

Communicating With Families, Educators, and Policymakers

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- **Special education leaders are key in facilitating positive, collaborative communication across multiple school and community audiences about the benefits of including students with disabilities in all assessments.**
- **To communicate effectively about assessments, special education leaders need to understand the purposes of the assessments administered in their school or district and how to interpret and explain assessment data.**
- **Different audiences have different assessment-related questions and needs and different preferred ways of communicating.**
- **An array of communication tools and methods, including electronic and in-person formats and synchronous and asynchronous options, can be used to communicate successfully with stakeholders to share information about assessments.**

• **Key words: Assessment, Audiences, Communication, Social Media.**

The reasons for taking achievement tests, the different types of educational assessments used in schools today, and the meaning of assessment results are often confusing to families, the public, and even educators. With the numerous and varied ways that testing results are communicated today, it is easy for confusing messages to emerge about assessments and the results of assessments that are administered to students, particularly those students with disabilities, English learners, and English learners with disabilities.

District and school leaders are the ones who can provide stakeholders (e.g., families, educators, policymakers) with accurate assessment information that supports appropriate interpretations and uses of test results. Effective communication with varied audiences requires leaders not only to know about the purposes and appropriate uses of assessments and interpretations of assessment results, but also to understand effective approaches to communicating with families, educators, and policymakers about assessments, their purposes, and how to interpret their results.

In this article, we provide a short overview of how to communicate about the purposes of educational assessments. We address the assessments that may be

required at the state or district level, including summative assessments, interim assessments, and formative assessment practices. We describe the needs of various audiences and the implications of those audience needs when talking with each of them about assessments. Then, we conclude by describing communication strategies and how they might be used to communicate about statewide and districtwide assessments. Note that we use the terms “families,” “educators,” and “policymakers” to refer broadly to the community of people who contribute to the teaching and learning that happens in schools. In this context, families include parents, guardians, students, siblings, and other significant adults in students’ lives. When we refer to educators, we are including teachers (e.g., general education, special education, intervention specialists), administrators (e.g., principals, curriculum specialists, testing coordinators), and other professional staff that support student learning (e.g., related service providers, guidance counselors, paraprofessionals). Finally, we employ the term “policymakers” to reference district and state education administrators, school board members, and other leaders who are responsible for making policy decisions.

Communicating About Assessment Purposes

Assessment, an essential part of the learning process, comes in a plethora of formats and serves varying purposes. Unfortunately, the availability of many different assessment formats and their varying purposes can confuse families, educators, and policymakers who may end up misusing data or simply tune out. Effective communication about the purposes of assessments and how to include students with disabilities in them is vital. Leaders need to understand and be able to communicate about how data are collected, interpreted, and used to make informed decisions from the broad policy level to the daily choices teachers and students make about learning. The idea is simple in theory: Different assessments produce different types of data for varying purposes. In practice, this becomes more complicated and can be challenging to communicate to a wide range of audiences including families, educators, and policymakers.

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Whereas all assessments are used to gather evidence of student learning, that evidence can look very different depending on the purpose, format, and developer of the assessment. Some assessments are developed by states, usually with the assistance of vendors that respond to their requests and adhere to predetermined specifications. Statewide assessments are usually aligned to state standards and meet state and federal accountability requirements. Others are developed by vendors to sell to multiple states and districts. These assessments are often loosely aligned to broad academic standards and may include attractive reports that can make it seem as if the data are easy to use. Others are developed by district or school staff to meet local needs. Some assessments are used to make minute-by-minute and day-by-day instructional decisions; others are used for week-by-week and month-by-month decisions, and

still others are used to inform year-by-year decisions (Heritage et al., 2018). For example, state tests used for accountability provide data that show how schools, districts, and states are doing on a year-to-year basis. These data provide information that can be used to inform programmatic and resource allocation decisions. Similarly, interim assessments can be used for several purposes, such as evaluating the effectiveness of interventions or showing a student's progress toward individualized education program (IEP) goals. Data from an interim assessment that is aligned to grade-level standards may also help inform instructional decisions or measure student progress individually or as a group. In contrast, formative assessment practices provide valid data "in the moment" for the many instructional decisions that happen day to day. Together, these multiple purposes of assessment comprise a comprehensive assessment system that gathers evidence of student learning that informs everything from specially designed instruction to allocation of resources at the state and federal levels (Riley et al., 2022).

Students with disabilities must be included in all statewide and districtwide administrations of assessments (see the guest editors' introduction); to ensure that their access needs are addressed, they may be provided accessibility supports and accommodations. The participation of all students in assessments, including students with disabilities, English learners, and English learners with disabilities, provides information about how schools are meeting the needs of all students and compels schools to consider the needs of all students when planning programs and designing learning opportunities. Most students with disabilities participate in general assessments with or without accommodations. A few students with the most significant cognitive disabilities participate in alternate assessments aligned to alternate academic achievement standards (Thurlow & Lazarus, 2017; Thurlow et al., 2021). Students with disabilities who are English learners also take English language proficiency (ELP) assessments or, for those with the most significant cognitive disabilities, alternate ELP assessments. To ensure all of these students are included in assessments, it is vital to communicate with families, educators, and policymakers about how to make participation decisions as well as decisions about the provision of accessibility features and accommodations. There are many

short- and long-term consequences of assessment participation decisions. Short-term consequences include possible effects of the assessment decision on the nature of the student's instruction and perhaps classroom placement, whereas in the longer term, there are potential consequences regarding whether the student will graduate from high school as well as postsecondary education and employment ramifications (Hinkle et al., 2021).

One way to think about assessments is to differentiate between assessments *for* learning and assessments *of* learning. Assessment for learning includes assessment tools and strategies used by teachers and students while learning is occurring (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). This type of assessment is used to determine the extent of student understanding of the material being learned, permitting the teacher to adjust instruction so students can learn more effectively and completely. Assessment of learning includes assessment methods used at the conclusion of instruction. These assessments might be used at the end of a fixed period of time (e.g., weekly); at the conclusion of an instructional unit; or at the end of marking periods, semesters, or the school year. Assessments of learning are retrospective. They are designed to show how much of the instruction students learned and how much they remembered to show on the assessment. Most students with disabilities, including English language learners with disabilities, participate in both assessments for learning and assessments of learning, often with accessibility features or accommodations that enable them to access the assessments meaningfully. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities take alternate assessments because their instruction toward standards is in less depth, breadth, and complexity.

Another way to think about assessment data is to think about two "buckets" of information. The first bucket includes data that can be used to make systemic or programmatic decisions about curriculum, staffing, funding, and resource allocation. These data may come from state summative tests used for accountability as well as from some interim assessments. These data are generally organized in a data system at the school, district, and even state levels. The other bucket of data includes information about student learning that can be used to make instructional decisions. These data may come from assessments developed by

vendors (e.g., screening and diagnostic tools, interim assessments) and assessments developed locally that are aligned to standards and curriculum expectations (tests, quizzes, formative assessment practices). Together, the second bucket of tools can inform decisions about student learning goals, interventions, monitoring progress, providing effective feedback, and building student ownership of learning.

To ensure a consistent message with a broad spectrum of school community members, special education leaders should be at the table and engaged with a range of educators and other stakeholders, representing both the district and school levels, to create and disseminate a shared vision of the role of assessments in their district. What role do assessments play in improving outcomes for all students? How can families, students, and educators use data to accelerate student learning? What data are used by IEP teams when setting goals and planning for interventions? How are interim assessments and state achievement tests used to make programmatic decisions? What data are collected at the district level, and for what will they be used? To what data do teachers have access? And are they the right data? These are all questions leaders have to grapple with as they work together from the perspectives of assessment, curriculum, special education, and English language development to develop a shared vision that can be disseminated and improved through communication with a broad audience of school community members.

Special education leaders are in a unique position to help the school community communicate a vision that has high expectations for all students, including students with disabilities, and to help empower families, educators, and policymakers to use data appropriately. For example, they can help create and share a vision of assessment that includes the use of data for decision making. Often referred to broadly as assessment literacy, it is important for teachers and students to understand why assessments are given and how the results will be used to move learning forward. This includes understanding the purpose of an assessment (e.g., determine readiness, monitor progress, evaluate achievement, inform policy and resource decisions), how it is connected to learning (i.e., aligned to grade level standards), and how the resulting evidence of student learning will be used to guide instruction or inform systemic decisions (see Lazarus et al. in this issue).

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Creating and communicating a shared vision for using assessments as a tool to improve outcomes is a collaborative endeavor that should include a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Special education leaders can collaborate with their curriculum and assessment colleagues to ensure that they are promoting both assessment for and of learning in their resources. Professional learning initiatives on concepts such as evidence-based practices (Saunders et al., 2020) and whole-school multitiered systems of support (Thurlow et al., 2020) provide an apt venue for building an understanding of how assessment data can inform instructional decisions from minute-to-minute decisions in the classroom to large-scale curriculum changes. Educators contending with changes in policy and practice need opportunities to discuss ideas, make their voices heard, and know that their input is valued (see, for example, Salamondra, 2021). According to Salamondra, “Effective communication promotes motivation and builds staff culture, while poor communication creates dissatisfaction” (p. 22). Professional learning can also provide a way to gather feedback from teachers as they review assessment data, which is an essential part of developing shared understanding and shared responsibility.

Audience Needs

Special education leaders have a key role to play in providing successful leadership for partnerships between school stakeholders, including families, educators, and policymakers. This entails tailoring communications in ways that are accessible to each stakeholder. Each stakeholder group must be engaged directly and individually because they all have a vested interest in creating and sustaining successful partnerships to support students’ academic learning. Reaching out to families and community members requires forethought. Researchers have documented the importance of intentionality and understanding when developing community engagement initiatives

(Beard & Thomson, 2021). Beard and Thompson note that it is essential to remember that the goal is engaging stakeholders, not informing stakeholders.

Special education leaders can enlist a wide range of educators, including principals, guidance counselors, teachers, related service providers, paraprofessionals, and others, as indispensable partners in facilitating communication with families and the larger community. For example, a paraprofessional may be uniquely qualified to facilitate communication with some communities and can foster collaborations with community leaders. Paraprofessionals can help identify the most promising communication methods and opportunities to reach families to discuss assessments, the implication of participation decisions, the use of assessment data to inform instruction, and other related topics. *Table 1* provides suggested strategies for special education leaders to effectively communicate with families, students, educators, and policymakers.

Talking With Families

Facilitating two-way communication between families, educators, and policymakers is essential to developing successful support for assessments and using data to improve instruction and programs. Families often face barriers when navigating the school system, communicating with their children’s teachers and school leaders, and serving as members of IEP teams. Providing a friendly, welcoming atmosphere for families can help create and sustain a culture that values and supports the learning of all students, including students with disabilities and English learners with disabilities. For example, one way for school leaders to collaborate is to include families in a shared vision of high expectations for all students (Lazarus et al., 2019).

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Information about preferred modes of receiving general information (e.g., flyers students bring home, Facebook, etc.) and individual communication (e.g.,

Table 1: Communication strategies for special education leaders by audience

Audience	Purpose of communication	Strategies
Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the importance of the participation of students with disabilities in all assessments • Ensure that families understand which assessments their student will participate in and why • Encourage two-way communication to promote collaborative decision making about appropriate test participation and accessibility for individual students • Explain the expectations and opportunities for families of students with disabilities, especially for families new to U.S. schools • Explain that federal legislation defines and protects student and parent rights (IDEA, ADA, and ESSA) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a welcoming school atmosphere in which all families feel comfortable to attend and participate in special education events • Identify effective and preferred asynchronous communication methods of school/district families (e.g., email, text messages, discussion boards) • Facilitate events that allow for presentation and discussion of special education policies related to assessment • Use family-friendly language with suggestions for accessing more detailed information • Provide resources in multiple languages as appropriate • Provide guidance for families on how to support their child in preparing for and succeeding on assessments (e.g., practice use of accessibility features, implement stress relief strategies, convey a positive attitude) • Provide real-time translation services to ensure all families can participate in IEP discussions and assessment participation decisions
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure students with disabilities, English learners, and English learners with disabilities understand the benefits of participation in formal and informal assessments • Promote student use of assessment results to take ownership of their learning (e.g., determine next steps, track progress, know when to ask for help) • Empower students to use assessment results to track and communicate progress with families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote school-based events that explain which assessments students will participate in and why • Model the use of straightforward language and clear communication methods when discussing the benefits of assessments with students • Model a positive attitude toward formal and informal assessments
Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure educator perceptions of assessment align with state assessment policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk with educators to learn about their perceptions of assessment • Make sure educators have access to and understand all relevant assessment policies • Coordinate and lead professional development on assessment • Communicate how, and when to use assessment data for instructional decision making • Explain how to use data to make informed decisions
Policymakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure policymakers understand the legal requirements for students with disabilities and assessments • Support policymakers' understanding of how tests help students, families, districts, and schools • Build policymakers knowledge about how they can support students and families in their states regarding students with disabilities and assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information about ESSA and IDEA requirements for assessments and students with disabilities to policymakers in easy to access formats such as one-pagers, bullets, and executive summaries • Collaborate with policymakers to communicate how components of a comprehensive assessment system improve student learning and outcomes and that testing is a regular part of teaching and learning during the school day • Explain how state tests are aligned to rigorous state content standards that will prepare students to thrive in a global future • Detail how state, district, and school efforts promote student participation in state tests and ensure tests are accessible to all students

Note. ADA = Americans with Disabilities Act; ESSA = Every Student Succeeds Act; IDEA = Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; IEP = individualized education program.

phone, e-mail, paper mail, text) should also be solicited. It can be particularly challenging for culturally and linguistically diverse families to access and understand information. Consider alternative ways to communicate with families of English and multilingual learners. For example, they could be asked whether they prefer information to be provided in a language other than English. Communicating with parents may include the use of an interpreter or a translator.

Families need to know that schools are inclusive of their children. A meaningful way to do this is to convey to families that assessment is a regular part of teaching and learning during the school day and that their children are a part of it. Families should also understand that summative assessments are an important part of evaluating whether programs are working for their children and their children benefit from being included to show what they have learned. For example, a Facebook message may address how the alignment of state assessments to rigorous state content standards is key to preparing students to thrive in a global future. This allows for discussion of how making decisions informed by assessment data improves programming and provides targeted resources and support to schools that benefit their children's learning.

Families need to understand the implications of assessment participation decisions and should be actively engaged in the decision-making process (Hinkle et al., 2021). It is also vital to work collaboratively with families to identify any needed accessibility supports and accommodations for their children to access instruction, state assessments, and other assessments. Families are a significant resource of information on the types of support that have been useful for their child within and outside of school.

Talking With Students

Students need to understand the benefits of participating in the many types of assessments to have a sense of purpose and investment in their learning. When talking with students, it is helpful to speak directly with them about assessments using straightforward language so they feel supported and to make sure everyone understands why they are taking each assessment. Including students in the discussion about their learning and assessment participation can promote their self-determination,

which leads to positive outcomes in school and transition to their postsecondary future (Shogren et al., 2015). Remind students that testing is a regular part of learning and helps guide their learning. Encourage students to talk with their family and teachers about accessibility features and accommodations to help them during tests. Students' perspectives about accessibility features and accommodations they find helpful and like provide critical information for IEP teams (Lazarus et al., 2021). It is essential to model a positive attitude to students and remind them that test scores are just one piece of information used to help them reach their goals. For example, explain that taking state assessments can help them in many ways. One way is that participation in assessments allows students to show what they have learned and practiced in their school. Another way is that the assessments let the students and their families know whether their school is doing a good job supporting their learning. A third way is that the assessments give students and their families information about how local schools in the community meet students' needs. A fourth way is that assessments tell students and their families about students' progress toward completing high school and readiness after high school, such as attending college or pursuing a career (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2021b).

Talking With Educators

Educators' knowledge and understanding of assessments can affect the quality of students' education (Popham, 2009). Moreover, educators' beliefs or conceptions of assessment may not be consistent with expectations of assessment policy (Looney et al., 2017). Consequently, there is a need to be mindful about what educators' think about student participation in assessments and how their expectations of students influence student achievement. It is helpful to remind educators that federal legislation (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Every Student Succeeds Act) requires all students to access rigorous academic content based on grade-level academic content standards. When students with disabilities, including English learners with disabilities and students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, have the opportunity to learn rigorous content, they often surprise us. Educators with high expectations for all

students with disabilities, including English learners with disabilities, foster the learning of grade-level academic content that leads to improved outcomes on state tests (Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2019).

Targeted communication and professional development can help educators understand that statewide testing matters and is beneficial for their students. One reason is that assessments allow students to demonstrate what they learned and practiced in teachers' classrooms throughout the school year. This shows support for teachers' efforts in holding all their students to the same high expectations and provides information to ensure that curriculum and instruction are aligned to rigorous, grade-level standards. To assist students in demonstrating what they learned, educators need to work with their students with disabilities and their families to make sure accommodations are listed on their IEPs (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2021a).

Another reason educators need to understand that state testing matters is that they provide a complete and accurate picture of how all students are doing, including how various subgroups are doing (e.g., racial/ethnic groups, students with disabilities, English learners). Assessment data may reveal performance gaps among groups of students in their classes. Such gaps can prompt adjustments to instructional and school strategies to address students' educational needs and shift policy development in allocating resources for student needs and instructional and professional support for educators (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2021b, 2021c).

Similarly, it is vital to communicate with educators on how some assessments are used for instructional decision making. For example, data obtained through the use of formative assessment practices can inform goal setting and progress monitoring as well as enable students to take charge of their learning. Teachers use assessment data when they know the data will help them make sound instructional decisions that move student learning forward. They approach assessment in an entirely different way than teachers who fail to see the purpose of an assessment (Brookhart, 2020; Brookhart & Lazarus, 2017).

For teachers (and their students) to use the results of assessments to inform instructional decisions, special education leaders should articulate how to use data to make informed decisions about

differentiating instruction, interventions, pacing, and trajectory of learning. Special and general educators as well as English language development teachers may require authentic professional learning that supports the use of data this way. In addition, students and families as well as related service providers and paraprofessionals may require assistance understanding the full potential of using assessments to inform instruction (Brookhart, 2020; Brookhart & Lazarus, 2017).

Talking With Policymakers

Schools and districts should communicate with policymakers about how all components of a comprehensive assessment system work together to improve learning and outcomes. This includes communicating how state tests are part of a comprehensive system and providing essential data that guide programmatic and resource decisions. It is also vital to articulate how these tests need to be accessible for all students for the data to support valid results and interpretations of results. Data from state tests can help inform decisions schools and districts make and help ensure that policy development and distribution of resources support schools and districts in most need. In addition, the data reveal possible performance gaps across student groups and support programs to address all students' educational needs (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2021c).

Similarly, policymakers need to understand the purposes of the wide range of tests in the comprehensive system and why different assessments are necessary for various purposes. For example, school leaders need to understand and share that understanding of the purpose of interim assessments (e.g., progress monitoring, predicting summative assessment performance, or accountability). They also need to understand that assessments convey information about a vision in which formative assessment practices play a key role in guiding instruction. Finally, assessments enable policymakers to better understand how all of the pieces fit together and support improved learning and outcomes.

Communication Strategies

The electronic communication age began with the telegraph and continues to the present. The

introduction of radio, television, and the internet has brought what is commonly referred to as the Information Age (Boston University, College of Communication, Center for Mobile Communication Studies, 2017). Although traditional communication methods still have their place, electronic communication permeates our world today. More recently, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders were forced to find novel ways to communicate clearly and rapidly with families, schools, and others, most notably via video conferencing. Social media networks are also a critical communication channel (Carr, 2010). Ultimately, the ways in which school leaders communicate should be approached as an integrated system, not as individual components (Hanna et al., 2011) in the same way that the different forms of assessing students should be approached as components of a comprehensive assessment system.

There are many ways to communicate today about assessments and assessment data. These range from traditional paper print methods to electronic communication and social media and face-to-face interactions. School leaders can no longer be content with solely sending out information without receiving input back (i.e., one-way communication). Today, school leaders recognize that communication must also be two-way. Communicating today is not only about the message. It is about the conversation (Hanna et al., 2011). There is a public relations adage that applies: "People beat paper every time." Mass communication tactics have their place in a school district's communication plan, but building relationships and developing two-way communication is necessary. Two-way communication is needed to build relationships and make stronger connections. Salamondra (2021) identifies three critical components of effective communication: trust, transparency, and active listening. When school leaders build relationships with families, students benefit, including students with disabilities and English learners (Cohan et al., 2019). Increased parent involvement can improve school culture, inform participation and accessibility decisions, and ultimately improve student performance and outcomes (Hampton, 2016; Liu et al., 2019). School leaders need to engage families in conversations about assessments, especially the importance of the participation of all students in assessments, including students with disabilities, English learners, and English learners with

disabilities. Another essential conversation to have with families is how educators and policymakers use assessment data to inform student learning and hold schools and districts accountable for the achievement of their students.

School leaders should use multiple communication methods and tools to communicate important assessment information to various audiences. There are many strategies school leaders use to communicate with families, educators, and policymakers. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the limitations of some communication modes and highlighted the need to consider the use of multiple and innovative communication methods. One significant result of the pandemic is the increased use of multiple means of electronic communications to engage families (Laxton et al., 2021) and other stakeholders. Paper; electronic; and in-person, face-to-face communications are all methods school leaders should, can, and often do use to communicate with others effectively. In addition, most schools utilize multiple communication channels including e-mail, website, text message, social media, voice calls, mobile apps, paper flyers, paper and electronic newsletters, and video apps. All of these channels can be important when communicating about assessments.

Communication using multiple formats and methods can engage and build relationships. Communication can be one- or two-way. One-way communication is linear and limited but is useful for conveying information. For example, a flyer can inform families about the upcoming state testing window, including dates, times, and tips on how to help students prepare. Two-way communication is more prosperous and interactive (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Multiple platforms, such as hotlines, websites, and other social media, should be available to ask questions, provide comments and concerns, and suggest improvements. For example, the back and forth of two-way communication can be crucial for school leaders to address the concerns families have about assessments and to help others understand why assessments are important for all students, including students with disabilities, English learners, and English learners with disabilities. The inherent interaction in two-way communication also can be an opportunity to explain how teachers use assessment data to inform instruction and to show how schools and districts use assessment data from interim and summative assessments to prioritize

resources and inform policy decisions. The use of assessments for accountability is essentially about equity. Accountability requires that all students be included and counted, including students with disabilities, English learners, and English learners with disabilities. For example, sharing data about how schools and all students are doing on assessments is used to prompt conversations supporting equitable instruction access (Bennett, 2016; Katanyoutanant et al., 2021). Effective electronic communication about assessments can lead to more inclusive communities. Bavuso (2016) states that using technology for effective communication among schools, parents, and the community leads to social justice.

The National Center on Educational Outcomes developed a participation communications toolkit that provides several communication resources. It is available at <https://nceo.info/Resources?text=%22NCEO+Participation+Communication+Toolkit%22>. Leaders can use the toolkit when communicating with families, students, educators, and policymakers about why it is so important that students participate in state assessments. These resources identify and describe why all students, including students with disabilities, English learners, and English learners with disabilities, should take state tests. It also contains a discussion guide that IEP teams can use when making state test participation decisions for students with disabilities. It is designed to provide a neutral but beneficial mechanism to guide positive, thoughtful conversations about test participation. In addition to the discussion guide for IEP teams, the toolkit (Kwon et al., 2021) includes sample social media posts; a sample letter to families; one-page customizable flyers for families, students, educators, and policymakers; and a customizable slide deck.

Paper Communication

The use of paper in communication is still a go-to for schools when communicating about assessments. Letters and handwritten notes can be sent home in students' backpacks. Informational brochures are printed in bulk to hand out at kick-off events or parent nights. Paper still has its place, but it does not engage and build relationships as do other forms of communication. Despite the widespread use of mobile phones and other electronic devices for

communicating, some people still do not have access to these devices or prefer to receive information on paper.

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It is common practice in state education agencies to provide guides for interpreting individual student reports for state assessments in the most commonly spoken languages within the state for linguistically diverse families. Paper communication printed in other languages is still a cost-effective way to communicate with linguistically diverse communities, especially when produced in bulk, such as informational brochures or repeat use forms. However, some cultures prefer oral communication over written ones (Ong, 2013), so care must be used to ensure that, if written materials are provided, they are an appropriate means of communication with the intended audience. Additionally, it is vital to ensure that high-quality translations are produced so that accurate information is provided clearly and professionally.

Electronic Communication

The list of types of electronic communication is long and varied. Most, if not all, schools have a website. Many also use short message service (SMS) texting as well as automated SMS texting apps such as GroupMe, Hangouts, Reach, and WhatsApp to efficiently reach various audiences.

Social media, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn are widely used. There are dozens of social media platforms (Hanna et al., 2011). Communication that was once commonly provided via newspapers and other public means now occurs on social media (Bavuso, 2016). For example, social media posts can provide information about upcoming test dates, the benefits of participating in assessments, and other related topics.

School leaders need a visible professional presence on social media to establish two-way communication by sharing information, listening, and engaging with the community about assessments. Whereas, once, leaders had to rely on

the media, press releases, or their website to convey information, now they effectively communicate their message through a wide range of electronic methods (Sheninger, 2011). A quick search on the internet locates many “how to” articles for educators and schools to set up their own social media channels (Cooper, 2015, 2020; Sherwin, 2009).

Blogs are a website or a page that is part of a more extensive website that often contains informal, conversational, diary-style posts. Blogs can be an important tool in an educational leader’s multichannel communication plan to informally engage and build relationships with a wide range of audiences. Cox (2012) finds that all of the administrators in his study blogged. The longer format of blog posts can be ideal for discussing more complex assessment-related topics, such as how formative assessment practices are used to inform instruction. Blog posts can also be a good way for school leaders to address concerns about assessments that may need a deeper, more complex, or more nuanced discussion, such as how a school or district uses assessment data to drive policy decisions. However, leaders should recognize that school boards may require them to add a disclaimer on their blog that their thoughts are their own and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the school board or district (Cox, 2012).

Face-to-Face Communication

Although paper and electronic communication are critical pieces of a school leader’s communication arsenal, face-to-face communication offers the greatest opportunity to build relationships and connect with others. In addition, face-to-face communication can build trust and provide clarity to conversations.

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As with the previous forms of communication, there are multiple ways to achieve face-to-face

communication. Schools have family teacher nights. Schools and districts hold informational nights to share important information. In some cases, schools and districts hold town hall meetings to hear from the community on important topics of interest or discuss upcoming changes. Informational nights and town hall events are important opportunities to engage the community, involve diverse groups in decision making, and share other important information on a range of assessment topics, such as the interaction between instruction, standards, and curriculum; the types of assessments students take; and the implications of school and district assessment data.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, video conferencing exploded and, in many instances, became the primary way schools and districts communicated with others (Laxton et al., 2021). Video conferencing will likely continue as a primary way for schools and districts to communicate with others postpandemic. And, although not precisely “face-to-face” communication, phone calls also continue to be an effective means of contact, providing a quick and efficient way for school leaders to connect with others. Regardless of the method, communications must be culturally responsive and linguistically sensitive (Cohan et al., 2019; Garcia et al., 2016; National PTA, 2008).

Conclusions

Special education leaders are central to facilitating equitable access to general education contexts for students with disabilities (Tracy-Bronson, 2018). Leaders are key in communicating with families, students, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders about assessments and assessment data. This includes providing information and facilitating two-way conversations about the benefits of students with disabilities participating in assessments, the implications of participation decisions, and making accessibility and accommodations decisions. It can feel overwhelming, and school leaders may be apprehensive and focused on potential adverse outcomes (Clark, 2012), but communication about how students are doing and what the data say about what is working and what is not has the potential to pull schools together to improve instruction and learning for all students, including students with disabilities, English learners, and English learners with disabilities.

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