

Interim Progress Assessment: Public Engagement and Communications Planning

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In the spring of 2021, President Biden and Congress approved an unprecedented infusion of federal funds into our public education system to safely reopen schools, address pre- and post-pandemic unfinished learning, and build lasting, equitable systems of teaching and learning. While these resources were badly needed, it was clear that the new funding would test the ability of school systems to properly manage and allocate the money in ways that most effectively address student needs.

To provide guidance and support in this endeavor, the [Council of the Great City Schools](#) assembled a high-level task force of urban district leaders to develop and release a toolkit entitled [Investing American Rescue Plan Funds Strategically and Effectively](#). School districts are now one year into their federally funded relief and recovery efforts. As we reach the anniversary of the release of the Council’s initial investment guidance, district leaders should take the opportunity to step back and assess their investment planning and implementation.

Purpose and Audience

This document aims to provide a framework for this assessment process, specifically designed for communications leaders and their teams.

- The document first sums up the guiding principles and considerations provided last year.
- We then provide a series of questions aimed to help communications leaders and teams assess how well they have incorporated these principles and recommendations in their communications initiatives. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Rather, these questions are designed to prompt discussions about current initiatives and to suggest potential next steps.
- The document ends by identifying a set of “warning indicators”—problematic approaches or developments based on guidance from last year on what to avoid. If the district’s communications and outreach efforts meet any of these criteria it should signal to district leaders the need to rethink or refine their strategy.

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Guiding Principles for Communications and Outreach

Communications departments have a critical role to play in the investment planning and implementation process, as districts need to effectively engage employees, parents, and the community and build support for its plans to spend ESSER dollars. The Council's [investment guidance](#) from June 2021 underscored the point that effective internal and external outreach and engagement relies on transparency, authenticity, and clarity of purpose. Communications departments need to collaborate closely with district leadership and the school board to ensure consistency in messaging. In both internal and external outreach (e.g., surveys, town halls, community forums, and/or focus groups), districts should think through the purpose of their engagement efforts and what they want to accomplish. In the case of communications around federal funding, this means being clear about the vision and priorities driving a district's investment strategy. It is also critical to build trust and to send the message to the community that the feedback school districts receive is thoughtfully considered as part of the decision-making.

Interim Progress Assessment Questions for Communications Officers

1. How have you communicated your vision and priorities for COVID recovery and relief investments?

- Developed a communications plan for keeping schools, parents, and the community informed about the district's goals and vision for federal relief funds. This plan identifies outreach activities, platforms, and materials that:
 - Explain the district's spending in simple, easy-to-understand ways using communication tools such as infographics.
 - Articulate *why* the district is spending federal relief money in certain areas.
 - Help the community understand that the district is being a good steward of taxpayer money.
 - Clarify that COVID-19 will have a long-term impact, and the district's efforts to spend these funds to support academic recovery are a multi-year strategy aligned with the district's strategic plan and priorities.
 - Provide "fast facts" and FAQs about what works to increase student achievement and the barriers that impede achievement. This will enable the district to demonstrate how its decisions are evidence-based and data-driven.
 - Focus on visual storytelling, using short videos and testimonials, that put a human face on the issues and tell how the money is affecting students in real time.
 - Highlight the ways federal relief funds are being used to keep students safe as part of school reopening plans, such as providing students with personal protective equipment (PPE), improving ventilation in classrooms, and preventing the spread of COVID-19.
- Created a timeline around engagement, planning, and announcements of federal relief funds and the district's plans for them. This includes articulating which stakeholder groups will receive the information first, and carefully sequencing that communication.



- Created a toolkit for principals and other employee supervisors on federal relief funding and provided the tools and training to be able to communicate effectively with staff and parents. The toolkit includes talking points, answers to anticipated questions (for use with staff and families), and a framing document that consolidates a common narrative around the district’s spending strategy and provides information on how federal relief funds can and cannot be spent. This helps clarify why certain investments are or are not being pursued.
- Ensured consistency in the information being shared through the development and use of standard communication tools, such as press releases, family letters, staff letters, community letters, social media toolkits, videos, roundtable events, and FAQs.
- Created a webpage and/or an interactive ESSER dashboard on the district website where all information on the use of funding is posted, allowing the public to track how funds are being spent, keep up on the strategies the district is employing, and stay informed of the measures being used to gauge student outcomes.
- Other: _____

2. How have you engaged stakeholders and made them feel they are a part of the investment planning process?

- Sent out electronic surveys to gather feedback on community priorities. These surveys asked respondents to prioritize investment areas from a district-provided list.
- Hosted town halls, live Q&A sessions, webinars, focus groups, or informational virtual meetings. These forums were streamed on different communication channels and translated for non-English speaking families.
- Included interpreters and translated materials to engage all parents and families in the community.
- Appointed a high-level commission made up of various stakeholders, such as parents, educators, the business community, philanthropic organizations, and even critics of the district to advise the superintendent and senior-level administrators.
- Established a monthly superintendent advisory council or town hall to engage students in messaging around federal relief fund investments, particularly older students. These students have offered valuable opinions on what kinds of changes or enhancements are needed based on their experiences in the classroom.
- Shared the impact of stakeholder feedback on investment planning and implementation. For example, informed students about a new initiative based on their feedback or informed parents about programs designed to support student needs they identified in surveys or town hall meetings.
- Other: _____



3. How have you boosted the district’s communications capacity to ensure the quality and sustainability of this and other outreach initiatives?



- Improved database communications. This has included developing a robust database of key stakeholders in the community, and identifying staff focused on creating and keeping contacts updated.
- Shared information with key stakeholders frequently, asking them to help the district spread the message to others in their personal and professional networks.
- Collaborated with key district departments to track and monitor investments so the district can share how funds have been spent, why the investments were selected, and the outcomes from the funded initiatives, programs, and projects.
- Partnered with other departments, such as operations, curriculum and instruction, and student services, to build a communications plan and budget into their initiatives.
- Maintained outreach and engagement with community philanthropic organizations to nurture those relationships and demonstrate how they can continue to support schools and students in ways that complement the investment strategy for federal relief funds.
- Maintained outreach to state legislators and local elected officials, sending clear messages about the need for sustained and increased state and local funding levels and emphasizing that now is not the time to cut funding to schools.
- Other: _____



WARNING INDICATORS

- The district has not communicated its plan and priorities for federal relief investments and initiatives, or how these priorities are aligned to its strategic plan.
- The district is not transparent about the three-year timeline for spending federal funds.
- The district is not transparent about the longer-term nature of the work that must be done to support student academic recovery.
- The district's outreach does not emphasize the supports being provided to the students most impacted by the pandemic.
- The district's outreach and communications about COVID relief and recovery efforts is not differentiated for various internal and external audiences.
- There is no schedule or prescribed sequence to outreach efforts. District leaders, staff, parents, and community members may receive messages at the same time.
- The district conducts parent outreach, but this outreach is not differentiated to address the questions and concerns of parents of specialized populations, such as students with disabilities, English learners, and parents of foster children.
- Parent outreach and informational materials are offered only in English.
- The district has not included students in its outreach and engagement efforts.
- Input or feedback from employees or the community is not considered or incorporated in the district's investment planning process.

If any of these statements describe your district's communications and outreach efforts, you should rethink your strategy.