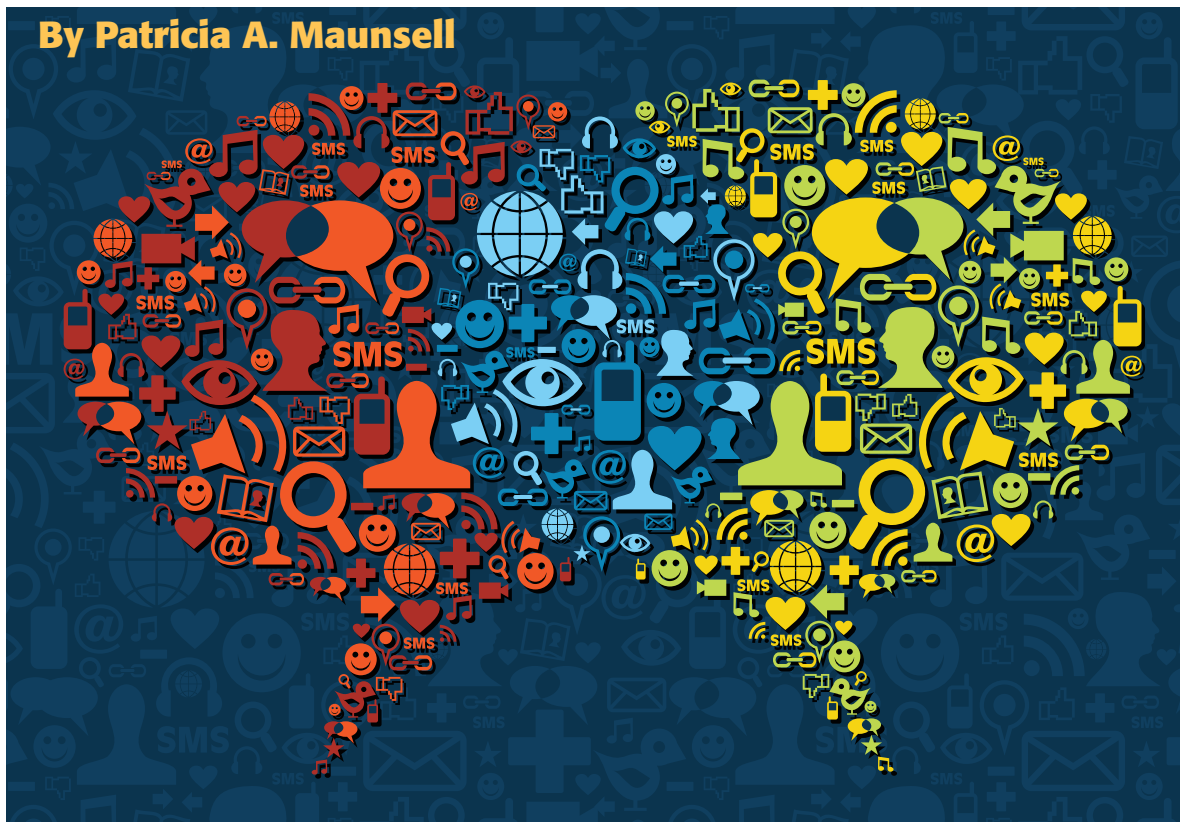




Communication is key to Common Core

Educators must begin now to prepare their communities for how assessments will change after Common Core implementation.

By Patricia A. Maunsell



Most states have adopted the Common Core State Standards and are working to develop assessments that align with those new standards. Yet two-thirds of Americans have never heard of the standards or the assessments (Bushaw & Lopez, 2013).

Given the importance of effective communications, the Education Trust commissioned research on how states had communicated changes in state assessments in the recent past. The research included interviews with education leaders in Florida, Georgia, New York, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (states where new tests were introduced or changes were made to existing tests between 2004 and 2012) and conversations with individuals and organizations from many other states to learn how they communicated changes in assessments.



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What emerged from these interviews were practical lessons for all school systems — state education departments, local public school districts, and charter management organizations — that want sound communication strategies that will support a smooth transition to the new assessments. (The numbering of the lessons below is not to suggest a ranking of importance.)

Lesson #1. Take a big-tent approach. Include all stakeholders from the beginning and develop genuine relationships.

A strong communications plan is built on meaningful relationships and partnerships with the full range of stakeholders. Throughout implementation, include diverse constituencies to ensure that all viewpoints are integrated into the communication efforts and that concerns and questions are addressed proactively. This open dialogue builds trust, which will help when potentially difficult news must be shared. A network of genuine partners can also serve as champions and messengers of the need for higher expectations and new assessments. Key strategic partners include advocates, the business community, and, especially important, parents and community members whose input is essential because they're closest to students.



Tennessee provides a prime example of this inclusive approach. In 2008, the Tennessee State Board of Education introduced new, more rigorous standards to address a significant gap in student proficiency identified by comparing the results from their state assessments with results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Though assessments aligned with the new standards wouldn't be administered until spring 2010, Tennessee started right away to build a large and strong coalition and launched an extensive communications campaign.

The state built a coalition of about 30 organizations, including parents, teachers, business and advocacy leaders, school board members, and other elected officials. This coalition was strong in part because it was built on mutual respect, valuing the contributions of school board and parent organizations as much as the governor and SCORE (the statewide

education advocacy organization founded by former Sen. Bill Frist). The coalition then developed a comprehensive communications campaign and shared in the work of implementing that campaign plan.

One measure of success was that Tennesseans throughout the state understood that scores on the new assessments would be lower initially than on previous state tests. But, because they also understood the rationale for the change, citizens had greater trust that the change was worth it. The result of well-implemented, strategic communications was trust and understanding even when the initial news was not positive. (See the Expect More, Achieve More web site — <http://expectmoretn.org/> — to learn about Tennessee's current efforts to roll out the Common Core standards and assessments)

Lesson #2. Be sure to talk *and* listen.

Developing two-way communications with key stakeholders is critical in building strong relationships and successfully implementing the new assessments.

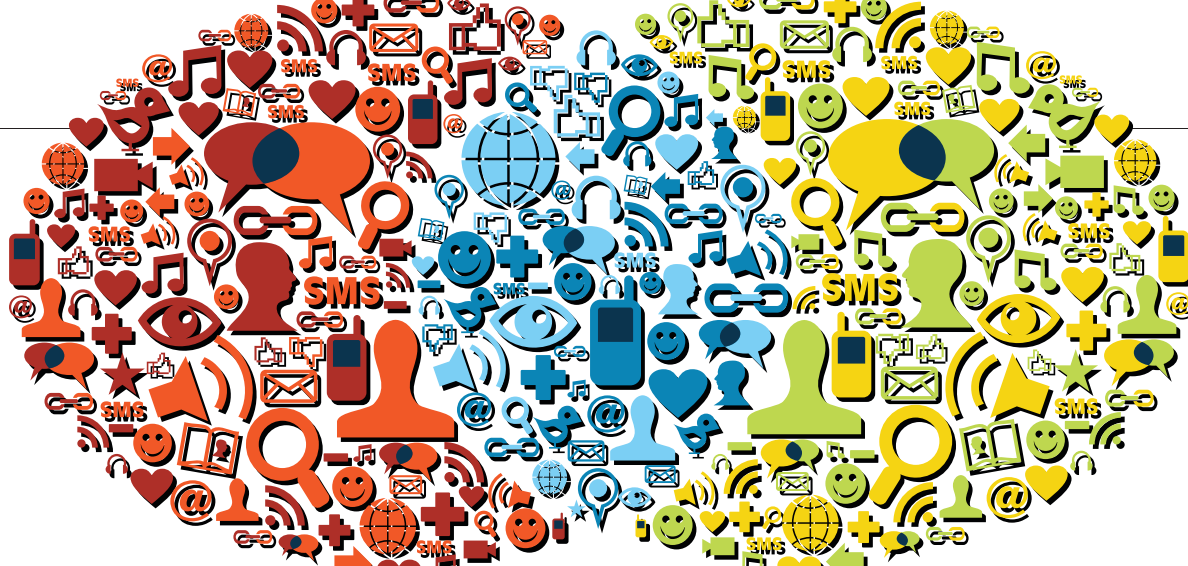
When included in an authentic way, business leaders are among the biggest champions for high expectations and strong, standards-based assessments. With a focus both on a strong economy and a strong bottom line, business leaders have a vested interest in education as a source for a qualified workforce. In Georgia and Tennessee, the Chambers of Commerce, a range of business organizations, and individual business leaders were at the table from the beginning of the process to raise standards and implement more rigorous assessments. In Tennessee, the governor visited five media markets across the state to talk to many stakeholders, had conversations with over 300 business leaders and surveyed human resource managers to learn their needs and ideas. All of these public meetings were transcribed, and the notes were then used to support the work and communications around implementing new assessments.

When Florida changed its state assessments, education officials and advocates conducted focus groups with stakeholders representing different viewpoints (e.g., students, parents with children in elementary and high school, low-income and high-income families, and business leaders). As a result of what they heard in the focus groups, Florida education officials created a hotline for people to get answers to their questions and led town hall meetings to talk about the assessment changes as well as hear the concerns of additional stakeholders.

Surveys are another tool for establishing two-way communications. Before developing an RSS feed to inform teachers about state assessment changes, Virginia (not a Common Core adopter) developed a simple, nine-question survey to learn how teachers



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preferred to get information. Officials conducting the survey expected a couple hundred responses but received over 11,000. While state officials had been relying on teachers to go to the web site and read the superintendent memos, only 5% of survey respondents did so. Survey respondents also made clear that an RSS feed was not the best way to communicate with teachers since only 3% wanted this communications method. Teachers overwhelmingly favored — 99.7% — email communications, and they wanted emails tailored to the subjects they taught. Applying what they learned, Virginia education officials set up a tailored email communications system rather than an RSS feed.

Lesson #3. Sing from the same songbook. Focus on internal communications and consider everyone a messenger.

All members of school systems — from the state superintendent to administrative support staff in local schools — must be knowledgeable and prepared to explain the rationale behind the new standards and assessments. Internal stakeholders often wear more than one hat. Teachers and support staff are also parents and neighbors who are frequently asked about changes in the schools.

Some of the most important messengers are the people closest to the children and families — teachers and principals. According to the 2013 PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 72% of adults trust and have confidence in public school teachers, and 65% of adults trust and have confidence in public school principals (Bushaw & Lopez, 2013). What teachers and principals say matters to families and communities so they need the information to communicate accurately and effectively.

When Florida changed its statewide assessments, state education officials gave superintendents specific talking points to use with teachers and principals. One district superintendent developed similar talking points that principals could share with parents during parent-teacher conferences. Providing

follow-up after such tools are circulated is important so superintendents and principals get answers to questions that might arise and to ensure that the materials are being used consistently to reach all teachers and parents.

Lesson #4. Don't reinvent the wheel. Use existing communications methods and structures.

To ensure strong representation of the voice of parents, the PTA has been an important partner in New York and Kentucky and access to its communication vehicles was critical. In Georgia and Tennessee, community organizations like Kiwanis and Rotary were important partners and, in turn, helped communicate the need for more rigorous expectations and assessments.

Many states, including Texas (not a Common Core adopter) and New York, used existing structures to give teachers and principals the information and tools needed to communicate with parents and other stakeholders about new, more rigorous assessments. These regional offices — called Education Service Centers in Texas and Boards of Cooperative Educational Services in New York — train and inform local educators throughout their states. Education officials used these existing structures to share information about changes in assessments with local educators.

The New York State United Teachers, the statewide teachers union, used its newsletters and other communications channels to get information about changes in the state assessments into the hands of its 600,000 members.

Lesson #5. Ensure that you use simple, clear, consistent messages for all and differentiate for key audiences.

Key messages around new, more rigorous standards need to explain:

- Why the assessments are necessary and important;
- How assessments will be implemented;

- How assessment results will be used;
- How assessment results will affect students and teachers; and
- What will be done to support students who don't meet the higher standards.

There also may be local issues to address up front, such as the connection to accountability and teacher evaluation systems.

After receiving an “F” for truth in advertising from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for not delivering on the promise of a good education for all, Tennessee education and political leaders acted. Tennessee officials developed clear messages to explain the much-needed changes they planned to implement. These messages also included an important but difficult truth: Higher expectations would mean lower test scores at least initially.

Indeed, the initial scores were lower than in the past, but Tennesseans didn't panic. People were well prepared because the messages were very clear about why change was necessary and what would likely happen when the first tests were given. The media did stories about the new assessments and the lower scores but reported that the lower scores were “as expected.”

Nashville, with 81,000 students, was concerned about the response from parents, teachers, and community groups when the new, lower scores were released. The district proactively set up a customer service call center and trained staff to handle questions about the lower scores, anticipating lots of angry callers. Once scores were made public, however, the call center only received a few calls because the messages about why the changes were necessary and what would likely happen had been clearly communicated.

Delivering clear and consistent messages is critical but as any good teacher knows, conveying the same messages to different people does not mean delivering the messages in the same way; messages must be tailored for each audience.

Georgia education officials developed clear, consistent messages to explain current and future student achievement issues and the changes that were being made to support improvement and raise the bar for all students. To ensure understanding, these messages were tailored to each audience's needs and interests. Women's organizations, church groups, and business leaders have very different perspectives, and the key messages were tailored to reach them. For example, the messages resonated with business leaders when they were connected to increased competitiveness in the marketplace.

Even within a given stakeholder group, there may be different views and perspectives. In Kentucky,

focus groups with stakeholders in urban areas provided valuable information to support development of key messages around efforts to improve student achievement. But, when advocates and education officials traveled to more rural areas, they encountered different questions and concerns. Some rural residents were concerned that raising expectations and achievement would cause young people to leave the state and seek opportunities elsewhere. This information enabled educators to tailor messages to support understanding and proactively address stakeholders' concerns.

Some of the most important messengers are the people closest to the children and families – teachers and principals.

Lesson #6. Methods matter. Communication tools and delivery mechanisms are important.

Much like the messaging, the methods of communication must be easily understood by stakeholders and tailored to the intended audience. The methods must also deliver the messages clearly and repeatedly to ensure that people understand and remember why and how higher standards and more rigorous assessments will support student achievement.

Approach the communication effort like a campaign that has a wide reach and includes key messages, a range of communication methods, a detailed plan for each target audience, and constant feedback and evaluation to support midcourse corrections. Tennessee is a great example of a state that adopted this holistic approach.

Tennessee's Expect More, Achieve More campaign included a wide range of tools and tactics:

- Newsletters, brochures, parent guides, web site content, and videos;
- Briefings for school board members and county commissioners;
- Briefings for superintendents who in turn shared information with principals, teachers, other school staff, and parents;
- A mini-campaign to get information to all stakeholders, but particularly parents, in coordination with report card distribution;
- Roundtable discussions with business leaders and other stakeholders and editorial board

meetings around the state by then-Gov. Phil Bredesen and former Sen. Bill Frist, founder of the statewide education advocacy group, SCORE; and

- Public service announcements featuring state celebrities like Patrick and Gina Neely, restaurateurs from Memphis and the Food Network, and popular Tennessee athletes.

Tennessee leaders also made sure the media was well-informed to ensure that accurate information reached parents, community members, and other stakeholders.

In an attempt to reach large numbers of people, the communication around higher expectations and new assessments also must be personalized and brought to a local level. In Nashville, for example, district leaders met with the parent advisory council at every school and explained the need for higher standards and stronger assessments, and they “deputized” parent advisory council members to explain what they learned to others in their school communities. District leaders also spoke at community events, went on Nashville-based talk shows to share and reinforce their key messages, created materials including flyers and other information that could be sent home, and updated web site content to support stakeholders’ understanding. Thanks to a district employee mentioning that his nephew was a high jumper, the district used the high jumper as a metaphor for increased student achievement and integrated the image into their materials and presentations.

In some instances, personal engagement required an added level of outreach. In Georgia, the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) was instrumental in working with Spanish-speaking immigrant families new to the United States and American schools, inviting them to meetings and giving them necessary background information. In one of the schools, MALDEF worked with the principal and created a network of volunteers who would staff each bus stop to share information and answer questions from other parents and caregivers. The volunteers also personally invited and reminded families to attend informational meetings.

Lesson #7. A good defense is a better offense. Start communicating now!

School systems must have a clear and specific plan for successfully implementing higher standards and new assessments. An equally strong and thorough communication plan should be developed on the heels of the implementation plan. Built on effective implementation and trusting relationships, the communication plan must proactively answer people’s questions and concerns with clear and consistent

messages delivered through a variety of communication channels.

District leaders will want to know how much such a communication effort will cost. Producing public service announcements and marketing materials does cost money, and each system’s ability to invest in these tactics will vary greatly. But conversations with education leaders across the country made clear that strong communications requires more than money. A change in culture is required.

A culture shift supported by an effective communication plan that includes developing genuine partnerships and two-way communication with all stakeholders requires time and new habits. All school systems have communication channels and opportunities that they can leverage to support stakeholders’ understanding of making important changes to improve student achievement.

Effective communications isn’t always easy, but it is critical to success. Some education leaders may be starting on the defensive based on the information circulating in their communities. Some may wish they had started sooner, but getting started now is the most important thing. The need for communication will only continue to build and doing so will become more difficult the longer you wait. Building trusting relationships and a real sense of collaboration and strong communication with all stakeholders takes time and practice, but it is very much worth the effort. **K**

Reference

Bushaw, W.J. & Lopez, S.J. (2013, September). Which way do we go? The 45th annual PDK/Gallup poll of the public’s attitudes toward the public schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95 (1), 8-25.



“I worry when they can name all the American Idols, but can’t name any of the American presidents.”