

Communications Planning for Blended Learning: Step-By-Step Guide



Communications Planning for Blended Learning

Effective communications is a cornerstone of successful blended learning implementation. Strong two-way communications builds engagement, trust and credibility. Poor communications can lead to unmanageable expectations, confusion, and opposition to innovation. Communications is not expensive, but it takes a commitment of time and consistency.

Many of our nation's school districts lack sufficient communications expertise and capacity. Not that long ago, sending paper notices home in students' backpacks was one of the most common strategies for reaching parents. Today, as technology and the Internet have revolutionized how we receive and process information, communications is happening anywhere, anytime, and among multiple interested parties. As more schools shift to blended learning, district leaders are recognizing the need for communications assistance to build understanding and support for their implementation efforts.

To respond to this demand, The Learning Accelerator spent several months reviewing existing communications tools, interviewing communications and blended learning experts, and discussing communications needs with education leaders and school districts. The result is a step-by-step guide to communications planning for districts implementing blended learning.

This guide is intended for district leaders, whose commitment to communications as a district priority is crucial for success. However, the guide includes many tips and links to additional resources that others (communications directors, technology officers, principals, and teachers) may find useful.

We encourage you to use this guide to customize a blended learning communications strategy for your unique district. Our hope is that you will [share with us](#) what works, what doesn't, and what is missing, so we can develop a more comprehensive version of the guide in the future.

COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING FOR BLENDED LEARNING: STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

Your most important initial step is to **make proactive communications about your blended learning program a district priority**. Reflect this priority in the district’s blended learning implementation plan and share this priority with elected boards, principals and staff.

If you do not have a dedicated communications staff person, identify a staff member (or hire someone) with communications skills to manage district blended learning communication efforts. **Include the communications coordinator on your blended learning implementation team** and have them be responsible for developing and executing your comprehensive communications strategy. (They may be the person who conducts many of the steps in this guide for you.)

The following are 10 specific steps to creating your own blended learning communications plan, along with helpful examples and tools. Although few of the examples are specific to blended learning, they are examples of good communications practices in general and can be adapted to fit your blended learning communications needs.

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STEP 1 / Communications vs. Engagement



As you begin planning a communications strategy for your blended learning initiative, keep in mind that your efforts should not be just one-way, from you to your audiences. **Work to create two-way conversations that build true engagement with your stakeholders.**

Ask questions about what your teachers' concerns are about blended learning. Listen to your staff's suggestions around implementation. Discuss with your community the skills and aptitudes they think necessary for your students. Check in frequently about how things are going and if adjustments need to be made (they will!). Make your blended learning implementation a shared journey of discovery by focusing on engagement.

- **What are the benefits of engaged stakeholders?**
 - > Informed audiences
 - > Reduced resistance/opposition
 - > Increased resilience when faced with problems/obstacles
 - > Improved blended learning results with feedback/iteration
- **Tips for two-way communications: Ask and Listen** (Adapted from *Looking Back to Move Ahead - M2 Communications*)
 - > **Surveys:** Add questions to existing surveys of parents, educators and community members or use free or low-cost survey tools easily found on the Internet.
 - > **Focus groups:** Plan a segment of existing meetings (e.g. PTA or teacher meetings) to ask a few key questions or bring a group or groups of key stakeholders together to ask questions and listen to answers.
 - > **Capture conversations:** Track feedback and follow up with people.
 - > **Use technology to talk and listen:** Adding a comment box and a sign up for social media feeds and other announcements at the bottom of an e-newsletter or a specific email address on a letter may seem small but they are ways to solicit input and let people know you are listening.
 - > **Meet people where they are – literally and figuratively:** Look for opportunities to talk to people in formal and informal settings – everywhere from PTA meetings to the grocery store. And remember that not everyone is at the same place in terms of understanding blended learning. Be ready to provide background information to support your perspective.
 - > **Make sure listening is not a one-and-done activity:** Make the “listening tour” approach a constant in your interactions with key stakeholders. Listen to what people are saying and use that feedback to inform your work.

EXAMPLES/RESOURCES:

[Looking Back to Move Ahead - M2 Communications](#)

[Greeley-Evans School District 6 “Listening Tour Flyer”](#)

STEP 2 / Communications Goals



Next, **establish clear communications goals** that are deeply connected to your blended learning goals and your district's overall strategic plan for student learning.

Districts often fall into the trap of talking more about the technology than the transformation of teaching and learning that occurs with blended learning. Computers, tablets and other education technology devices are simply tools that educators can use to enable greater differentiated instruction, data-driven interventions, competency-based progression and improved student engagement. Your communications goals should focus primarily on building understanding and **support for blended learning's role in achieving your district's definition of student success.**

Set targeted communications goals that reflect the unique opportunities or challenges in your school or district. Do you have teachers who are resistant to change? Community members whose support you need for upcoming funding measures? Parents skeptical of technology in the classroom? Develop communications goals that target those audiences and underscore your blended learning programs' objectives for student learning.

Examples of (general) blended learning communications goals:

- Ensure stakeholders understand how blended learning provides teachers with tools to personalize learning for students, enabling competency-based progression and increasing student engagement, growth and achievement.
- Build trust and buy-in from teachers for blended learning so they, in turn, can be advocates for the work.
- Identify issues early, and alleviate any parent concerns about blended learning and technology in the classroom.
- Build understanding and partnerships with the broader community to support blended learning in local schools.
- Build strong two-way communications channels to ensure effective listening as well as sharing, when communicating about blended learning.

EXAMPLES/RESOURCES:

[Rockwood School District: Comprehensive Communications Plan \(2014-2015\)](#) Good example of how to tie communications goals to district strategic goals

[Blueprint 2.0: Our Way Forward](#) The Baltimore County Public Schools strategic plan, Goal #3 Communications

STEP 3 / Communications Resources



Assess your district's communications capacity and identify existing communications resources, as well as gaps in your capabilities and/or expertise.

Review existing communications methods and tools. What has been working well for your district and what needs bolstering? For example:

- Is your website up-to-date?
- Are you active on social media?
- Do you have reliable contact information for parents and community leaders?
- How does information flow to your staff and teachers?

This process can be as deeply thorough or as high-level as you have time for, but the important step is to **know what communications tools and resources you have at your disposal to execute your blended learning communications plan.**

If there are budget constraints on hiring communications experts, **explore parent/community experts** who could help address gaps in communication skills. For example:

- Are there parents who are writers and are willing to help you capture and share stories about the blended learning happening in your classrooms?
- Is there a local web-design company that would provide pro-bono assistance in improving your website or e-news blasts?
- Do you have high-school students who could help prepare content about blended learning for your social media platforms?

If budget and time allow, **consider conducting a formal communications audit**, offered by most communications firms or through organizations like the National Schools PR Association.

Work closely with your communications coordinator to determine strategies and a timeline for filling resource gaps so that your blended learning communications efforts will be successful.

STEP 4 / Stakeholder Audiences



Taking the time to identify and understand your key audiences, what they care about, and how best to reach them, is critical to successful communications.

- **Identify your district stakeholder audiences.**
 - > Internal: Teachers, students, principals, administrative staff including IT directors
 - > External: Parents, community/local business, media, funders/foundations
- **Know your audiences.**
 - > Deploy regular surveys or other tools to better understand your audiences
 - > What are each group's top issues, concerns, values?
 - > What special communications needs might they have? Language? Access to technology/email?
- **Identify the best methods to reach your audiences.**
 - > Email, phone-calls, local news, website, social media, meetings, newsletters, op-eds, PTA meetings, etc.
 - > Regular surveys can keep track of shifts in these preferences
- **Build alliances with influential groups to help communicate with key audiences.**
 - > Teachers unions
 - > Chambers of Commerce
 - > Community development organizations
 - > Faith-based organizations

EXAMPLES/RESOURCES:

[How To Identify Audiences For Your Cause](#) (Cause Clarity)

[A Stakeholder Approach to Prioritize Communications Efforts](#) (BSCP Center)

[Sample family communications survey](#) (Montgomery Township School District)

STEP 5 / Key Messengers



Although the Superintendent is the official “messenger” for the district, identifying and **preparing other trusted messengers** to deliver key messages about your blended learning program is essential.

- Identify the most trusted messengers for each audience.
 - > Teachers, students, and principals are the best messengers for parents
 - > Principals and district leaders are the best messengers for the community
 - > Respected community leaders are also strong third-party endorsers/influencers for the broader community
- According to the 2014 PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools:
 - > 64% of respondents trust and have confidence in public school teachers
 - > 65% of respondents trust and have confidence in public school principals (2013 result)

EXAMPLES/RESOURCES:

[How to Choose a Messenger](#) (Cause Clarity)

[BCPS Lighthouse Case Study](#) Good idea:
Name a Blended Learning Ambassador for each school

STEP 6 / Key Messages



Key messages must be customized for each district, but there are specific approaches to messaging around blended learning that we believe are critical:

- **Always tie your communications back to your student learning objectives!**
 - > Technology will be part of the story, but whenever possible, stress the benefits to students and teachers first and foremost
- **Keep it simple.** Define blended learning in an easy to understand, non-jargon, accessible way.
 - > “Blended learning is the combination of in-person instruction and education technology that personalizes learning for students and allows them to progress at their own pace.”

- **Build understanding of how blended learning enables competency-based progression**, in which students proceed through course material at a pace that is right for them, rather than waiting for their peers to catch up or moving on without having fully mastered the material.
 - > As a result, all students build a stronger academic foundation and are better able to master the knowledge and skills critical to prepare them for college and career.
- **Capture and share the authentic voices of teachers and students** in explaining the benefits of blended learning. They are your best messengers.
- **Show how blended learning is an exciting evolution of teaching today.** (Soon we will just call it “learning.”) Provide examples of blended learning happening in schools to help share the momentum.
- **Capture how blended learning helps achieve personalization** and differentiation (for which there is much [research on the benefits for learning](#)).
- **Stress that blended learning is a journey of innovation**, and model the behaviors we want our teachers and students to have (resilience, creativity, grit).
- **Review The Learning Accelerator’s Blended Learning Messaging Guide** for sample messages targeted to key audiences.

How to use your key messages?

Depending on which stakeholder audience you are trying to reach, embed the appropriate key messages in any and all of the following communications vehicles (previously identified in Step 4).

- Speeches
- Presentations
- Videos
- Letters home
- Web-copy
- Op-eds
- Blog posts
- Social media posts
- FAQs
- Newsletters
- E-blasts, email
- Interviews

EXAMPLES/RESOURCES:

- [Blended Learning Messaging Guide](#) (The Learning Accelerator)
- [How to Create Your Core Message](#) (Cause Clarity)
- [Competency-Based Pathways: Definition, Key Messages and Talking Points](#) (Achieve)
- [Greeley-Evans School District 6 Blended Learning Report](#) Example of a presentation made to the Greeley-Evans school board about blended learning implementation efforts

STEP 7 / Storytelling



One of the most powerful ways to communicate your key messages is through storytelling. **Think about ways to deliver your key messages through visuals, video and vivid language.**

Instead of telling us about the number of computer tablets in each classroom, share with us how a certain student in Mr. Smith’s 5th-grade blended learning classroom was able to solve a specific problem in a unique and personalized way.

In your stories, use real-life characters (students and teachers) and a compelling plot to translate your messages into an inspiring story that your audiences will remember and respond to.

According to Betsy Henning, Founder and CEO of AHA! branding consultancy, the principles of digital storytelling include:

- **Simple:** Focus on the core idea of what you want to say.
- **Unexpected:** Get the listener’s attention and keep them interested.
- **Concrete:** Make it real and relatable to make the listener understand and remember.
- **Credible:** Help the listener believe your story while building credibility.
- **Emotional:** Make the listener care.

EXAMPLES/RESOURCES:

[Communicating Success Stories](#) (Competency-Based Pathways: Achieve)

[Celebrating Excellence: Stories of a Digital Age](#) (Digital Promise)

STEP 8 / Timeline



As you develop your communications strategy, be sure to **link the communications timeline to your blended learning implementation timeline**. Overlay your calendar of implementation events with your communications milestones, activities, and tasks.

- **Start from the beginning.** Engage your stakeholders at the earliest stages of your blended learning implementation efforts.
- **Identify specific events** and opportunities to communicate with each audience.
 - > Teachers: meetings, professional development, newsletters, union communications
 - > Parents: Back-2-School night, parent/teacher conferences
- **Frequency matters!** The need for a comprehensive communications strategy has become a main “lesson learned” for blended learning early adopters.

EXAMPLES/RESOURCES:

[Sample Communications Timeline](#)

(The Learning Accelerator)

*“Think about what you currently do
(for communications)
and then double or triple your efforts.”*

*Diane Tavenner,
Founder, Summit Public Schools.*

STEP 9 / Issue Spotting: Continuously survey the landscape



Engaging with your stakeholders is an ongoing effort and it pays to try to **spot issues ahead of time** that may be of growing concern. Implementing blended learning could cause apprehension for certain audiences and districts should be prepared to help address those fears or misunderstandings.

Establish strong two-way communications as laid out in Step 1 of this guide to help you spot issues and be prepared. Listen to worries that bubble up in meetings or community forums. Ask teachers and principals what concerns they are hearing from parents, or from teachers and staff. Reach out to other districts that are adopting blended learning and learn what surprising issues came up for them. Use formal surveys and informal conversations to listen for topics that you may need to address sooner, rather than later.

ISSUES OF POTENTIAL CONCERN AND RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Screen Time:

[Technology and Interactive Media as Tools in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8](#) (National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media)

[Education Week Multimedia Tool Shows Good Technology Use in Pre-K Through 3](#)

Student Data Privacy:

[Education data communications toolkit](#) (Data Quality Campaign)

Computer vs. Teacher:

[Three false dichotomies in blended learning](#) (Clayton Christensen Institute)

Common Core:

[Common Core Communications Toolkit \(SVCF\)](#)

[Looking Back to Move Ahead: Lessons for Effective Communications to Support Implementation of Common Core-Aligned Assessments](#) (M2 Communications)

Student Online Safety:

[Digital Literacy & Citizenship Classroom Curriculum](#) (Common Sense Media)

STEP 10 / Success Metrics



How you determine if your communications efforts are succeeding depends on what goals you set in your strategy in Step 2. If parent or community awareness was a goal, consider doing a survey at the beginning of your implementation efforts and again periodically thereafter to gauge effectiveness. Similarly, a teacher “listening tour” at the beginning and mid-way points of your implementation efforts can highlight communications successes or problems.

Other metrics of success to consider:

- **Number of positive news stories** about your blended learning initiative in local media
- **Number of parent/community meetings** that showcase blended learning examples
- **Number of “stories” with teachers and/or students** showing blended learning in action shared with key audiences and posted on the school/district website
- While harder to quantify, the **lack of opposition or expressed concern** over your blended learning initiative is another sign of success

Additional Tips and Tools

Communications Planning Tools:

- [Communications & Engagement Workbook](#) (CCSSO, RttT)
- [Communications Planning Step-by-Step, for competency-based pathways to college and career readiness](#) (Achieve)
- [Building Public Understanding for Student-Centered Learning](#) (Nellie Mae Education Foundation)

Tips for Parent Involvement:

- [Parent Communication Tips](#) (Edutopia)
- [Parent Communications Toolbox](#) (Edutopia)
- [Practical Tips for Parent Engagement](#) (Summit Public Schools)

Social Media:

- [Social Media Toolkit](#) (GettingSmart)

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For more information about The Learning Accelerator, please visit www.learningaccelerator.org.

