

From “Inform” to “Inspire”

A Framework for Communications and Engagement

As Race to the Top grantees make far-reaching reforms, shift policies and heighten expectations, communicating with and engaging a wide range of key audiences have grown in importance. Building widespread understanding and support is crucial to the successful implementation and sustainability of proposed State reforms. Engaging educators in this work is essential, but State education agencies (SEAs) have a responsibility to reach out to their many other stakeholders as well.

The Reform Support Network (RSN) encourages SEAs to assess their current efforts to communicate with and engage key audiences and look for ways to sharpen approaches, build capacity and extend reach. The Stakeholder Communications and Engagement Community of Practice (SCE CoP) is developing resources to encourage State leaders to strengthen their work in several areas. To start with, the CoP is helping States craft a **strategy** with specific goals, define internal and external **audiences**, and create clear and compelling **messages**. Those messages, in turn, will require a variety of **tactics** — from face-to-face meetings to social media — to reach their audiences. States can expand their reach by working in **coalitions** and with partners. In the process, States might need to build staff **capacity** to do this work. Finally, the CoP is urging States to **measure** everything and use their data to adjust course as needed.

The communications and engagement framework in Figure 1 provides a way for SEAs to think about and implement these priorities.

This framework recognizes that SEAs will, at a minimum, **Inform** key audiences about their work and changes in key practices, expectations and systems. However, these efforts will be more responsive, less reactive and likely to be more successful when audiences’ unique needs are considered and State leaders listen to feedback closely and respond to questions (**Inquire**). In some cases, SEAs will want to actively **Involve** key audiences in the work as active co-creators of policies and programs. Ultimately, the most powerful results will occur when State leaders **Inspire** others to act and lead, based on what they have learned and the policies and programs they have helped develop.



Figure 1. Communications and Engagement Framework for SEAs

Connecting the Dots

The concepts discussed in this framework overlap significantly with **Engaging Educators: A Reform Support Network Guide for States and Districts**, published in December 2012. That guide focused on the need to engage one key set of stakeholders: teachers and other educators. This framework deals with multiple stakeholders, including educators. And its four action steps are described from the perspective of the SEA: that is, how the SEA can inform, inquire, involve and inspire various stakeholders, including educators. Our inform and involve steps particularly align with the many engagement concepts discussed in more depth in **Engaging Educators**, such as using feedback loops, joining communications teams and assuming school leadership roles.

Doing a good job of **informing**, **inquiring** and **involving** makes it more likely that audiences will be **inspired** to action.



Doing a good job of informing, inquiring and involving makes it more likely that audiences will be inspired to action. The RSN defines each of these four strategic actions as described above.

There is no sharp dividing line between and among these strategic actions. Depending on the issue, State education agencies are likely to regularly do some combination of *informing*, *inquiring* and *involving* activities; when done well, the result should be well-informed, supportive and inspired audiences.

This framework does not necessarily suggest a continuum that progresses from good to better to best. In some cases, providing sound and timely *information* is all that is required. And doing an excellent job of consistently *informing* audiences is a major accomplishment in itself. However, we believe that finding ways to add an *inquiry* or *involvement*

component to the work will make it more likely that SEAs' information will be heard — and acted on.

Providing additional opportunities for inquiry and involvement will require a real commitment from the SEA to meaningfully engage stakeholders — that is, supplementing one-way communications with more two-way engagement opportunities that invite stakeholder input from educators and others and have higher potential for creating shared commitment for state reforms. This kind of culture shift will require more collaborative leadership — and the active leadership of the chief and his/her executive team.

This framework and related resources are designed to provide a starting point for those important conversations. Additional details are available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/stakeholder-communications-engagement.html>.

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