Tip Sheet: Communicating about the 2023-24 School Year

Tips to consider when preparing for the 2023–2024 academic year:

# Establish a communications strategy. Consider the following methods:

* Survey educators, parents, and students to gather their views on how they would like to receive information from the school.
* Appoint a family liaison who will organize and direct all communications with families, if one is not present already. This may be the same person who is responsible for communication in your School-level Communicable Disease Management Plan. At a minimum, this person should work closely with the communications lead in your School-level Communicable Disease Management Plan.
* Ensure a dedicated email address and telephone number (run by the district or school) is functional, messages are monitored, and timely responses are provided.
* Host virtual town halls.
* Publish a press release articulating a detailed vision for the 2023-24 school year and how community input was/will be incorporated.
* Create and run public service announcements encouraging steps, such as filling out the survey.
* Publish opinion pieces that articulate the district’s plans describing health and safety precautions being taken.

# Prioritize families that you have not communicated with in the past

Traditional outreach methods like parent nights or flyers or social media may not reach every audience. Your district will need to utilize more than one strategy to communicate with the parents, families, and students who make up your school community. You can use ESSER funds for this purpose. ODE’s [Appendix A: Community Engagement Toolkit](https://www.oregon.gov/ode/StudentSuccess/Documents/AppendixA_CommunityEngagementToolkit.pdf) from the Office of Education Innovation and Improvement aims to honor the learning and work of the prior school-years, provide information that deepens the community engagement work called forward by the student investment account and career and technical education, and offer useful and compelling tools to **integrate community engagement work across other kinds of programs and initiatives** - embedding this work in the fabric of districts and schools. Meet people where they are and consider using a combination of communication vehicles:

* WhatsApp (a popular app for many Oregon families)
* Hire culturally specific community-based organizations or community liaisons to partner with schools
* Encourage schools to call families, knock on doors
* Make use of local radio (in multiple languages)

Ask community questions similar to those below. Be responsive to their answers as you plan engagement.

* How will you engage families, particularly those from historically underserved communities who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic?
* Which forums work best for members of your community? (e.g., small group conversation, large forum, partner-led discussion, online vs. in-person)?
* What supports and services will promote and encourage greater engagement (e.g., childcare, translation, food)?
* Where does your audience feel most safe (e.g., coffee shop, school, church, community center, park, playground)?

# Provide concrete, family-friendly information

* Avoid ‘education jargon’ or difficult instructions that are not plain language. Explain what the changes will mean and provide step-by-step instructions for what they can expect when a disease outbreak occurs. For example, if they will receive an alert message through the school’s messenger service.
* Translate updates into school community native languages, as needed.
* Be empathetic and personalize the tone of updates as much as possible (parents care first and foremost about how changes will affect their child rather than the system). Changes in school day routines, whether for an individual student, classroom, or a whole school, can be stressful for parents, teachers, and students. Communication should acknowledge the difficult time and offer opportunities for the school community to support each other as much as possible.

# Engage key partners

* Co-host meetings with educator organizations, community groups, and parents and families to hear concerns and provide clarity on the district’s vision.
* Record meetings and post to website.
* Discuss and review parent-friendly materials.
* Work with partners to identify additional opportunities for deeper engagement.

# Communicate new information frequently using multiple platforms

* In addition to sending informational flyers home with students, update your website (homepage) regularly with concrete, easy to understand information and resources. Also, consider posting items that are being worked on and let parents know when to check back. (e.g., Fall School Plans: In Progress. Check back for updates soon).
* Include all links to district digital learning platforms in one place as well as additional mobile-friendly digital resources for families who may not have access to high-speed internet.
* If possible, also include the latest information regarding communicable disease services and supports (e.g., information on vaccination clinics in the community; information on testing sites; school, county or state recommendations regarding mitigation measures.)
* Have materials reviewed by organizations that represent underserved communities for tone, cultural competency, and to ensure key issues are addressed and that resources are reaching intended populations.
* Take steps to ensure that all materials are available in multiple languages and are accessible to parents and individuals with disabilities.
* Communicate via local media (earned, donated, and paid) channels including print, TV, and radio (in multiple languages).
* Track questions that are raised and create FAQs with clear, detailed answers to respond to common concerns and issues.
* Engage with communities on various social media channels, setting expectations regarding respectful communication.
* Utilize social media, voice, and text to reach parents with key information.
* In addition to the above channels, share information through community-based organizations such as PTAs, youth serving organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs, and places of worship.

# Send regular updates on a consistent schedule so parents know to expect them (e.g., every Monday night)

* Use multiple communication methods in a coordinated way to ensure you’re reaching all families, including those without email/internet access. For example, share updates by text, phone, and social media.
* If updates are too long for text/social media, link to the website page or one pager that can easily be opened from those platforms.
* Consider leveraging an existing auto phone call system or chain (or create one) to contact families or students that you haven’t been able to reach online. Phone calls should also be used for communicating sensitive or personal information.
* If possible, provide printed updates and instructions for home learning.

# Create Opportunities for Two-way Communication

* Consider a way for parents to submit questions, ideas, and share resources.
* Provide a question/contact us box either on the website or Facebook page.
* Use social media and/or PTA/parent group pages as an avenue for parents to share ideas and resources on both academic as well as social/emotional development.