

Last Updated
08/06/2020



Return to School Plans

A Communication Toolkit

A guide for Michigan's Public School Leaders

Helping schools communicate with families, staff, media and the community.

Section III of III

Return to School Communication Toolkit

Section III of III

Section III of the Toolkit for Communicating about Return to School Plans has been developed by the Michigan School Public Relations Association (MSPRA) to support schools in their communication to students, parents, union leaders, staff, board representatives, community members, the media, and others about their individual return to school roadmaps (which includes their official COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plans as outlined in [Executive Order 2020-142](#)).

This is the third of three parts that coincide with the [Opportunity Labs Roadmap](#) and the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Association's General Education Leadership Network's [Continuity of Learning - Back to School Guidance](#) timeframes:

1. **Do First - Section I of the Toolkit was released July 15, 2020.** This first part of the toolkit is designed to help schools when communicating with target audiences to highlight work being done over the summer to prepare for various return to school scenarios.
2. **Do Before Schools Open – Section II of the Toolkit was released on July 23, 2020.** The second part of the toolkit is designed to help schools communicate with target audiences to help them understand what school will look like in the fall, describe health and safety procedures, outline educational options and explain closure processes, should they be needed. [Section II](#) includes a number of templates--including some that address positive COVID-19 cases--that can be easily adapted for school district use.
3. **When Schools are Open and Operating – Released on August 6, 2020.** Section III of the toolkit is designed to provide communication resources to support schools as they share important information and updates relative to school operations as Michigan moves through the phases of the [MI Safe Start Plan](#).

As your district communicates about this important issue, always consider your school's policies, codes of conduct, local community needs, and local climate as you address the information needs of your stakeholders.

Remember: This toolkit is designed to be a communication guide. It highlights some of the ways school districts may choose to communicate about this important issue. Samples contained herein are intended to serve as examples of what could be tailored to individual district situations and needs. When in doubt, consult legal counsel.

Note: It is important to recognize that COVID-19 is a public health issue. Please direct questions or inquiries about health guidelines to your local health department.



Prepared by:
Michigan School Public Relations Association (MSPRA)
1001 Centennial Way, Suite 300
Lansing, MI 48917
Phone: (517) 327-5910
www.mspra.org

This document has been reviewed by representatives from the Michigan Department of Education, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, the Michigan Association of Superintendents and Administrators, and the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators. All sample materials have been used with permission.

Table of Contents

Click on a heading to navigate directly to that section.

SECTION III: WHEN SCHOOLS ARE OPEN AND OPERATING	4
What You Need to Know Now	4
Important Items to Remember	4
New Resources to Access	4
Key Points to Communicate	5
EVALUATION AS RESEARCH	6
EVALUATION METHODS AND TIPS	8
GETTING BACK TO TELLING OUR STORY	11
YOU'RE NOT DONE YET! BUT DON'T WORRY – YOU ALREADY KNOW WHAT TO DO.	14

Section III:

When Schools Are Open and Operating

What You Need to Know Now

- With school about to begin, it's time to evaluate your most recent communication efforts.
- The strategies in this section can be used to help assess your communication activities and plan your next steps.
- When you evaluate your communication:
 - Start with the planning process. Decide what worked and what didn't.
 - Review your two-way communication program and how it was implemented. *[Be kind to yourself; everyone has been communicating in crisis mode.]* What worked? What can you do differently this coming year?
 - Check the goals and objectives you set for your communication plan. Did you make the objectives timed and measurable so you could determine if you achieved them? (e.g. By the first day of school, 100% of the district's parents will have received a district notice about proper hygiene practices.)
 - Apply your findings as research to improve your next round of communication.
- As you communicate about returning to school during COVID-19, also return to telling your school's story.
 - Focus on the positives.
 - Use visuals to communicate.
 - Include stories about customary back-to-school activities.
 - Pitch back-to-school highlights to the media.
- Planned, systemic, continuous, two-way communication helps build mutual understanding and trust among the schools and the families and communities they serve. So, stay the course!

Important Items to Remember

- Continue to work with your local health department throughout this process.
- In the event of positive, confirmed COVID-19 cases, work with your local health department to communicate about next steps and contact tracing. See your local health department's website for its described process. The CDC website has more details about [contact tracing](#), as well as more information on COVID-19, including symptoms and treatment at www.cdc.gov.

New Resources to Access

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued [new guidance](#) for schools on July 24, 2020.
- This Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) [toolkit](#) on Workplace Safety is specifically designed for PK-12 schools.

Key Points to Communicate

- As we return to school, the safety of our students and staff remains our top priority.
- We have updated our FAQs on returning to school. To access them, go to _____.
- For the latest details about our return to school, visit our website _____ or call our hotline _____.
- Our students are learning new things in new ways, for details visit our website _____.
- To see our school's approved Preparedness and Return to School Plan, visit our website _____.
- We want to hear from you. You can give us your feedback in these ways:
_____.
- We will only share factual information; reporting what we know, when we know it.
- We are staying current with federal, state, and local guidance.
- If you think you are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, please contact your healthcare provider.

Evaluation as Research

After having communicated with staff members, students, parents, and the media over the past several weeks about your return to school plans, it is important to remember to COMPLETE the Research-Planning-Implementation-Evaluation (RPIE) process to ensure your communication resonated and in fact, made an impact. You may need to repeat steps to be sure you achieved your desired result. How do you do this?

To ensure that your communication efforts did what you intended, it is critical to spend time focusing on the “E”, or Evaluation of your messages. Did your technology survey actually measure if students had devices and connectivity, or did your responses result in questions about virtual or remote learning options? Did your Facebook post about health screening protocols prior to band camp result in changed behaviors or did it result in questions about your school’s check-in process for the fall. If you did not get your intended result, cycle through the RPIE process again, making appropriate adjustments to achieve your communication goal. Remember, all feedback is good feedback. If comments were negative or if questions resulted from the communication, it provides you with direction for your next messages.

Preparing for Future Messages

As you prepare for your next communication, determine what went well and what can be improved based on your last experience communicated with that specific audience, using a particular platform, the time of day and day of the week the message was issued and the level of engagement received.

- **Review website analytics.** If you are using a Google platform or if your district has invested in a content management system that has embedded metrics, spend time looking at which links on your website are used most related to your district’s COVID-19 resources. Is it the FAQ section you have developed? Perhaps parents are interested in your virtual programming webpages? Also learn about where visitors reside based on their Internet provider addresses. Are a number of families from the same neighborhood interested in your transportation plans? You may want to send target messages to homes in that area of your district to reassure them about your school bus safety protocols. Is your website being translated into multiple languages? If so, is your district planning to offer future communication in those languages as well?
- **Review analytics for social media, too.** Social media platforms offer general engagement metrics. If your district employs Hootsuite, Tweetdeck, or SproutSocial, among others, more in-depth analytics may be available. Using this information will help you pinpoint the best time to share messages to guarantee maximum engagement based on your target audiences’ preferences. For example, teachers may prefer receiving information on Twitter about professional learning opportunities on Sunday mornings. Parents and guardians may appreciate receiving push notifications linked to YouTube videos about your district’s safety procedures and updates on Friday evenings. As you learn about your audiences preferences, it is important to customize your communication to meet them where they are - they will appreciate it, and your communication efforts will be successful.
- **Get direct feedback.** Continue to use surveys, focus groups, virtual town hall meetings, phone call interviews, public comments shared at board of education meetings, parent feedback, website questions and live chats to help improve your communication strategies. Remember, if you don’t ask for feedback, you will not be able to effectively deliver your message. It is important to do this often. Circumstances may change how audiences prefer to receive communication. Did high-speed Internet recently become available in your area? If so, older, traditional methods of communication may no longer be used. Did a community newspaper transition to an online platform? Banner advertising may be a new option for schools to use to promote programming and education options.
- **Measure your return on investment.** Determine if your communication efforts are paying dividends by measuring your return on investment. Is your district spending countless hours drafting an electronic newsletter with detailed stories about the success of your return to school plan, but no one is reading it because it is too long? Is your superintendent creating weekly videos providing a return to school

countdown but is not answering the questions that are on the minds of parents and students? If your district is investing resources (time and money) to create communication products, it is critical that the communication be designed to meet the needs of the target audience while also being mindful of the effort being invested to produce the piece.

- **Mark accomplishments by conducting a content review audit.** Review each section of the [Return to School Roadmap](#) to ensure sufficient communication (including engagement and checking for understanding) has occurred in each topic area of the plan - governance, facilities, wellness, instruction/technology and operations. As you conduct your audit, check off each area where successful communication has occurred. Again, think about each of the sections using the RPIE process. (The RPIE process is detailed in [Section I of this toolkit](#) on pages 7 and 8.)

Keeping Yourself (and Others) Organized

In addition to evaluating if your communication has been successful during a crisis, it is also important to put systems in place to keep yourself organized. When juggling multiple messages on multiple platforms, keeping track of tasks (and the evaluation of each of those tasks) can become overwhelming. Here are a few tools that may help as districts navigate through complex communication plans:

- **Communication Mapping** - outline all planned messages using a [calendar system approach](#). The calendar should address all the sections of the Return to School Roadmap.
- **Service Request Form** - Develop an [internal communication request system](#) to help filter communication needs specific to COVID-19 and other return to school issues. One way to do this is to establish a formal request process. As the school communicator, it is important to see the big picture when communicating through each phase of your re-entry plan. Like any other crisis, information will change quickly and decisions impact multiple departments across your organization. By creating a request process, you will be able to determine what communication is needed so that all audiences get the right information at the right time.
- **Use a checklist** - The Michigan Association of Superintendents and Administrators (MASA) has created a Superintendent's calendar that can serve as a checklist for your district to follow when issuing messages across multiple platforms. Share the calendar with your cabinet team so that they can add department events and projects to the list. As your communication is shared, check it off the list. Be sure to record the level of engagement, questions or comments that were shared and any notes relative to the success or opportunities for growth derived from the message. These will be critical pieces of information that will help you evaluate the effectiveness of the communication.

Tip: In addition to evaluating what you have communicated relative to your return to school plans, the same evaluation process should be applied to communication about fall activities. Use your experiences from your communication about spring events and these suggested planning strategies now to prepare your district for a successful messaging campaign about all aspects of the 2020-21 school year.

Evaluation Methods and Tips

- Effective and strategic communication is based on two kinds of research:
 - Initial, fact-gathering planning research - Who needs to know what, when, and through which methods?
 - Post-communication evaluation research - Did we reach our audiences and achieve our goals?
- Examining your post-communication efforts to determine if your communication goals were met and you successfully communicated is the essential last step in the RPIE (Research, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation) Communication Process.
- Use your evaluation results to improve your communication plan, as needed.

Tip: Keep track of your feedback data for all communication outlets. Tie the data back to your communication methods. Documenting feedback and engagement from stakeholders can help you determine the effectiveness of your efforts, plan next steps, and budget for the following year.

“If you don’t take time to collect the data about an issue, it is impossible to understand what to do next with any confidence.”

*-- Trinetta Marquis-Hobbs, *Engaging Data: Smart Strategies for School Communication**

- Consider using some of these methods to get feedback on the effectiveness of your two-way communication.
- Conduct focus groups.
- Issue surveys. (See Survey Bonus section below.)
- Collect (and post) Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).
- Monitor social media comments/feedback.

Tip: Assign a staff member to monitor and respond to comments/questions on communication platforms including social media, hotline, and district email address. Make sure the assigned staff person has access to the district’s social media policy and knows when plans are changed/updated so they are sharing correct/timely information.

- Note public comments/questions at school board meetings.
- Capture YouTube likes/feedback from your posted videos.
- Hold virtual Town Hall Meetings.
- Employ “Let’s Talk” or “Thought Exchange” (or a similar application) to encourage engagement.
- Mine demographic data/analytics from paid social media ads and other paid advertising (e.g. radio/TV) to determine message reach.
- Gather questions from your info @ _____ or help @ _____ email.

Tip: Establish/maintain a feedback loop that can be used by all your audiences. Institute a hotline phone number and an email address, with an invitation to use them or to contact their school office to give feedback. Post it on your website and include it in publications and other communication that is sent, so it’s accessible to all your audiences. It’s an excellent reminder and promotes two-way communication.

- Document participation numbers from planned events.

- Observe behavior changes. (If your goal was to change audience behavior, did it change? e.g. Did more parents participate in parent/teacher conferences this time?)
- Note open rates: How many individuals opened the email? What device were they using? How many people clicked on the link to the district website? How many minutes did they spend on each of this district's web pages?
- Log phone calls of concern: How many are being received? What is their nature?
- Track website clicks.
- Note email topics.
- Ask community partners (e.g. health department) what they are hearing.
- Connect with union representatives for staff perspective.
- Ask school staff members:
 - Are you receiving the communication from us?
 - Is the communication we're sending to you clear and understandable?
 - What are you hearing from parents?
 - What are you hearing from community members?
 - What are you hearing from students?
- Check with your key communicators (identified influential community, staff, parent, and student leaders with whom you communicate regularly) what are they saying/hearing?

Tip: If you don't have a key communicator network, now is a good time to start one.

Evaluating Media Coverage

- Monitor the tone, content, frequency, and placement of your school's media coverage.
- Track/note earned media (unpaid coverage/mention of your district by third-party outlets) and coverage content.

Bonus: Survey Topics and Questions

School communicators conduct formal and informal research to discover public opinion and attitude to help guide their work. Surveys are one form of research.

- During this timeframe, you may decide to conduct surveys around some or all of these areas: wellness, instruction/technology, communication, governance, facilities, school operations.

You may want to consider asking:

- Remote learners about their online experience.
- Parents to rate the district's communication efforts to date.
- Student/parents how satisfied they are with the district's learning options, online learning, learning supports, wrap-around services.
- Are you in need of support (e.g. PPE, connectivity, devices, training)?
- Teachers/Parents/Students about their state of wellness (physical and emotional):
 - How are you feeling (physically/emotionally)?

- Do you feel the district is adequately protecting your health and safety while you are in the school building/on school property?
- Is the district's symptom screener functioning appropriately?
 - If not, what needs to be improved?
 - Do you feel confident that the screener is promoting a safe work environment?
- How is the district doing relative to its cleaning practices? Do you feel that efforts are being made to protect the health of all students and staff?
- Do you feel parents are working to promote wellness in the classroom by accurately monitoring their children's health prior to sending them to school?
- Is the district's sick leave policy related to COVID-19 isolations/quarantines providing you with the flexibility you need?
- Are you struggling with childcare due to COVID-19 isolations/quarantines/school closures?
- As a parent, do you feel your school districts/staff members are taking the necessary precautions to maintain a safe and healthy learning environment?
- Now that (in-person) school is back in session and you have had an opportunity to experience the health and safety precautions implemented at the district, are there additional or better ways in which the district can promote a healthy learning environment?
- As we prepare to move to Phase ___, what are your concerns/questions/worries?
- Are there any health and safety protocols that you would recommend we maintain, even after the COVID-19 situation is resolved?
- Do you have access to the district's Return to School plan; do you have any questions?
- Do you still have access to the Internet and to devices in order to complete remote learning assignments?
 - If you need technical assistance, do you know who to contact?
 - If you received technical assistance, was it helpful/did it meet your needs?
 - If you are struggling with an assignment, who did you contact for support (Tech Department staff, teacher, principal)?
- What are your biggest concerns about going back to work/school in person?
- What are your biggest concerns about continuing to work/learn remotely?
- Since we began working/learning remotely, what is something new you've learned about yourself?
- Since we began working/learning remotely, what is something new you've learned about the students and/or families and/or teachers with whom you work?
- Do you have any other questions or concerns?
- How is your child coping socially and emotionally with their new classroom environment/procedures?
 - How can the district work to support your child's emotional wellbeing?
 - Are you aware of the numerous resources the district provides related to your child's/family's social and emotional needs?
- You may decide to conduct a survey now, upon return to school, and/or as a follow up later in the school year.
- If and when you decide to conduct a survey, be sure to communicate the results and respond to any feedback.

Getting Back to Telling Our Story

As a school public relations professional, you are communicating a lot of changes to your families in light of this pandemic, but the one thing that hasn't changed is the fundamental need to connect with your stakeholders by telling your stories. We recognized in the spring how powerful stories were that showed unique celebration events, new ways of learning, and how our students and staff were overcoming difficult times. As we prepare to reopen, those stories, and the need to tell them, remain an important part of our communication efforts.

Sharing our stories brings the emotion, culture, connection and humanity to this time of continued uncertainty and unknown. When you develop your back-to-school plans and how to communicate those details, start looking for ways to reconnect on a personal level.

Communicate the Positives

Look for the good in your district. When we find those stories of overcoming adversity, we share the strength of our districts. ***Highlight the relationships within the public schools.***

Some ideas include:

- Students determined to finish classes/certifications despite summer break (e.g. in one district, 19 cosmetology students came back and completed their remaining 84 classroom hours and are now able to sit for their state exam).
- Summer learning that is taking place.
 - Show the teacher-student connection - whether it's a one-on-one time or via video, this connection remains an important visual for parents who are making tough decisions about the fall.
 - Share a quote from a mom whose child is making progress.
 - Share pictures of a playgroup - socially distanced - or pictures of a video playgroup.
 - However kids are learning, share it!
- Students, staff, families, community members finding positive ways to embrace the current pandemic and getting ready for back-to-school
 - Are students making masks?
 - See where students are stepping up to be leaders in unusual ways.
 - Teachers setting up their classroom for a new way of learning
 - Are there donation drives that relate to the pandemic and/or back-to-school?
 - Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), backpacks, school supplies
- Share the excitement to be back together again - whether in person or virtually.
 - Share short videos of staff members talking about being excited for school and seeing students. (e.g. [Otsego Public Schools' Monday Messages](#))
- Reiterate what makes your district special. Parents will have a lot of choices when it comes to returning this fall; remind them of why your district is the place to be.
 - Positive messages from staff
 - Throwback Thursday social media posts of the great things that take place in your district
 - Are there new ways to show this?
 - Image video highlighting all of the strengths of your district

- TV, radio ads (e.g. one district is developing a campaign called “Choose Us!” emphasizing relationships. We know your kids. We coach them. We teach them. We care about them.)
- Highlight the first day of school! What do you usually do for the first day? Think of ways to showcase this new start to the year.
 - Solicit first day of school pictures to share on social media.
 - Capture pictures of students getting off the bus, entering the buildings, listening to the teachers.
 - Highlight classroom activities taking place on the first day. Ask teachers ahead of time what fun activities they have planned.
 - (This could be another great opportunity to share the safety measures in place.)
 - Will students walk through new procedures?
 - Students practicing hand washing, getting hand sanitizer

Address Parent Concerns Through Visual Storytelling

When sharing the positive messages and stories from your district for back-to-school, review your parent surveys and your overall communication goals to make sure you are addressing what’s most important to your families. You want them to know you are doing what’s needed to bring students safely back to school.

- What safety measures are being implemented? For many districts, safety measures are likely the top concern of parents. Take pictures or [video](#) to show families the steps you are taking.
 - Signs going up on windows, doors, on floors, etc.
 - Shipments of PPE being delivered or distributed to buildings
 - Custodians cleaning classrooms/buildings
 - Are there new products they are using?
 - Installation of hand sanitizing stations or other protective measures
 - Infographic on how you’re keeping families safe (e.g. Otsego Public Schools [infographic](#))
- What does a child’s classroom look like? With the new requirements and recommendations in Michigan’s Return to School Roadmap, classrooms are likely going to look different than when students last left them. There might be fewer desks, a new set up, etc.
 - Think about taking families on a virtual tour of the classrooms.
 - Create a video simulating the arrival of the first day of school to point out the new procedures.
- What are the new procedures? From traveling in the hallways to lunchtime/cafeteria, to school transportation, there’s going to be a new way for students to behave and new procedures in place along with a new look to familiar places in their schools.
 - Consider creating videos to walk families and students through the new processes.
 - Create an infographic or colorful flyer to explain the procedures and distribute it to families.

Focus on “Customary” Back-to-School Activities

Parent orientation nights and open houses are part of the back-to-school process. What will yours look like this year? Will you cancel? Will leaders get creative in planning unique events like with celebrations in the spring?

- Help your parents understand what will take place.

- Will it be virtual?
 - If it's virtual, consider having the teacher do a virtual tour of their classroom on video to share with the class.
- Will they need to sign up for a time slot like conferences?
- Will it be outside?
- Be sure to capture these activities and the excitement of returning to school as a positive story.

Tip: Be sure to explain to your parents why you chose the format. For example: If students are coming back to school in person and you do a virtual event, explain why.

- Did the teacher want to get everyone together at once but current state restrictions don't allow for indoor in-person gatherings of that many people?

Other fall activities to consider:

- Opening Day for staff
- Homecoming
- Fall festivals
- Halloween

Use Proven Methods to Discover Your Stories

This is another place where the pandemic did not change our procedures. Think back to pre-COVID-19, how did you solicit stories then? Dig into those resources to help find today's stories.

- Lean on your instructional leaders, technology department, division directors and ask what's happening.
- Monitor your social media feeds, and ask those within your district to do the same to find potential stories.
- Lean on your Key Communicators for good stories they might be hearing about in the district.
- Activate a Communication Services Request Form and get it out to your stakeholders to share good news story ideas (e.g. Berrien RESA [Communication Services Request Form](#) process)

Pitch Your Back-to-School Highlights to the Media

Just like pre-COVID stories, follow your normal process when seeking media coverage of your back-to-school efforts. See [Section I of this toolkit](#) re: Working with the Media.

You're Not Done Yet!

But don't worry – you already know what to do.

It's been daunting and the unknown certainly poses a challenge for communication. But even if you've been operating in crisis mode 24-7, you still have the tools you need to move forward and communicate confidently and clearly with your audiences.

Whether your District/ISD/RESA changes the mode of learning (remote, hybrid, full return) on a dime, a positive COVID-19 case crosses your desk (see [Section II](#) of this toolkit for related templates) or protocols and requirements change overnight, effectively communicating these changes to your stakeholders is vital. The work you've done since March, along with the guides provided by MSPRA, offer a wealth of resources that can be retooled and shared to address the crisis or change in front of you.

Consider:

- Set communication expectations with your community. Yes, you live and breathe it each day, but don't forget that your colleagues, staff, students and parents may not. Let them know what to expect around District/ISD/RESA communication and where to go if they need to express their unease or anxiety.
- Pull out your framework for decisions, or consider documenting your communication frameworks now for easy access later. Your framework should consider your audience(s), modes of communication at your disposal and when to use them, thresholds for action, and evaluation tools that can be used to assess communication. Share this framework with your colleagues to ensure everyone is on the same page.
- See MSPRA template letters on shifting plans (see Section II of this toolkit). Moving backward or forward in phases can be easily adjusted in each template letter.
- Use the surveys and feedback you've gathered since March to support decisions being made (i.e. "The survey that went out to all parents in May shared the need for an online component for many families uneasy with a full return.").

Above all - remember to keep telling your story! The work you did pre-COVID-19 matters now more than ever! Get back to your roots and provide the positive stories for your community that resonate with each and every one of us. You know how to do this, and you can do it.

As always, reach out to MSPRA www.mspra.org through our listserv, on our Facebook page, or as a direct contact for any support you may need. You're not alone.

Return to School Communication Toolkit

Section I of III: Do First - published July 15, 2020

Section II of III: Do Before Schools Open – published July 23, 2020

Section III of III: Do When Schools are Open and Operating – published August 6, 2020

For more information about school communication, please visit www.mspra.org.