



CREATING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES: LESSONS FROM STATES

Heather Zavadsky, Ph.D.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State education agencies (SEAs) are central players in initiating and leading reform efforts to improve academic achievement for all students. With the adoption of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), SEA leaders have the opportunity and flexibility to rethink how to best educate students for the future. To be effective, SEAs of the future must now incorporate communication into their overall organizational strategy to ensure that both internal and external stakeholders can and will support implementation of new state plans. This report details the central themes that emerged from this year's Strategic Communications Benchmarking Project, which follows the BSCP Strategic Communications Framework (see Appendix A) developed through the 2014 project. Participants for this 2016 Benchmarking Project include the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), Indiana Department of Education (IDOE), Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). The central themes from this year's project by framework component are described below.

Leadership plays a critical role in strategic communications. In SEAs, the chief state school officer (i.e., chief, commissioner, director of education, secretary, or superintendent) referred to in this report in general references as the chief, is responsible for creating structures and processes that make communication more strategic and coordinated across internal and external agency stakeholders. Steps toward greater coherence around communication include:

- Setting the direction of the agency;
- Leading the development of agency goals and major initiatives or strategies;
- Conveying consistent simple messages to align and clarify agency initiatives;
- Creating and supporting formalized internal communication processes to ensure communications are managed and coordinated from one centralized source and that all agency actors are clear about how their role supports the agency vision and goals;



- Creating organizational structures that promote collaboration and alignment between communications and academic staff; and
- Clarifying the role and expectations of staff as communicators who support the agency mission, vision, and goals.

Significant Leadership practices described in this report include:

- KSDE Commissioner Randy Watson helped create a clear agency vision with stakeholder buy-in by engaging in a 20-city listening tour across the state when first arriving in office. The result was a clear mission and vision for Kansas education that became a well-formed campaign called “Kansans Can.”
- Commissioner Watson also prioritized and supported the agency’s communications department by repurposing funds from other divisions to allow the communications director to hire one more staff member. The communications director was able to assess what skills she needed most in a full-time equivalent (FTE) position and was able to find and hire a person with the right skillset.
- ADE Commissioner Johnny Key took his agency through the BSCP Strategic Performance Management process to redefine the agency’s direction, create an organizational structure around that direction, and devise a performance management system to encourage productivity and innovation. The resulting clarity and coherence has seeded conditions for the SEA to create a strategic communications strategy around the agency’s strategies and priorities.
- IDOE Commissioner Glenda Ritz, in partnership with the Great Lakes Comprehensive Center, reorganized the SEA in 2016 to streamline its organizational structure. The resulting structure allowed for easy collaboration between the executive director of communications and the deputy superintendent of public instruction.

Internal communication challenges are often process challenges. It is important to establish policies and processes to ensure communication is clear, aligned, regular, and consistent for both internal and external stakeholders. Communication processes that are ad hoc and rest within individuals rather than in organizational practice are unpredictable and can turn into a liability quickly. Ways to improve internal communication include:

- Implementing clear repeatable processes to ensure information about key initiatives is consistently disseminated vertically and horizontally throughout the agency;
- Clarifying the role and functions of the communications division and matching staff to those functions;



- Clarifying when and how to engage the communications division in agency activities; and
- Identifying and implementing effective methods and timelines for sharing information internally.

Internal communication practices described in this report include those below.

- NCDPI leaders ensure all staff members are apprised of agency priorities through regularly scheduled meetings. Meetings are held weekly with the senior planning team, twice monthly with senior leadership cabinet division directors, quarterly with small cross-division groups, and an annual all-staff meeting.
- NCDPI leaders align internal and external communication by sending memos targeted to districts and schools to agency staff members prior to their release. The memos contain a routing sheet to ensure key agency staff members received them.
- IDE communication is funneled through both the communications director and the deputy superintendent of public Instruction to ensure that messages are correct regarding academic content, clear, and meet the needs of various stakeholders.

External communication should flow from a centralized source and address the unique needs of various stakeholders. One way to ensure that legislators, educators, parents, and community members receive clear and aligned messages is to establish clear processes around external communication by:

- Creating well-coordinated clear processes for website, media, social media, and legislative communications;
- Creating multiple and reciprocal communication mechanisms to reach LEA leaders, teachers, and parents;
- Developing messages and using communication channels consistent with the needs, preferences, and backgrounds of each target audience; and
- Considering ways to effectively engage stakeholders in developing and supporting the SEA vision and goals.

External communication practices described in this report include the following.

- The NCDPI website is easy to navigate and has an effective method to communicate with the general public through its interactive “Let’s Talk!” link. The link is divided into 24 different SEA divisions from which stakeholders can select to submit suggestions or questions.



- The ADE webmaster is located in the communications division. The webmaster serves as one point of contact for website content by soliciting information from designated division representatives. Website changes are tracked through a Google doc, and a one-page internal newsletter provides website updates to agency staff every two weeks.
- IDOE has improved communication to teachers by sending information provided to local education agency (LEA) superintendents to teachers in a communication adopted for teachers called the Teacher Dialogue. The agency website includes a link for teachers to share and learn about promising practices from other teachers.
- To increase communication with families, leaders in the IDOE worked with AT&T to develop a mobile application that can be downloaded on a phone and used for free to receive information from the SEA. The app can be updated, enabling IDOE to send messages to targeted stakeholder groups.

Evaluating communication is a critical area of need in SEAs. Because communication is a broad term and is implemented through multiple mechanisms across divisions, SEA leaders should be vigilant in creating a holistic approach to evaluating communication efforts.

Communication evaluation in SEAs should be:

- Holistic with consideration for the type and level of communication;
- Well-defined and have relevant measurement and analysis procedures;
- Meaningful and useful for adjusting communication strategies; and
- Co-developed by evaluation staff using agency data.

BSCP Strategic Communications Framework

