

SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE TEACHING

Communications Resources for Implementing New Systems for Teacher Development and Evaluation

Emerging Perspectives from Partnership Sites to Empower Effective Teaching

As a growing number of states, districts, and public charter school organizations are personalizing and strengthening supports for teachers, developing new evaluation systems to recognize and foster excellence and improvement, and creating new opportunities for teachers, they are seeing how clear, consistent, and transparent communication is critical to successful implementation of these changes.

Effective communication is more than messages or messengers. It involves sharing information, getting feedback, making changes based on that input, and establishing predictability in what is inherently a continuous improvement process.

This guide shares communications lessons, examples, and artifacts from school systems implementing these new teacher development and evaluation systems.

- How and when should you involve and inform teachers, principals, and parents?

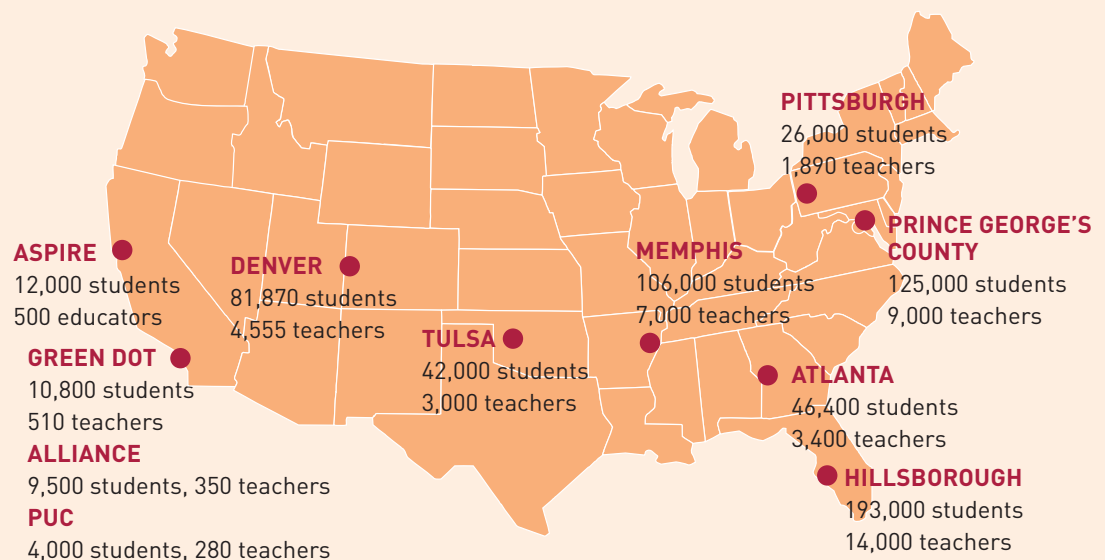
- What messages are most likely to engage?
- What strategies and tools work ... and do not work?
- How do you help get and keep everyone “on the same page”?
- How can you build effective partnerships with teachers unions and other community groups?

Perspectives on questions such as these come from 11 organizations funded since 2009 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as Partnership Sites to Empower Effective Teaching. Project leaders and communicators from Partnership sites have been working with each other for the past three years to share lessons and resources.

This guide explains what they have been doing and why, how they have implemented their plans, and what they have learned. Perhaps most helpful, it includes dozens of practical tools and resources that other states, districts, and charter management organizations can use or modify to support their own efforts.

Partnership Sites

Alliance College-Ready Public Schools
Aspire Public Schools
Atlanta Public Schools
Denver Public Schools
Green Dot Public Schools
Hillsborough County Public Schools
Memphis City Schools
Partnership to Uplift Community (PUC) Schools
Pittsburgh Public Schools
Prince George's County Public Schools
Tulsa Public Schools



KEY LESSONS AND RESOURCES

Lesson 1: Be strategic, prioritize audiences. A strategic communications plan allowed these districts to set priorities, be proactive, target resources, and keep everyone on the same page about what mattered most and who was responsible for what.

Hillsborough EET Milestones			
Timeline	September 2010	October 2011	April 2012
Highlights	New Evaluation Methodology	Finalist Score Released	Professional Development
Conversations	Identified new evaluation areas and methods to be released with teachers to release by 10/1/11	Written evaluations, data review, 100% scores, regular new and score	Parent Forums, FFA, FFA and CTE, community
Planning Areas	Legal and fiscal readiness	Teacher and principal	Parent and community
Strategies	Supporting teachers with data and professional development	Teacher and principal	Parent and community

Hillsborough County (FL) Public Schools maps out key priorities.

Lesson 2: Engage teachers early and meaningfully. Because teachers are the most directly affected by changes in policies and practices, earning their understanding and support is paramount. Getting their input at the front end, listening to their questions and concerns, and adjusting plans if necessary is essential to building their ownership and creating a partnership.

Lesson 3: Involve principals from the start. For the same reasons that engaging teachers early and often is essential, so is engaging principals. Plus, research shows that teachers consider principals by far the most trusted source for credible information on these issues.

Lesson 4: Proactively explain changes to parents. Beyond school staff, parents have the most at stake in ensuring that every class is taught by an effective teacher. A few early lessons have emerged: Rely on teachers to help reach parents, simplify and make messages relevant, promote transparency, and develop parent leaders.

Lesson 5: Craft positive, supportive, and “connected” messages. Words matter, especially on an issue as complex and potentially controversial as effective teaching. Emphasize the positive (“supporting, not sorting”). Emphasize sustainability — this isn’t just another passing fad. Connect the dots to larger strategies such as implementing the new rigorous Common Core State Standards. “Walk the talk” so that actions support the rhetoric.

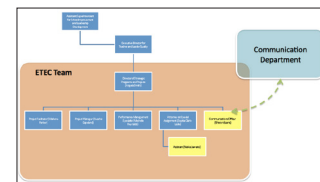
Lesson 6: Elevate principals and teachers as key communicators. Principals are the most credible resources for teachers. And multiple surveys over the years confirm that teachers are more effective communicators with parents than school boards, administrators, or the media. But you will need to prepare them with timely, accurate, and relevant information.



Memphis City Schools created the I Teach, I Am campaign.

Lesson 7: Streamline communications. Many of the school systems have deliberately streamlined their communications to minimize information overload. Instead of bombarding staff with emails and newsletters, they are increasingly driving them to their initiative websites, which are serving as one-stop portals for information and updates.

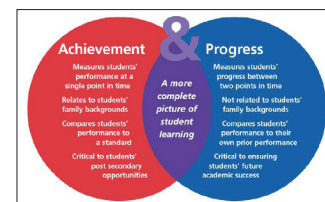
Lesson 8: Invest in staffing. Explaining these changes requires both deep content knowledge and communications expertise. Having embedded communications professionals is important not only for getting messages out but also for facilitating the collection of input, measuring understanding and progress, and supporting the changes over time.



Atlanta Public Schools' organizational chart highlights the role of communications.

Lesson 9: Partner with the teachers union. Ongoing coordinated and collaborative communication with the union or teachers association is important for (1) building a true partnership and (2) presenting a united front so that mixed messages don't confuse stakeholders.

Lesson 10: Engage the media at the right time. External media relations has been less of a priority for most of the school systems because the focus has been on internal communications. However, as the new evaluation systems begin to be implemented, additional public scrutiny is inevitable.



Tulsa Public Schools' media materials explain the methodology of the new report cards.

Lesson 11: Work with external champions. Third-party partners such as businesses, community-based organizations, and local foundations can provide important early and sustained support for the work: external validation, credibility, and communications resources, from funding to people.

Lesson 12: Evaluate and refine strategies — repeat. It is relatively easy to measure communications “inputs” such as microsites launched and e-newsletters sent. But beyond the obvious “outcomes” (e.g., website hits, open rates on emails, positive media mentions), sites are using tools such as surveys to make sure their outreach efforts are having an impact.