

'Communicate Together' HANDBOOK



OREGON ESDs

A step-by-step guide to help
ESD administrators, board members,
and licensed and classified employees
work together to improve
public perception and support
for Oregon education service districts

INTRODUCTION

Recent research has found that Oregonians want schools and students to succeed, and to set and meet high standards and expectations; they want parents to contribute to student success; they want community members to be involved in schools, and they want students to perform community service; and they want schools to spend money wisely, in ways that maximize teaching and learning. Although all of the above is essentially occurring in our schools today, Oregonians don't believe that it is (Employers for Educational Excellence, 2004; Chalkboard Project, 2004; Stand for Children, 2005). In fact, a significant minority of school employees share the general public's beliefs (COSA, 2005).

This knowledge about what Oregonians want from their schools, as well as external and internal perceptions about schools, is important for Oregon ESDs. That's because the extent to which ESDs contribute – and are *perceived* to contribute – to school success, parent and community involvement, and wise and efficient use of education resources, is directly tied to their real – and perceived – relevance and value.

Today, public opinion about Oregon ESDs can be considered to be mixed. One reason for that seems obvious – the notoriety surrounding a few recent high-profile situations. But, despite what we might think, the biggest image problem for ESDs isn't what's sensational – it's what's fundamental. Our basic public relations weakness is this: *people simply don't understand what ESDs are, nor the important contributions ESDs make to schools and students.*



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What's more, research suggests that the messengers exerting the most considerable, unfavorable influence on public perception of schools and ESDs aren't newspapers or television or even talk radio. They are *us*.

A recent national study found that nearly half of all public messages about schools that come from school staff are negative (Banach, Banach and Cassidy, 2001-2004). Coupled with decades of research that shows that the public trusts school employees as the most credible source of information about schools, this study leads to the inevitable conclusion that *we* need to begin communicating more purposefully.

This "Communicate Together" handbook provides a step-by-step guide that ESDs can use to make a positive difference in public perception and support by: 1) educating staff about ESDs' contributions to school and student success, 2) reinforcing with staff their influence as messengers about ESDs, 3) enhancing internal communications systems to better inform and engage all staff, and 4) involving staff in communications planning and delivery.

This "Communicate Together" handbook is an outgrowth of the TEAM UP partnership, in which seven statewide organizations – the Chalkboard Project, the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, the Oregon Department of Education, the Oregon Education Association, the Oregon PTA, the Oregon School Boards Association and the Oregon School Employees Association – joined forces to consider causes and cures related to the research outlined above.

Together, these organizations encourage ESDs to consider undertaking the collaborative process offered in this handbook, just as they encourage school districts to consider the TEAM UP process. Together, these organizations believe, we can make a real, positive difference in public perception of Oregon ESDs.

 STEP#

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1 . . . Determine if this process is for you



Assemble a small (about 10 people), representative group of your ESD's potential communications collaborators (administrators, licensed and classified employees, board members).



Together, **review and discuss** the presentation, "**Communicate Together.**" The presentation shares state and national public opinion and communications research related to schools and ESDs. It explains this project's key concept: "*We can improve public support for ESDs simply by improving the messages we share about ESDs.*" And it lays out the steps for developing and implementing a "Communicate Together" Plan for your ESD.



After your group has reviewed the presentation, **contact** the "Communicate Together" partners if you have questions or need additional information.



With your group, **decide** whether your ESD is ready to "communicate together." The statewide TEAM UP partners believe that implementing "Communicate Together" will enhance public support for your ESD and, collectively, public perception of all Oregon ESDs. But the choice to "communicate together" is *yours*.



When you are **ready** to make the commitment to "Communicate Together," **take the next step.**

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2 . . . Recruit your ESD's 'Communicate' Squad



Befitting the spirit of collaboration that is the essence of “Communicate Together,” **consult leaders at all levels** and among all groups in your agency in the selection process for your ESD’s “Communicate Together” Squad.



As much as possible, **fill your squad** from a variety of departments, programs, levels and roles. “Communicate Together” squads need to be diverse enough to represent the various points of view in among your ESD’s employees and board. They also need to be large enough to communicate information and solicit input throughout your ESD.



Statewide TEAM UP/Communicate Together partners include the major Oregon organizations (OEA, OSEA, COSA, OSBA, Oregon PTA) that represent teachers, classified employees, administrators, school board members and parents. The statewide partners of TEAM UP/Communicate Together are happy to **support** you in **promoting participation** in the project.



Schedule the first meeting of your ESD’s first full-squad “Communicate Together” meeting, then **take the next step**.

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3 . . . Facilitate your first 'Communicate' meeting



At your ESD's first full "Communicate Together" meeting, **review and discuss** the presentation, "**Communicate Together.**"



During the meeting, **develop** your squad's contact list and **share the expectation** that members will continue to work between meetings via e-mail discussions, as well as in other forums.



As outlined in the presentation, **conduct the "warm-up drills"** -- the small-group exercises designed to prepare your squad to successfully take upcoming steps.



As outlined in the presentation, **discuss the next step** -- the local research phase of the project -- and, as provided in the presentation, **solicit ideas for data gathering** in addition to those already planned via "Communicate Together."

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4 . . . Conduct local research



Gather data from about your ESD's internal communications systems, the external messages that come from your ESD and its staff, your ESD's contributions to student achievement and to meeting the goals of your constituent districts, and other areas identified by your "Communicate Together" Squad. This data will be used to inform and develop your "Communicate Together" internal survey, as well as to provide information for the development of your ESD's "Communicate Together" Communications Plan.



Assess your ESD's internal communications systems by using the **"Communicate Together" Internal Communications Checklist**. Designate a sub-group of your squad to complete the assessment. Share the sub-group's draft checklist results with entire squad via e-mail and ask for feedback. Modify the checklist to reflect consensus.



Using the **"Communicate Together" Survey Guide** and the **"Communicate Together" Sample Survey**, **develop and conduct a survey** of your internal groups. Involve your TEAM UP Squad in the creation of the survey, sharing and modifying drafts via e-mail. Use an electronic instrument (such as Survey Monkey or Zoomerang) to survey your internal groups.



When you have completed the research, **take the next step.**



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5 . . .

Examine and incorporate the research



At your district's second "Communicate Together" meeting, examine the results of your research. **Look at the local data** you gathered. **Consider** the completed **Internal Communications Checklist**. **Review and discuss** the results of the **Internal Survey**.



In preparation for the next play (presenting "Communicate Together" and the results of your research to all internal groups), **determine** which parts of the research should be included in your upcoming presentations. What surprises you? Concerns you? Encourages you? On what points is there the most consensus? The least? Are there strong beliefs that can be used as a foundation for this project? Misperceptions that can be corrected? Which results might you be able to use as messages or themes as your squad develops the "Communicate Together" Communications Plan?



Incorporate your research into the "Communicate Together" presentation.



Review and rehearse the presentation, then **take the next step**.

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6 . . . Share 'Communicate' throughout your ESD



Schedule “Communicate Together” presentations for all staff groups, as well as your board of directors, so that all members of your internal groups have the opportunity to participate.



Take particular care to include classified employees, as they often have schedules and responsibilities that preclude participation. Involvement of all internal groups is essential for the success of the “Communicate Together” Project.



Have “Communicate Together” Squad members **deliver** your research-enhanced presentation at all scheduled meetings. As part of your team at each presentation, include squad members who are viewed as “one of us” – someone who does the same job or works in the same program or department, for example – by the assembled group.



When you have completed the presentations, **take the next step**.

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7 . . . Brainstorm about your 'Communicate' plan



At your third “Communicate Together” Squad meeting, **share the feedback** generated at the presentations held throughout your ESD. How was “Communicate Together” received by staff and board members? What were the audiences’ reactions to your survey and other research results? What did you learn from small group exercises?



Distribute and review the **“Communicate Together” Communications Sample Plan** (you may do this prior to the meeting so that squad members can preview it).



Brainstorm the key elements of your communications plan: goals and objectives, messages, strategies and action plan, etc.



Form a subgroup of your “Communicate Together” Squad to draft your ESD’s communications plan, then **take the next step**.

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8 . . . Develop your 'Communicate' Plan



Using the **Communications Plan Template**, draft your district's **"Communicate Together" Communications Plan**. Write the plan based on the your research, the feedback and input you received at presentations throughout your ESD, and the discussions at your squad meetings. Adopt objectives that are achievable and based on "Communicate Together" concepts. Remember, "Communicate Together's" impact comes through helping licensed and classified employees, administrators and board members to respect (and make the most of) their power to influence public perception.



As you write your plan, don't hesitate to **contact** TEAM UP/"Communicate Together" Oregon for assistance.



Your subgroup may also find it helpful to **refer to the TEAM UP/ "Communicate Together"** Web page, which offers a wide variety of resources that may assist you in developing your communications plan.



Review, discuss and modify the plan at a fourth meeting of your ESD's "Communicate Together" Squad. When your squad has finalized the plan, **take the next step**.

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9 . . . Implement Your 'Communicate' Plan



Launch your “Communicate Together” Plan on an ESD-wide stage – such as at your start-of-year, all-employee gathering.



Implement the plan throughout the year, holding meetings of your “Communicate Together” Squad as necessary to stay on track or to make mid-course adjustments, if needed.



Any time you wish, feel free to **contact** the TEAM UP/“Communicate Together” partners for advice or assistance.



Remember that “Communicate Together” is a **multi-year endeavor** that will have its greatest impact over time, as licensed and classified employees, administrators and board members continue to make good use of their power to influence public opinion. Near the end of the first year of your ESD’s Communications Plan, **evaluate** and modify the plan for year two.