Texas

This district website will “wow” you from the beginning with clear, beautiful videography. The #pampaproud line divides the page and pushes their slogan



simultaneously, while the top hitting resources are provided next. They did a great job of incorporating social media and calendar feeds to keep the website content fresh.

Lenoir City Schools - Lenoir City, Tennessee

With a very modern vibe, this district website is visually appealing. The use of negative space helps break up the copy and visuals for the reader, and the navigation bar across the top of the page is well thought out.

Oklahoma School for the Deaf - Sulphur, Oklahoma

This school website utilizes visuals in a way that helps tell their story, which is very fitting for the school’s mission. We really like the blocks with semi-transparent photos that break up the different sections of the website.

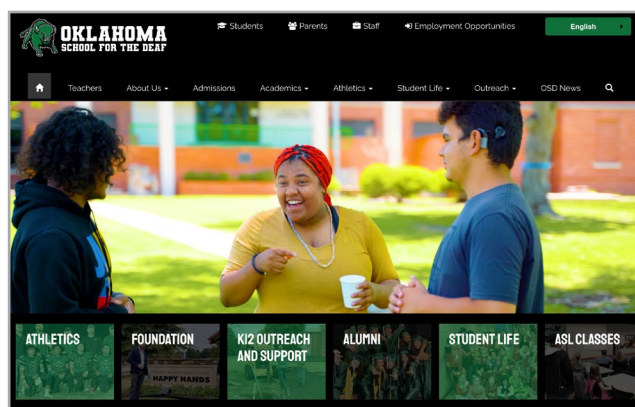
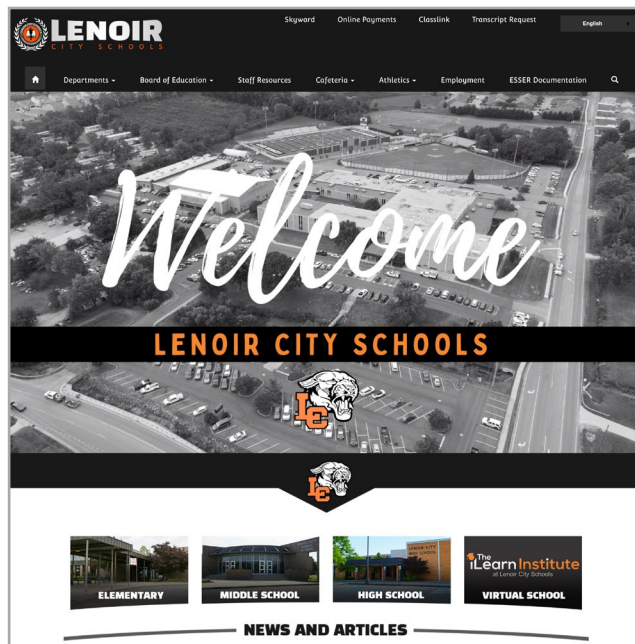
Social Media


It’s the necessary evil we all love to hate, but you should be using social media to build relationships with your community and beyond. It can be quite challenging to connect with stakeholders in your community that do not have children. They are a vital part of success, particularly for public schools that depend on taxpayer dollars for funding. Direct mail can get expensive and while dependable relationships with local businesses, organizations and government agencies can be incredibly helpful, the people that aren’t paying attention to school news may also not be paying attention to local news. The one place we know they all are is social media.

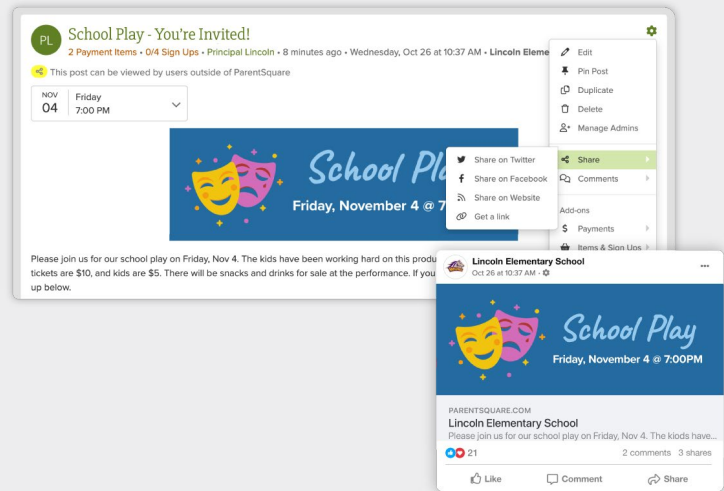
One way to make social media a positive experience and therefore a tolerable one for you, as the moderator, is to keep policy and controversial topics off of your accounts. The stakeholders that need to get important information directly are already getting that from you via email, text, voice or app notification. You don’t need someone from the other side of the country weighing in on your district’s face mask policy. The only exception here would be school closures and delays since those do often affect community members.

Instead, save social media for sharing your amazing stories, good news and attention-grabbing visuals. There are amazing things going on in your schools everyday, and your social media accounts are a great way to share those with your community. We also recommend sharing hiring opportunities and information on your social media pages. It’s a great way to get those opportunities in front of your local residents.

While they are perhaps the most time consuming channels, websites and social media are vital.

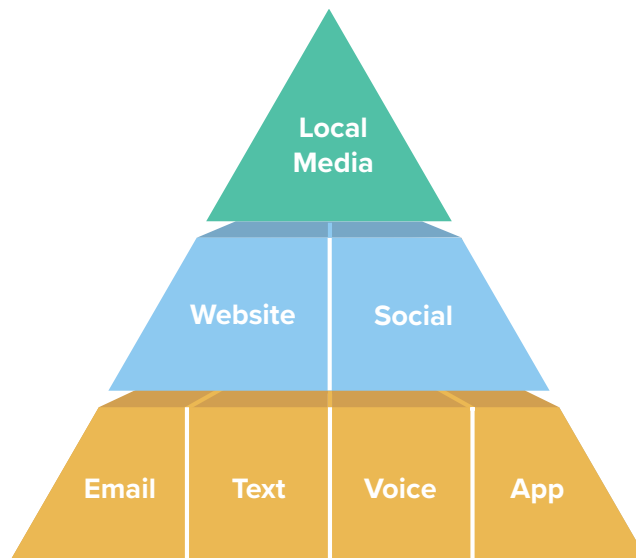


 **ParentSquare makes your job easy with automatic posting to social media and your website.** With a few extra clicks, you can choose to send your post to approved social media accounts and to a newsfeed on your district’s website.



Step 3: Grow relationships with local media

Building mutually beneficial relationships with your local media will ensure fair coverage in bad times and promotion of your district in good times. Let’s finish off your communications pyramid with:



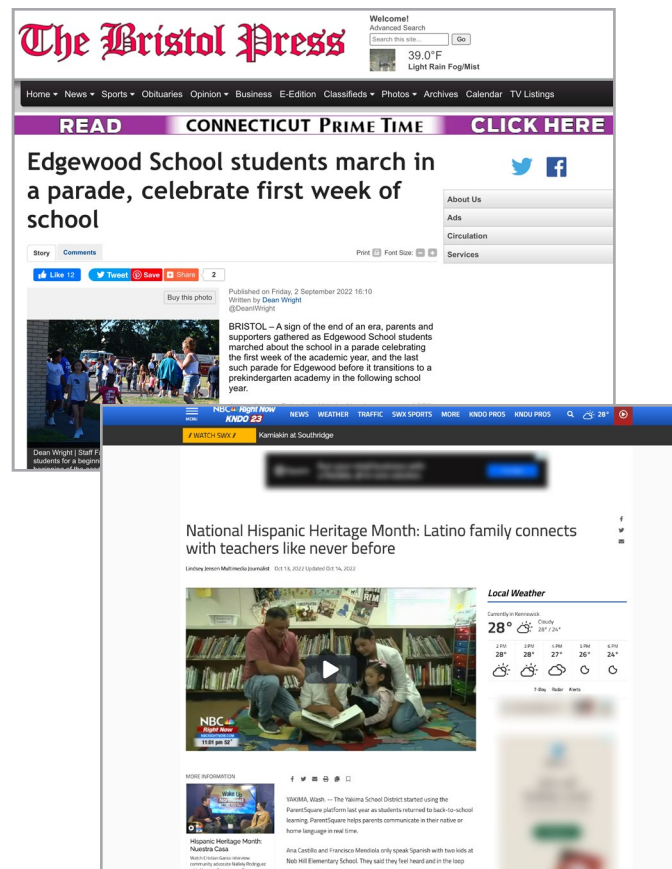
Many school district communication leaders can trace their roots to journalism. For those that started in the newsroom, it will be easy to put your reporter hat back on and remember what it was like to desperately need a feel good story for the education section, maybe even the front page. While the big media game has changed significantly in the last few years, your local media outlets are likely still in a similar position.

When appropriate, Brian at Bristol Public Schools said he believes the key to building positive media relationships is to be as transparent and timely as possible.

“We have a great rapport with our city’s local newspaper and I consider their education reporter a valuable extension of our district when we want to inform the greater community of the many positive happenings of our district,” Brian added. “When you collaborate regularly with any media outlet, you build trust that the coverage will be fair, even if the news itself is not positive.”

Brain said he works regularly with major television, radio, and newspaper outlets to ensure that each one gives him the opportunity to comment on Bristol Public Schools news first.

Here are some of our favorite examples of great school media coverage:



the language barrier. After utilizing the translation feature in ParentSquare, the family told the reporter that they feel important enough to now be included in the conversation. This is a big, feel-good win for the district that has a large Spanish speaking population.

“When you collaborate regularly with any media outlet, you build trust that the coverage will be fair, even if the news itself is not positive.”

BRIAN BURKE

Executive Director of Communications,
Community Partnerships and Strategic Planning,
Bristol Public Schools (CT)

Edgewood School students march in a parade, celebrate first week of school

The Bristol Press attended the traditional back to school celebration parade at Edgewood School, home to kindergarten through fifth grade students. This was the first event that welcomed parents and guardians since the pandemic made such attendance unsafe. However, this was the last parade at Edgewood since the school is to be closed and repurposed into a prekindergarten academy at the end of the academic year. While the article could have gone in a different direction, it focused on the positive relationships being built between families, students and the school.

National Hispanic Heritage Month: Latino family connects with teachers like never before

The Yakima School District in Yakima, Washington, had an outstanding piece released with local NBC news station KNDU 23. The segment focused on a Spanish speaking family with two children at Nob Hill Elementary School. Previously, the family struggled to connect with the school because of

Danville art teacher named Indiana's 2020 teacher of the year in surprise ceremony

When leadership at the Danville Community School Corporation in Danville, Indiana, was notified that their elementary art teacher had been selected as the Indiana Teacher of the Year, they had to work closely with local media to pull off a huge surprise announcement. Full news crews from four news stations in addition to reporters from local print publications were invited under sworn secrecy.

Pieces like these show that whether big or small, partnering with local media can be a great opportunity to get positive coverage for your school district. Don't get too wrapped up in your other tasks to forget about feeding those amazing stories to reporters from time to time. We recommend that you reach out with story or event invitations at least three times a school year. Find a good balance between ensuring consistent, positive coverage and not annoying the education reporter.

When negative or unflattering coverage is presented to the media, the relationships you've built with the reporters with the positive stories will help ensure you get a fair opportunity to provide a statement. Depending on your comfort level and if you're using a personal or work cellphone, consider providing trusted reporters with your direct phone number. Setting boundaries is important, so make sure you're setting a precedent you're going to be comfortable with further down the road.



Key Takeaways

- ✓ Don't miss out on an opportunity to connect with your stakeholders – make sure that **information is provided in multiple channels**.
- ✓ Communications channels can be broken down into a three-part pyramid:
 - **The most direct channels are email, voice, text, and app.** Consider who should receive what and when, language preferences, notification preferences, and whether the information you are communicating is general or important/urgent.
 - Websites and social media can be used to share information and showcase your school/district. **Your website should be user-friendly and social media should be a positive place to share celebrations.**
 - **Form solid relationships with local media to ensure fair coverage** of negative news and promotion of good news.
- ✓ Always be sure to **consider stakeholder's preference for how, where and when they want to receive communications** when making decisions about your communications channels.

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.