

## Key Steps to Building a Communications Strategy

### What is “Communications and Outreach?”

Traditionally, communications and outreach refer to strategies used to educate, engage and involve specific stakeholder groups around an agenda or mission. *Communications* is the development and delivery of a compelling message to critical audiences; *outreach* is the means by which you reach and deliver your message to those critical audiences.

Beyond the “external” communications described above, states also need to think about “internal” communications strategies. While it is critical that states have a plan for reaching out to key stakeholders to build support for their education reforms, they also need to have a plan for communicating across and within agencies internally to ensure a cohesive delivery.

Developing a communications and outreach strategy takes work and planning but is well worth the effort. Many worthwhile policy reforms suffer setbacks because supporters think their work is done once the policy is passed. In fact, while policies are being implemented is when the work of communications and outreach really begins. Building a coherent and compelling message that aims to change the way individuals view education in your state requires the commitment of strong leaders, a readiness to use trial and error until you find the right message that can stick, and acceptance that communications and outreach is work that is never over and needs constant refinement and re-engagement. Without a strategic communications and outreach plan, too often you are forced to react to opposition, spending too much time and effort playing defense rather than making your case.

This document seeks to lay out the key steps states should take as they develop or refine their own communications and outreach strategies, with a specific focus on strategies aligned to support the policies of the college- and career-ready agenda.

### Step 1: Lay the Groundwork

Before you can begin building support for your agenda, you need to set priorities to anchor that agenda and set goals for your communications and outreach strategy. For example you should:

**Assemble your core communications team.** Perhaps an obvious first step, but an important one, is to assemble the core communications team of people you will need to develop, gain support for and promote the college- and career-ready policies such as the Common Core State Standards and rigorous graduation requirements. Often communications efforts in the policy development stages initially are housed in the state department of education or governor’s office, but draw team members from other public agencies or even from outside the government. While having a compact team makes sense early on as states develop their initial communications and outreach plan, over time you want to make sure your core communications team includes, at a minimum, representatives from the governor’s office, the state education agency, and the postsecondary and business communities.

This team may overlap with the network of individuals working across agencies to adopt and implement the reforms and are natural leaders for any statewide coalition you build. Having these groups share the same people is important, but not as important as them all sharing the same mission and core messages.

**Develop organizing principles.** Every organization, no matter how large or small, how formal or informal, needs an organizing structure to set objectives, scope, roles and responsibilities, metrics for success and basic governance. The organizing principles for your core team will serve as a reference point for answering procedural questions, guiding your communications plan, and keeping the ball moving forward.

## Key Steps to Building a Communications Strategy

**Set your goals and timeline.** Extreme clarity in your goals and timeline will be critical to your success. At different times, different audiences will be priority communications targets – in particular when aligning a communications strategy to the implementation of rigorous college- and career-ready expectations. Consistently successful campaigns focus on their goals and timeline and building targeted communications strategies around them. You must be clear in your mission if you are to stay on the path to success.

### Step 2: Evaluate Resources and Create a Budget

While certain communications and outreach activities cost money, many do not. You can do a lot with very little, and if you have more, you can augment your efforts with smart investments in communications channels that will give your education reform agenda greater exposure. Knowing what you can and cannot do, and thinking through a few key issues before you start to spend, can help you make the most of the dollars you have.

**Review Existing Resources:** Before committing to any activities or initiatives, you should take a look at the existing resources you have at your disposal, including existing state departments of education’s communications budget and staff, in-kind contributions of staff and other resources from members of the college- and career-ready reform team, and other materials (i.e. graphic design, space on the governor’s homepage, etc.)

**Set a Budget:** After you consider the activities you could undertake and understand the reasons that you want to take them, you should set a budget. The budget could be as sophisticated as having hard dollar numbers next to all the activities you want to undertake or as simple as outlining the percentage of your budget you want to spend on certain activities versus others. The key is to have a point of reference for your spending decisions for the planned earned, paid and/or social media – and then to work against that budget and account for what you actually spend.

**Look for Outside Resources:** States should consider looking to state and local philanthropies to support communications campaigns or other activities. States that can demonstrate what they have done already with no, or a low, budget, may be well positioned to find small start-up funds to get a larger campaign off the ground.

### Step 3: Develop a Communications and Outreach Plan

Once you have developed your team, established your priorities, evaluated your resources, and set a budget, it is time to put the pen to paper and start drafting a communications and outreach plan. There are a number of key issues to address moving forward:

**Identify Key Leaders:** States need to identify an individual or agency to take the lead on developing – and even implementing – the plan, ideally someone involved in the college- and career-ready reform team, described above. Ownership of the plan is important in ensuring that it is a living, breathing, and not an underutilized, document and the best way to ensure strong ownership is by identifying a person or organization responsible for its success. However, this is not to say any one person or organization should create a communications and outreach plan on their own. There should be opportunities for feedback and vetting, among key supporters and other state or national communications experts.

**Coordinate Internal Communications:** You should begin your communications plan by recognizing that communicating internally – among yourselves and your team members – must be where all efforts start. No campaign can be successful unless its own members and supporters are focused, energized and

## Key Steps to Building a Communications Strategy

activated to help communicate the campaign’s key themes and messages. Once you have secured the understanding and support of your internal team, you can move your communications to the external audiences that you want to inform and/or influence.

**Build a Plan:** Quite literally, a communications plan is a plan that outlines the specific state strategies for communicating about and building support for the college- and career-ready agenda. Any communications plan must include:

- **Goals & Intended Outcomes:** What are the state’s goals and anticipated outcomes around the college- and career-ready agenda (i.e. maintain support and increase awareness of common standards and assessments; increase public awareness of state-developed college and career planning resources)?
- **Key Audiences:** Who are the target audiences/groups you want to engage around the reform, including both hard and soft supporters (i.e. those you can always count on and those who are engaged, but to a lesser degree)? Who do you need to have in your tent to make progress on the agenda?
- **Key Messages:** What are the three key messages you want to convey to all stakeholders (i.e. “we need to ensure all students graduate ready for college, careers and life”) and what are the additional messages, building on your key three, that you may want to use with specific audiences (i.e. “taking a more rigorous curriculum in high school is the first step towards getting a college degree and a good job, with opportunities for advancement” to students; “By ensuring more students go on to earn a postsecondary degree, we can improve our state’s economic competitiveness” to business and political leaders)?
- **Communication Channels & Activities:** What communications channels do you plan to use to deliver the message (i.e. earned media, paid media, PSAs, social networks, etc.)? What other activities are worth investing in order to reach key audiences (i.e. state and local roundtables, forums or press conferences)? What types of advocacy materials should you create (i.e. brochures, fact sheets, etc.)?
- **Targeted Outreach:** How will you use the various channels to target your key three messages to specific audiences (i.e. Web-based media to target students; radio-based media to target parents, etc.)?
- **Timeline:** Communications and outreach plans often include various phases of work to ensure a smooth roll out of messages, materials and targeted outreach, aligned with major policy development and implementation milestones. It is important to think through the various stages of the campaign at the onset, and plan and budget accordingly.

**Strategies to Sustain the Reform:** In most cases, communications and outreach plans focus on what needs to be done to have a policy adopted. All too often, that is where state efforts end, which can lead to a breakdown of support during the phase-in period before the policy is actually implemented. States need to incorporate strategies for maintaining support AFTER reform is passed to ensure a smooth implementation and pave the way for a sustainable reform.

### Step 4: Put Your Plan into Action

Now that you have your core communications team, budget and plan organized, it’s time to put it into action. With strong leadership, coordinated messages and an actionable plan for moving forward, it’s time to ramp up outreach, figure out what’s working, retool what isn’t working, and keep an eye on what it will take to ensure your reform is adopted and implemented with fidelity and sustained over time.

States should:

## Key Steps to Building a Communications Strategy

**Build a Broad Base of Support:** One of the first actions a state should take as they begin implementing their communications and outreach plan is to develop a college- and career-ready coalition. While individual organizations or champions may be influential independently, when diverse groups – such as business and education leaders – collaborate and advocate as one, the effect can be exponential. Regardless of whether these stakeholders join together to form a single coalition, advocate from separate shops with a common goal and common message, or form a “coalition of coalitions,” having a broad base of supporters is a key element of sustainable reform.

The specific organization of the coalition of supporters is not nearly as important as its shared principles, clear and consistent voice, diversity of members, ability to reach and win over individuals at the state and local level, and well-defined leadership and governance structure.

**Research to Support College and Career Readiness:** At any point along the way, the state should consider conducting original research to understand what the public thinks about the college- and career-ready agenda, what messages resonate with different audiences and what communications channels are most effective at reaching different audiences. While research, such as a survey or targeted focus groups, is not cheap, it can save money in the long run by ensuring your efforts are efficient and effective.

**Measure for Success:** At key points along your timeline, you should review the intended goals of the plan and what has been achieved. As with communications activities, the metrics you choose can range from no to high cost. No matter what your budget, you should take the time at the beginning of your campaign to establish effectiveness trackers so that you can measure the strengths and weaknesses of your efforts. Particularly effective is an ongoing, repeatable analysis to capture important trends, such as media and Web tracking and regularly held effectiveness debriefs.

**Take the Long View:** Coalition-building and outreach is work that is never done. Passing the policy is just the first step and implementation takes years. Leaders need to continually engage new stakeholders and, at times, re-sell the reform to already engaged or previously engaged stakeholders. With competing priorities – in education and other policy areas – it is imperative that you have ongoing outreach and communications strategies in place to maintain the level of public support necessary to sustain reform. This is particularly true around education reform as there is typically a delay between adoption and implementation, a time when communicating regularly is critical. In addition, after you campaign has been launched, it is worth taking the time to do a “campaign check up” to assess where your efforts stand in relation to its communications and outreach goals and identify changes and improvements to be made moving forward.