



Advancing Competency-Based Pathways to College and Career Readiness

Communications Toolkit

Communications Planning Step-By-Step

Introduction

This document outlines a step-by-step approach for state-based teams to consider in developing tailored communications plans to build support for competency-based pathways (CBP). Each step in the process is designed to help state teams advance CBP in the face of challenges that are generally present in all states:

- **A general lack of information:** Unfamiliarity with the concepts of CBP can leave audiences (even those predisposed to support the ideas) confused. To counter this, state teams must develop clear and consistent messaging that explains CBP effectively to audiences unfamiliar with education issues.
- **Resistance to change:** The transition involved with CBP affects a range of stakeholders. Predictable “pushback” to organizing the school system under a different model can come from political leaders, administrators, teachers, parents and students. To counter this, state teams must recruit credible advocates from within each stakeholder group who can serve as change agents, and planning timelines must take into account that change cannot be hurried.
- **Political collateral damage:** The fights around the Common Core State Standards (and potentially other issues) have led to a general distaste for “education reform” among some audiences and politicians. That distaste creates a climate that can affect support for CBP. In fact, in some instances education reform opponents have swept CBP into the anti-Common Core debate. To get ahead of or counter this trend, state teams must be aware of other issues in the education space and develop specific strategies to avoid being dragged into these fights.

Step-by-Step Planning

STEP ONE: DEFINE YOUR GOALS

To make sure your state team efforts are successful, it is critical to define the specific goals you are trying to achieve and over what timeframe. By being clear on what actions you want to influence – and by whom – you will set the stage for a breakthrough advocacy effort.

While most plans are designed to influence decisions made by policymakers, in the short term you may decide that you want to reach a measurable goal (“increase adoption of competency programs by X percent over Y months,” for example). No matter your goals, you will also want to:

- Collect the data and facts (as well as sources for future research) you need to develop plans to reach your goals.

- Identify key partners and supporters who will help you reach your goals.
- Identify opposition or obstacles that will work to prevent you from reaching your goals.

STEP TWO: DEFINE MESSAGES AND AUDIENCES

As you begin to plan your advocacy efforts, it is essential to develop a coherent message that will resonate with the audiences you will be targeting. We recommend the following process:

- Develop a general message framework.
 - Determine your central advocacy message (e.g., adopt a competency-based pilot program in your school next year);
 - Identify three key high-level messages to deliver in support of the central message (e.g., competency-based pathways help students succeed in college and career); and
 - Develop supporting talking points, as appropriate, for each of the three high-level messages. Limit to a maximum of three talking points per message.
- Identify the audiences relevant to achieving your goals (start with the partners and opposition groups you identified in STEP ONE).
- Prioritize the audiences as HIGH, MEDIUM or LOW based on their importance to achieving your goals.
- Create an audience profile for each relevant group, determining if they (1) support the effort already, (2) are inclined to support it, (3) have no opinion or knowledge (likely a high number early in effort), (4) are inclined to oppose it or (5) are opposed.
- Map messages to each audience. Using the audience profiles developed above, customize the messages and talking points as appropriate for each audience, starting with the HIGHS that are 1s or 2s.

Note: Message development and audience mapping are somewhat complex, but critical, undertakings. You may choose to bring in outside resources to help walk you through it.

STEP THREE: PLAN FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Now you are ready to plan your specific outreach activities. We recommend starting with your friendliest, most familiar audiences and building outward from there. This is the most effective long-term communications approach, but it does require adequate time and resources. Here are the keys:

- Identify the primary channels available to communicate your message to the audiences mapped above.
- Determine which channels, venues and communications vehicles will have the most influence with your audiences. Questions to ask:
 - Who influences these audiences? Examples: peers, academics, think tanks, government, nonprofits, etc.
 - Where do audience members go to get information they rely on? Examples: conferences, websites, social media, newsletters, etc.
 - What resources/voices do they trust? Examples: news stories, websites, union materials, newsletters etc.
- Develop shareable content and materials based on the channels above.
 - Examples: newsletter articles, tweets, websites (you may decide to develop one or leverage existing), conference panels, keynote speeches, Facebook posts, blog posts,

media outreach, etc.

- Identify, recruit and equip third-party spokespersons.
 - Examples: students who have thrived under CBP systems, teachers who have experience in it, parents who saw their children thrive, etc.
- Identify and secure communications opportunities for members of your campaign and for third-party spokespersons to engage in the channels identified above.
 - Examples: media interviews, speaking opportunities, conferences, guest blogs, columns/articles, etc.

STEP FOUR: MEASURE PROGRESS

Once you begin your efforts, it is critical to check in on a regular basis to gauge how well they are proceeding – and what changes should be made. No campaign ever plays out as predicted, so the adjustments you make can make the difference between winning and losing. To keep your efforts on track, you should:

- Meet periodically with key leaders (monthly to start) to evaluate effectiveness of communications efforts to date (lessons learned sessions).
- Apply lessons to adjust messaging, media and audience focus as needed.
- Share your experiences with Achieve, and hear how other efforts are going elsewhere.