



Communications Plan
Northwest Education Services

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2022

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Northwest Education Services

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INTRODUCTION

Northwest Education Services (North Ed) strives to achieve a high level of effective communication with all of our stakeholder groups. This North Ed Communications Plan builds upon the body of work, protocols and strategies previously identified and implemented by the intermediate school district, and intends to put North Ed in a position to address the current and evolving communication needs of our school community, which includes both internal and external audiences. In addition, this plan will enhance the support and communication services North Ed currently provides to local school districts.

The North Ed Communications Plan is meant to present a clear and concise strategy of communication for the intermediate school district. For the purposes of this plan, effective communication is defined as involving a process by which a message is successfully and efficiently delivered, received and understood, along with characteristics such as timeliness, usefulness and whether the message is pertinent to the recipient.

The North Ed Communications Department will lead the implementation of this plan in coordination with other departments. The document will be continually evaluated and updated as needed.

GOAL

The North Ed Communications Plan will provide the framework needed to support the development of an effective system of communication. Effective communication will assist North Ed in providing the students and educators of our region with excellent educational opportunities and resources. In following the strategy and meeting the specific objectives detailed below, North Ed will take deliberate action to achieve that goal.

STRATEGY

North Ed's strategy will include:

- Education and training
- Ongoing development and review of new and existing tools and procedures
- Continual monitoring of specific initiatives and the overall communication system

A key component in the success of this plan is the engagement and support of North Ed's employees. North Ed administrators and other influential sources of information for our employees and the general public must ensure the organization's messages are clear, delivered through a proper channel and in an appropriate format. Efforts should likewise be made so that sent messages are consistent and aligned with our values of: Students/Learners First, Relationships, Integrity, Listening, Service, Diversity, Equity, Empathy and Excellence.

To ensure messages are consumed by staff members and the general public, there must be a clear understanding of which communication channels are deemed priority. Additionally, establishing an official means of soliciting and gathering feedback from staff and external stakeholders will allow deficiencies in protocols to be corrected and improve North Ed's overall communication structure.

North Ed currently uses a variety of communication channels and tools. While certain channels and tools were identified as preferred modes of communication, others may prove more useful in specific situations and when accompanied by proper training and awareness.

The North Ed Communications Department will continue to manage publications, marketing collateral and community relations and outreach, as well as provide leadership and support to others in the implementation of this plan.

OBJECTIVES:

- Prioritize Messaging Channels
- Standard Communication Tools
- Protocols and Expectations
- Training and Support
- Monitor and Seek Feedback

TARGET AUDIENCES:

Internal:

- Staff
- Board Members

External:

- Students
- Parents/Families
- Prospective Students and Families
- Alumni
- Retirees and Former Employees
- LEA Staff and Families
- Prospective Employees
- Media
- Other ISDs
- Governmental Leaders, Entities and Agencies
- Business Community
- Civic, Religious and Faith-Based Groups
- Higher Educational Institutions
- Taxpayers and Community Members

COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH:

North Ed began a strategic planning process in 2019 that identified the goal of developing a system of effective communication. To meet that goal, two surveys were conducted to gather information regarding internal communication from employees and external communication from a variety of community members.

The internal survey was sent to staff via email on May 20, 2021, and closed July 30, 2021. It was also featured in multiple editions of the organization's monthly newsletter Check It Out. The survey garnered a response rate of approximately 44% (265 respondents).

Staff members were asked to consider generally the current flow of communications, their preferences and priorities for communication, the effectiveness of North Ed's existing communication structure and whether staff members felt engaged with the organization.

The external survey was sent via email on Nov. 9, 2021 to approximately 650 email addresses of external stakeholders, including North Ed students, parents and advisory committee members, local school district employees, members of the media, business partners and community members at-large. The survey closed on Nov. 24, 2021, and received a response rate of approximately 35% (229 respondents).

External stakeholders were asked to rate the effectiveness of North Ed's existing communication structure, their preferences for receiving communications and how they prefer to reach out to North Ed if they are initiating the communication, among other survey topics.

Combined, internal and external stakeholders rated North Ed's current system of communication as more effective than not. On a 7-point scale with 7 as most effective, more than 79% of respondents rated North Ed's system of communication a 5 or higher; 60% rated it a 6 or higher; and nearly 11% rated it a 7.

While the survey results are relatively positive, there are steps that can be taken to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of North Ed's communication structure.

ACTION STEPS:

The approach outlined below includes concrete action steps that will be taken to achieve North Ed's communication objectives and goal.

OBJECTIVE: Prioritize Messaging Channels: *Establish and promote a primary source of organizational information for staff to improve consumption of and access to important messages, and ensure preferred channels of communication are being used correctly when communicating with both internal and external audiences.*

- **Email** was consistently noted as the preferred method of communication among internal and external stakeholders, according to survey data, and should be used as the primary channel when communicating important organizational information.
 - Policy updates, Human Resources news, etc., should be communicated via email – not solely in Check It Out (CIO). CIO was seen as less official when compared to other information sources, and the publication is read less frequently by staff when compared to email.
- **In-person communication** was also seen as a preferred source of information among North Ed staff members, according to survey data. Encourage supervisors and leadership to reinforce organizational news and messages during in-person conversations and meetings with staff.

- Continue to encourage staff and external stakeholders to receive cell phone **text message alerts** to improve emergency and urgent communications.
- Develop **social media** messaging plans and campaigns to increase traffic, awareness and engagement among North Ed’s community, and monitor accounts for engagement opportunities and sources of stakeholder feedback.
- Revamp North Ed’s **website and staff intranet** to ensure information is up-to-date, and establish a process to complete periodic reviews and revisions to keep content relevant. Review and streamline North Ed’s website and staff intranet infrastructure to improve navigation.
 - Establish a **central hub or repository** (such as a “North Ed News” webpage on the staff intranet) to serve as a comprehensive resource for all North Ed communications to staff and external audiences – such as emails, newsletters, press releases, etc. – as well as training opportunities, upcoming social events and more.
 - Check It Out and other North Ed newsletters should be modified to a more condensed format, with links to full articles and additional content posted to North Ed’s website and staff intranet.
 - Explore an expanded use of **web-based organizational calendars** to publicize upcoming events, professional training and other opportunities available to staff and external audiences.

OBJECTIVE: Standard Communication Tools: *Draft and update standard communication tools to be used and adapted for internal and external purposes, including messaging for crisis communications and emergency events.*

- Create a library of communication templates (such as letters, emails, etc.) to establish an organizational standard that can be applied in multiple scenarios.
 - Standard communication tools will allow for consistency of North Ed’s brand identity through proper use of organizational names, colors, symbols and other elements.
- The Communications Department, in coordination with other departments and personnel, will draft and assist in the creation of communication templates that may be modified and adapted to fit individual circumstances for, including but not limited to, the following areas:
 - Snow days and other school closings
 - Emergency and crisis communications
 - Annual, monthly, weekly and other recurring notifications
 - Promotional graphics, recruitment efforts and related content
 - Web and social media posts

OBJECTIVE: Protocols and Expectations: *Develop and clearly communicate protocols, guidelines and expectations for staff to meet North Ed’s internal communication needs and to improve community outreach and external stakeholder engagement. Frequently review and adjust protocols as needed in response to changing demands.*

- Encourage staff to consider using email subject lines to clearly communicate expectations and priority of messages, such as:
 - Staff Notice – Generally reserved for “All Staff” notifications
 - READ – Use when your message is only intended to be read by the recipient and no response or action is required.
 - ACT – Use when the recipient should take a specific action, which should be detailed in your email.
- Encourage staff to monitor email throughout their work day and respond to email generally within a 24-hour period during normal workdays and within two days upon returning to work when an email is received during non-workdays.
- If a message is not urgent, sending communications should be reserved for during normal work hours whenever practical.
- For inter-departmental emails and communications, consider Cc’ing department directors and supervisors when appropriate so they are informed of requests being made or other information that may impact their departments and staff.
- Encourage supervisors to direct their staff to the North Ed News webpage, once established, as the primary source of organizational information.
- Create “master lists” of school community contacts to be managed by the Communications Department, with support from North Ed’s departments of Technology and Human Resources.
 - Establish and follow protocol to update contact lists, such as Google Groups, Constant Contact, SchoolMessenger, etc., to reflect most recent data for new students, family members/guardians and employees. Similarly, remove from the active contact list the info for departing employees, students and guardians/family members.
- Crisis Communications: Establish an effective emergency communication protocol to be used internally and to support local school districts as needed.
 - Identify key communicators to support implementation of emergency notifications and provide advanced instruction and training to empower those individuals to act quickly.
 - Issue emergency notifications, such as school closures, via North Ed’s emergency notification system to target as many individuals as possible, along with social media and web postings.
 - Proactively communicate with parents and school families regarding key contacts and sources of information, including what they can expect in an emergency and where they can find details.

- Media Relations: North Ed staff should notify the Communications Department if they are contacted by the media for the purposes of tracking news coverage of the organization. Media outlets often promote their stories on social media, which provides an opportunity for North Ed to amplify positive coverage. Additionally, if North Ed staff are aware of events and other topics that may be of interest to the media, those opportunities should be discussed with the Communications Department prior to any outreach to media outlets to determine the most appropriate strategy.

OBJECTIVE: Training and Support: *Develop training programs and resources for preferred communication channels, tools and supports to assist North Ed staff in effectively communicating with each other and external audiences. Ensure staff members understand communication protocols and expectations and how to appropriately use communication tools and strategies.*

- Ensure North Ed’s key communicators at all levels are properly supported to communicate effectively with audiences.
 - Teachers and Instructors were identified by external stakeholders as the group of North Ed employees they interact with most regularly, followed by Administrative Support Staff and Department Directors/Supervisors. Identify opportunities to effectively leverage those communication channels.
- The Communications Department will continue to support North Ed leadership in communicating with stakeholder groups, media relations, community outreach and promotional efforts, event coordination, development of key messages, high-level communication strategy and other initiatives.
- Develop onboarding documentation for new employees regarding communication best practices and protocols at North Ed, and evaluate and revise training processes and resources for North Ed’s primary communication channels, tools and platforms.
 - Video and print tutorials were identified as the most preferred training resources among North Ed staff, according to survey data. Offering “live” virtual training sessions allow larger groups of people at multiple locations to receive training and an opportunity for questions. These sessions may also be recorded, edited and reused for future onboarding and training opportunities.
 - All training resources, as well as professional development opportunities, may be referenced on the “North Ed News” webpage, once developed.
- Promote email as the primary mode of distributing important organization-wide information for internal stakeholders and external audiences, as identified in North Ed’s internal and external survey results.

OBJECTIVE: Monitor and Seek Feedback: *Establish and promote a clear process for providing input to North Ed leadership and seek feedback through various means by ensuring staff members and other stakeholders have an opportunity to communicate directly with key communicators and leadership.*

- Conduct periodic town halls and office hours (virtual or in-person) with key personnel to offer the community and North Ed staff members the opportunity for direct dialogue with North Ed leadership.
- Continue to connect directly with key stakeholders at local school districts (LEAs) to determine whether additional support from North Ed is required to meet their needs.
- Encourage participation of stakeholders at North Ed Board of Education meetings to ensure the community and North Ed staff members are aware of the opportunity to present their perspectives to North Ed’s governing board.
- Promote the use of the North Ed Communications Department email (NorthEdNews@NorthwestEd.org) as an avenue to provide comments, suggestions and feedback to North Ed leadership.
- Develop a recurring survey to be issued to staff members and external stakeholders on the effectiveness of North Ed’s structure of communication, inviting suggestions for improvement.
- Track data to ensure feedback is appropriately used to make improvements to the communication system and to measure long-term successes and failures.

SUMMARY

The intent of this communications plan is to provide North Ed employees with guidance to increase effective communication among internal and external stakeholders.

North Ed seeks to implement this plan immediately and monitor outcomes to adjust our approach as needed. Efforts will be made to ensure the plan remains aligned with North Ed’s organizational vision, values, mission and communication needs. As additional feedback is received, input will be evaluated and incorporated into future versions of the plan.

Anyone wishing to comment or provide feedback and suggestions to improve the plan may contact the North Ed Communications Department via email at NorthEdNews@NorthwestEd.org.



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