SUMMER COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Prepared by

chorus

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INTRODUCTION

Strong leaders, including school principals, must be able to communicate effectively to a wide range of audiences. Messages from a school leader to families, staff, and students, can set the tone for the entire school year.

Taking time over the summer to make a plan for how, when, and with whom you will communicate will ensure that you craft intentional, thoughtful, and well-received messages. We drafted this summer communications framework using data from Possip on the topics that families and school staff identified as being top of mind over the summer months and the beginning of the school year. The framework provides three resources:

1
Guiding Principles

Best practices to keep in mind when you are communicating with your families, staff, and students.

2
Systems and Structure

Considerations and templates for selecting how and when you communicate and who is responsible for various communications in your school community.

3
Start of School Messages

Recommendations on the topics you should be communicating about at the beginning of the school year, as well as guidance on how to present the information for both families and staff.

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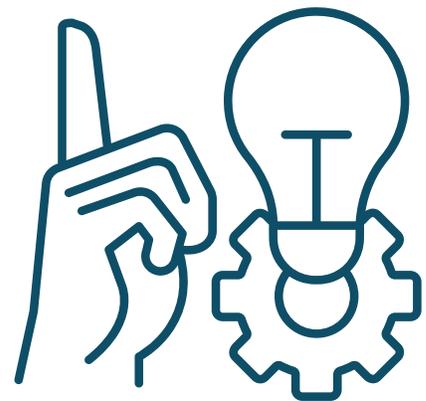
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

BE CLEAR AND CONCISE

Why it matters:

- During the summer and early school year, families are bombarded with information. Communications that are clear, concise, and to the point are more likely to be read and remembered.

What it looks like:

- Use bullet points, headings, and brief paragraphs in written communications.
- Always start with the most critical information, and provide links or attachments for additional details.
- Consider whether each communication answers the 5 Ws (and H):
  - Who?
  - When?
  - Where?
  - Why
  - and How?

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GUIDING PRINCIPLES

BE PROACTIVE ON SENSITIVE TOPICS

Why it matters:

- Proactively addressing potential concerns or sensitive topics can prevent misinformation, alleviate anxiety, and possibly help prevent escalation of an issue. "Keeping a low profile" or "not raising alarm bells" is not a good strategy. This applies to both school-wide matters and student-specific issues.

- For issues related to individual students, parents should not be surprised by a major behavior or academic problem. They should be brought along the moment a potential issue arises, so they can partner with the school on the solution.

- For school-wide issues, don't assume that something shared by your district or network will automatically reach your families and staff. Reshare important information and decisions through your own communication platforms.

What it looks like:

- Thanks to Pulse Checks by Possip, you have access to information that tells you exactly what is on the minds of parents and staff at any given time. Make sure to communicate proactively any changes or updates on topics such as school safety, student behavior policies, or changes to routines. Communicate transparently and confidently, emphasizing the rationale behind decisions, as well as any steps taken to address concerns.

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GUIDING PRINCIPLES

BE RESPONSIVE AND AVAILABLE

Why it matters:

- Engaging with families and teachers and soliciting their feedback makes them feel valued and heard.

What it looks like:

- Encourage replies to emails (and make sure to respond promptly, even if just to say you are forwarding a concern to the appropriate contact), conduct surveys, and consider holding regular, in-person or virtual Q&A sessions for various audiences.

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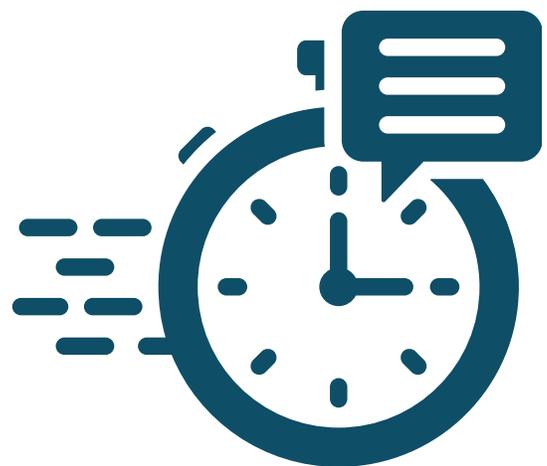
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

ENSURE ACCESSIBILITY

Why it matters:

- Every family and teacher deserves equal access to school communications and information. Accessibility reflects your school's commitment to inclusivity, ensuring that no member of the community is left uninformed or feels excluded.

What it looks like:

- Offer translations of all communications into the primary languages spoken within the school community (online services like Alboum are a great place to start if your school or district does not have translators available) and consider having interpreters onsite for in-person events.
- Ensure that digital communications, including emails and your school's website, are compatible with screen readers and other assistive technologies. Follow web accessibility standards to facilitate easy navigation for individuals with visual impairments.
- Consider the time of day when you host events and whether most families can attend. Most importantly, create a simple way for community members to report accessibility issues and suggestions.

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GUIDING PRINCIPLES

REGULARLY SHARE AND CELEBRATE GOOD NEWS

Why it matters:

- Celebrating successes builds the morale of your staff, while also supporting a positive reputation with families.

What it looks like:

- Share news that is both big and small. Acknowledge birthdays, work anniversaries, unique classroom projects, sports team wins and other competitions, as well as positive lessons learned or improvements.
- You can be creative (not everything has to go in a newsletter). Make time at school-wide assemblies and in small places, like bulletin boards to build a positive, supportive culture in your school.

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GUIDING PRINCIPLES

RESPOND QUICKLY IN A CRISIS

Why it matters:

- In times of crisis, accurate and timely information is crucial to maintain trust, ensure safety, and manage the situation effectively. Uncertainty can lead to anxiety and misinformation, often making a bad situation worse.

What it looks like:

- Quickly acknowledge the situation to all stakeholders, even if all the details are not yet available. Make sure to communicate the physical safety of students and staff as soon as it is available.
- Establish a schedule for updates (e.g., hourly or daily, depending on the situation) and stick to it. Clearly outline what is expected of families, students, and staff.
- Once a crisis is over, always follow up with a communication about what you are doing/have done to prevent a similar crisis from happening in the future.

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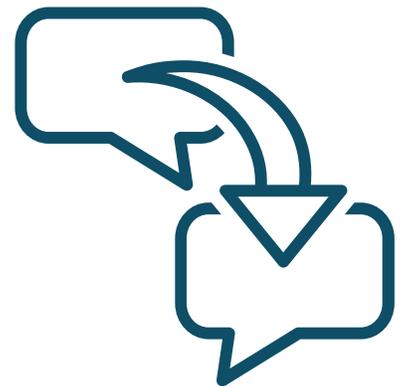
ACTION & PLANNING

Systems and Structures:
Build a Team and a Plan

SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES: BUILD A TEAM AND A PLAN

STEP 1

There are numerous communication tools designed specifically for schools and school systems, and many of them are integrated into student data management systems, website platforms, or apps. Evaluate the options that are available to you and which ones best meet your needs.

Ask yourself:

- Which communication channels/tools will you use to send out regular school-wide updates to families? Consider using multiple methods to reach families who best receive information in different ways (e.g., an email newsletters that is also posted on a private Facebook group).

- Which channels/tools will you use to send out urgent or time-sensitive messages? Consider using the same methods as regular communications, plus a text message service.

- Which channels/tools do you want staff to use for communicating with students and families? Consider establishing communication policies that provide predictability and consistency across the school community, so parents aren't having to check multiple apps or platforms to get information from different staff members.

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SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES: BUILD A TEAM AND A PLAN

STEP 2

Working with your team and knowing the systems you plan to use, develop a communications matrix that will guide your proactive communications throughout the year.

Channel	Audience	Frequency	Messenger/Staff Responsible	Notes
Email Newsletter	Families	Weekly Sundays	Assistant Principal	• Finalize and schedule distribution on Fridays • Include sports schedule and lunch menu
Facebook Group	Families	Twice Weekly (i.e. Tues & Thurs)	Family Engagement Coordinator	• Share positive news/celebrations • Spotlight achievements of students/staff
Text Message	Families	As Needed	Office Manager	• Post positive Possip shoutouts from families
Assemblies	Students	Bi-Weekly	Student Support Staff	• Recite school values • Recognize recent sports team wins
Workroom Bulletin Board	Staff	Monthly	Lead Teacher	• Post positive Possip shoutouts from families
Chat & Chew	Staff	Monthly	Principal	• Open conversation in the workroom during lunch periods

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START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES FOR FAMILIES

- Welcome Messages
- Nuts & Bolts Communication
- Engagement and Extracurricular Activities
- Academic Support and Expectations
- Safety and Security Protocols Update

START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES — FAMILIES

WELCOME MESSAGE

Objective:

- Start the school year with a welcome message that sets the tone for the year. Introduce new staff members, and highlight any significant changes or improvements made to the school facilities or resources over the summer. Tell families your goals for the year, any themes your school has, and let them know about 1-2 upcoming events to put on their calendars.

Format:

- Create a letter or a short video from the principal to introduce themselves, and deliver their welcome message. Send this in email or post to your website/parent portal.
- Develop an FAQ document addressing key concerns such as dress code, transportation, and school safety, and make it easily available on your website.

Considerations:

- What are the 3-5 messages or themes you want families to remember from your message?
- What format (letter, video) would most effectively reach your families?
- Should the information you share be different for families who are new to your school and families who are returning?

Time estimate:

- 2-3 hours for preparation and dissemination.

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START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES — FAMILIES

NUTS & BOLTS COMMUNICATION

Objective:

- Once you have set a welcoming tone for the new year, you can pivot to providing clear, detailed information on daily logistics, including transportation/busing, meals, school uniforms, carline logistics. These are the daily routines Possip data confirms many families want to understand at the beginning of the year.
- Keeping in mind that for a significant number of your families, middle school represents a big shift in student autonomy and responsibility, assure them that as the principal, you can always be reached, but also give them a list of who to contact regarding some of their potential questions.

Tactics:

- Send out a newsletter detailing transportation schedules, meal options, and carline procedures. Consider also sending a paper version of this information home in backpacks.
- Host a series of virtual Q&A sessions for parents to ask questions and receive real-time responses.

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START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES — FAMILIES

NUTS & BOLTS COMMUNICATION (CON'T)

Considerations:

- What are the most efficient channels to ensure this information is readily accessible? Should it be on the homepage of a parent portal?
- How can we provide this information in a way that respects families' time? Should this information be split up into multiple messages?
- What information do families who are new to your community need?

Additional messenger(s):

- Designated administrative staff

Time estimate:

- 4-5 hours for gathering information, creating documents, and hosting Q&A sessions.

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START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES — FAMILIES

ENGAGEMENT AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Objective:

- Encourage student engagement by communicating the range of extracurricular activities available, as well as how students can get involved and what is expected of parents.

Format:

- Depending on the number of extracurricular activities available at your school, consider hosting an extracurricular fair during the first weeks of school, where activity leaders can help families and students understand the options available to them.
- Publish an online activity guide with descriptions, schedules, and sign-up procedures for all activities, in one place.
- Make sure to resend all in-person information to families via email.

Considerations:

- How can you ensure that all students feel welcome and encouraged to participate?
- What steps should you take to highlight new or updated activities?

Additional messenger(s):

- Teachers and club advisors

Time estimate:

- 6-8 hours for planning the fair and compiling the activity guide

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START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES — FAMILIES

ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND EXPECTATIONS

Objective:

- Clearly communicate academic expectations and support resources available to students to promote a culture of academic growth and achievement, as well as student support.

Format:

- Hold an academic orientation session for students and parents, outlining the curriculum, assessment methods, homework expectations and norms, and support services.
- Provide a schedule of tutoring sessions and academic support resources.
- Make this information easily available on your website or a parent portal.

Considerations:

- How can we ensure parents understand the academic expectations and how to support their children?
- How can you highlight the importance of teacher feedback and communication?
- Are families receiving communication from each individual teacher who instructs their student? Could each grade-level team at your school streamline their communication to families into a single weekly newsletter?

Additional messenger(s):

- Teachers, academic counselors

Time estimate:

- 5-6 hours for planning the orientation and compiling support resources

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START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES — FAMILIES

SAFETY AND SECURITY PROTOCOLS UPDATE

Objective:
- Inform families about the safety measures and protocols in place to protect students and staff, including any updates or changes from prior years.

Format:
- Consider creating a special section in your nuts and bolts communications, or a separate email about school safety
- Host a family information session (virtual or in-person)

Considerations:
- Has your school or community experienced a school safety-related issue that is top-of-mind for families? What questions will they have as a result?
- What differences will new middle school families notice between the local elementary feeder schools and your school?

Time estimate:
- 3-4 hours

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START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES FOR TEACHERS & STAFF

- PD Opportunities & Personnel
- School Safety, Security, & Facilities Enhancements
- Compensation & Benefits
- Administrative Feedback
- Mental Health Support & School Culture

## PD OPPORTUNITIES & PERSONNEL

Objective:

- Inform staff about professional development opportunities and proactively update them on the status of teacher vacancies and recruitment efforts. Individual responsibilities and workload are top of mind for teachers at this time of year, so make sure to show them you are thinking about it too.

Format:

- Send calendar invites and email summaries for professional development opportunities. Include information about how the sessions will help your school meet its goals.
- Dedicate a portion of one of your first staff meetings to giving updates on any vacancies and how that will impact staff.

Time estimate:

- 2-3 hours

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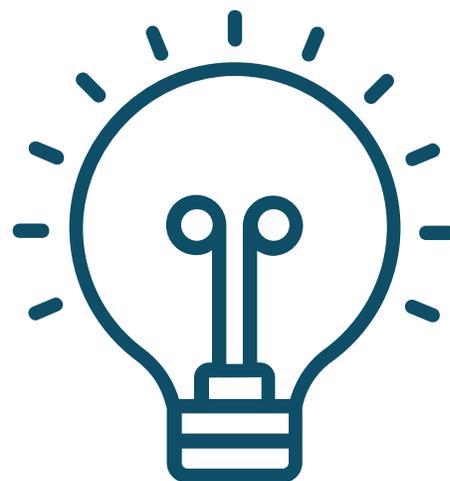
START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES — TEACHERS & STAFF

SCHOOL SAFETY, SECURITY, & FACILITIES ENHANCEMENTS

Objective:

- Keep staff informed about safety protocols, security updates, and improvements to school facilities that support teaching and learning.

Format:

- Host a training session for safety and security (unless your district has already scheduled this)
- Send an email with any additional facilities enhancements

Time estimate:

- 4-5 hours

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START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES — TEACHERS & STAFF

COMPENSATION & BENEFITS

Objective:

- Clarify compensation details and any updates to personnel benefits packages.

Format:

- Distribute an email or memo with information about compensation and benefits, and make yourself available to answer questions; if there are large changes, consider making this the main topic of one of your first staff meetings.

Considerations:

- What has changed to your school or district's compensation plan last year or over the summer?
- Are there additional or new opportunities for teachers to make extra money, either through a differentiated pay structure, or by taking on additional roles and responsibilities?
- When was the last time you outlined your school's paid/parental leave policy? Has anything changed?

Time Estimate:

- 2-3 hours

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START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES — TEACHERS & STAFF

ADMINISTRATIVE FEEDBACK

Objective:

- Establish an efficient process for teachers to provide feedback on administrative decisions, including curriculum, schoolwide discipline policies, etc.

Format:

- Consider holding regular feedback sessions, especially if your school or district is adopting new curriculum or standards.
- Create an anonymous online form for teachers to provide feedback on decisions that impact them.

Time estimate:

- Ongoing; initial setup 1-2 hours

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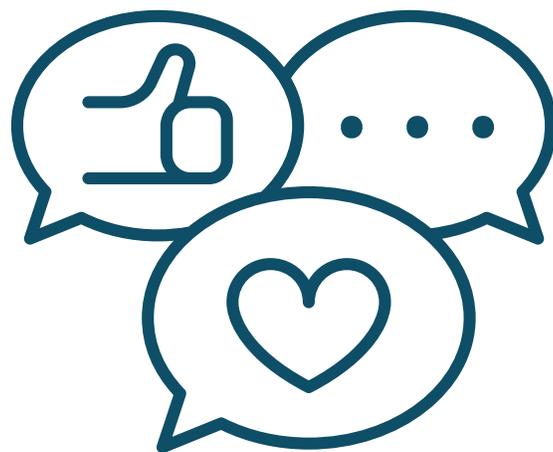
START OF SCHOOL MESSAGES — TEACHERS & STAFF

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT & SCHOOL CULTURE

Objective:

- Promote the mental health resources available to teachers, as well as initiatives aimed at enhancing school culture and staff engagement.

Format:

- Resource guide: Create a guide that includes all programs available to employees, such as employee assistance, PTO, or peer-aligned groups.
- Highlight the positive: Save room in your staff newsletter to highlight positive examples of school culture in action.

Considerations:

- How often do you survey your teachers and staff about their overall job satisfaction? When you do, can you include questions about how you can support their mental health and ultimately improve the school's work culture?

Time estimate:

- 3-4 hours
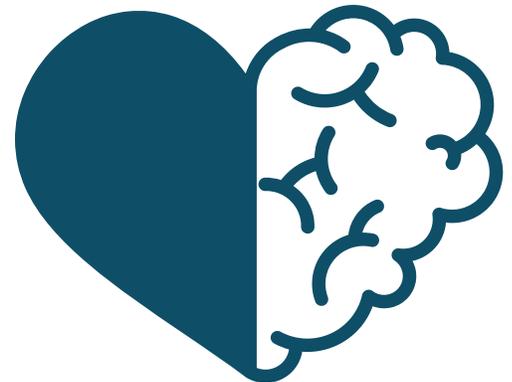
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ABOUT

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