



Connect Through Communication

THE CHARTER SCHOOL
COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA GUIDE

**Grōw
Schools**

Getting you the money, resources, and
know-how to create thriving schools.

Effective communication and strategic public relations are the backbone of a thriving school community.

From engaging families to managing your school's public image, strong messaging and PR strategies foster trust, connection, and enrollment. This guide equips school leaders, administrators, and communications teams with strategies to craft impactful messages, establish a unified voice, write effective emails, communicate during a crisis, and leverage public relations efforts. You'll learn how to write with clarity and purpose, tailor messages for different audiences, manage media relations effectively, and integrate email and newsletters into a seamless communication strategy.

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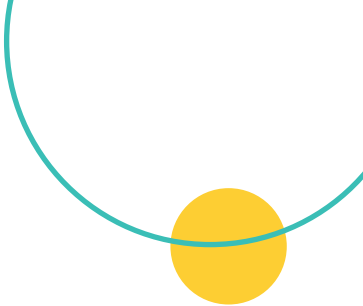


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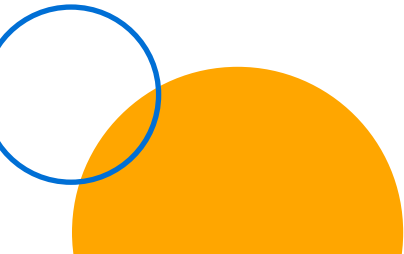
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About the Authors



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As Senior Content Strategist at Grow Schools, Marin channels her passion for research, writing, and advocating for high-quality education for all students. After earning a Master's in English, she spent nearly a decade at California Polytechnic State University, teaching Writing and Rhetoric and guiding students in developing style, voice, formatting, source evaluation, and rhetorical awareness. Marin thrives on crafting narratives that resonate—whether refining a brand's voice, exploring new perspectives in writing, or championing meaningful causes. Her personal essays and poetry have appeared in both online and print publications, and she serves as a co-Editor-in-Chief for *Abraxas Review*.



JEAN SHIELDS FLEMING

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Jean Shields Fleming is a global communications consultant. She started her career teaching middle school reading, and went on to lead communications for NWEA and Scholastic. She has worked with a diverse range of large and small organizations including Nike, Estee Lauder, Nikon and the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance. A two-time winner of awards from the Interactive Marketing Association for content and social media programs, she is also founder and editor at *Certain Age Magazine*. Learn more about Jean and her work at WorldChangingCommunications.com.

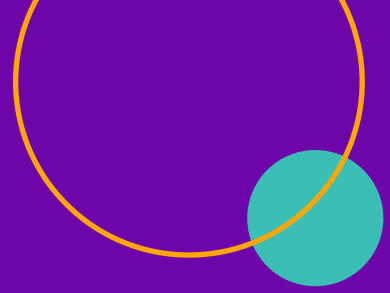


MICHAEL BARBER

Head of Global Marketing, Grow Schools

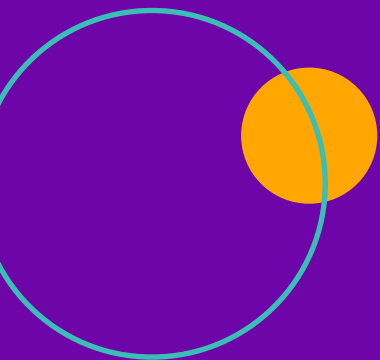
Michael Barber, Head of Global Marketing and Managing Director, UK, is dedicated to serving schools with valuable resources, straightforward support, and transparent messaging.

Michael has a robust marketing background, beginning his career among the top leaders in digital marketing. He led strategy and planning at several companies before founding his own consultancy, allowing him to provide support for marketing teams across industries. He began speaking at conferences and marketing gatherings across the country, and his work was featured in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Forbes*. In 2017, Michael was named one of Adobe's Fearless 50, which recognizes the top marketers around the globe driving bold, fearless marketing and digital transformation.



Introduction

The Power of Clear Communication at Your School



The Power of Clear Communication at Your School

Strong communication is at the heart of every successful charter school.

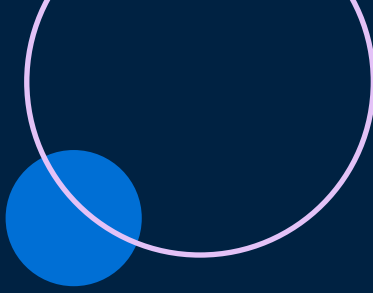
Whether you're engaging families, rallying community support, or aligning your team, the way you communicate shapes how people perceive and interact with your school. Well-timed and streamlined email campaigns can nurture trust with current families while engaging new ones, ensuring your community stays informed and connected. Relationships with local media are equally vital; they can amplify your school's story and shape public perception. Having a clear crisis communication plan in place is equally important, as it can make or break a situation during sensitive times. When all communication channels align, your school's message will not only be heard but will resonate and foster long-term support from your families, community, and beyond.

This guide is designed to help charter school leaders refine their written communication, ensuring consistency, clarity, and impact. We've gathered insights from three experts to guide you:

- **Marin Smith**, a content strategist, writer, and former university-level instructor, shares strategies for writing clearly, establishing voice and tone, and crafting messages that resonate with families. Drawing on rhetorical principles, she emphasizes the importance of aligning communication with your audience's needs and values.
- **Michael Barber**, a leading marketing expert, breaks down how to show up in your community's inbox. He emphasizes the importance of targeted email and text messaging campaigns, offering practical advice on timing, content, and delivery to maximize engagement and keep your school at the forefront of families' minds.
- **Jean Shields Fleming**, a global communications consultant, offers practical tips for engaging with local media and making a communication plan for crisis situations. Her expertise in building relationships with media outlets and preparing for potential crises equips school leaders with the tools they need to control the narrative and protect their school's reputation when it matters most.

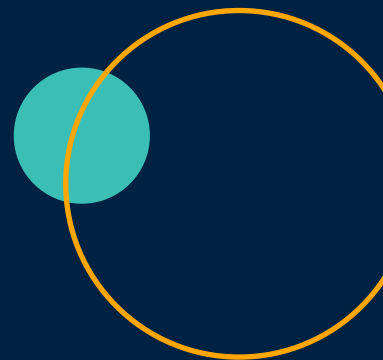
Together, their expertise will help you strengthen your school's messaging—whether you're drafting a newsletter, updating your website, or shaping a major announcement.





Section One

Writing with Clarity and Purpose



Writing with Clarity and Purpose

By Marin Smith

Flow and Constructing Paragraphs: The Architecture of Writing

Writing is like architecture—not the grand, showy kind, but the thoughtful design of spaces people actually live in. As school leaders, every paragraph we write is a room we’re asking our readers to inhabit, if only for a moment. The question becomes: how do we make these spaces both beautiful and functional?

The most inviting paragraphs work like well-designed spaces—they give readers both a clear entrance and a reason to linger.

Think about how you move through your school building each morning. You know exactly where you’re going (that’s your topic sentence), but along the way, you gather information, greet people, make connections (your supporting details). Sometimes you pause at the end of a hallway to reflect on what you’ve seen or plan your next move (there’s your point sentence, doing its quiet but essential work).

This movement—this flow—is what we’re after in our writing. Here’s how I’ve come to think about it:

Your topic sentence is like opening the door to a room and turning on the lights. When you write to your staff about a new initiative, you might begin: “Our recent student engagement survey has revealed both challenges and opportunities we need to address together.” Notice how this immediately orients your reader—they know where they are and why they’re there.

Then comes what I think of as the “given-new chain.” Each sentence starts from familiar ground before linking to something new. For instance: “The survey highlighted our students’ appreciation for project-based learning. This enthusiasm for hands-on work points to an opportunity to expand our STEM programming. Our current lab facilities, while adequate, could be transformed to better support this kind of active learning.”

See how each sentence begins with something we already know before stepping into new territory? It’s like having a conversation where each response acknowledges what was just said before adding something new (which, when you think about it, is exactly what good leadership communication should do).

Your supporting sentences are where the real living happens. They’re the furniture and decor of your paragraph-room, carefully chosen and arranged to serve your purpose. In a message about curriculum changes, these might include research findings, teacher feedback, student outcomes—all the evidence that makes your case feel solid and considered.



And then there's the point sentence, which I've come to think of as the moment of reflection before leaving a room. It's not just a reiteration of why you came in—it's a synthesis of what the experience in this particular paragraph-space has meant. From our example paragraph: "By reimagining our lab spaces, we're not just updating facilities; we're creating new possibilities for our students to discover their potential as scientists and innovators."

What I find most helpful about this approach to paragraph construction is how it serves both clarity and connection. When we build our paragraphs with this kind of intentional architecture, we're not just transmitting information—we're creating spaces where understanding can grow.



Example paragraph for accompanying images:

Our recent student engagement survey has revealed both challenges and opportunities we need to address together. The survey highlighted our students' appreciation for project-based learning. This enthusiasm for hands-on work points to an opportunity to expand our STEM programming. Our current lab facilities, while adequate, could be transformed to better support this kind of active learning. By reimagining our lab spaces, we're not just updating facilities; we're creating new possibilities for our students to discover their potential as scientists and innovators.

Red = Topic Sentence

Green = Support Sentences

Blue = Point Sentence

For school communications, this matters deeply. Whether you're writing about policy changes, celebrating achievements, or addressing challenges, your paragraphs need to be more than just containers for information. They need to be spaces where your community can enter, engage, and emerge with new insights.

The next time you sit down to write something important, try thinking of each paragraph as a room you're designing for your readers. Ask yourself: Is the entrance (topic sentence) clear and inviting? Does the space flow naturally from the known to the new? Have I furnished it with the right supporting details? Does the exit (point sentence) leave readers with both clarity and purpose?



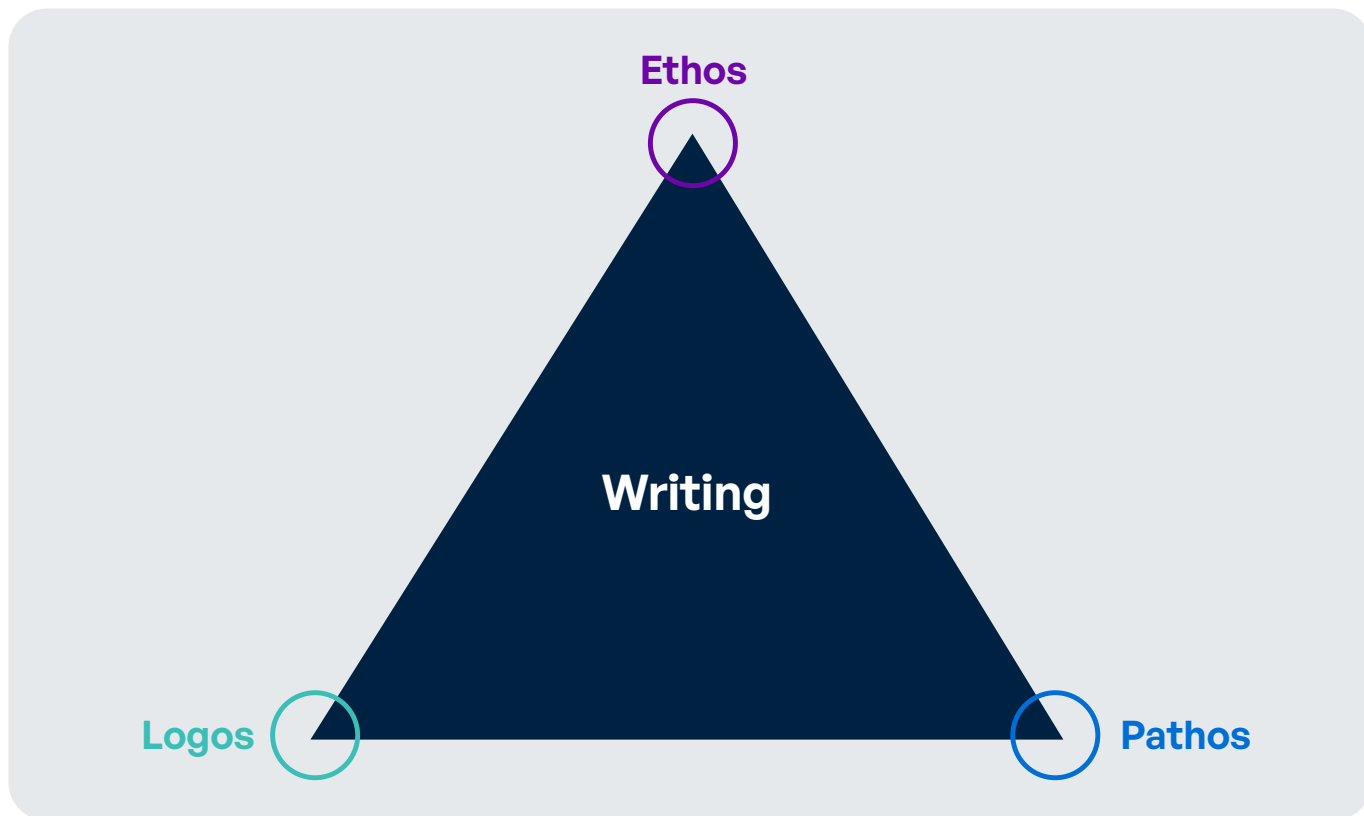
Emails and Messages that (Inherently) Persuade

Bear with me here: we're going to go back in time, to Ancient Greece. The Ancient Greeks broke down persuasion into patterns that still echo through our email threads and staff memos today.

When we write—including to our school communities—we're constantly weaving together different threads of persuasion, often without realizing it. It's like conducting an invisible orchestra where logic, credibility, and emotion play together in harmony (or sometimes, if we're not careful, in discord).

Think about the last time you had to announce a significant change in school policy. Your mind probably moved through several layers of persuasion. You were thinking through how to appeal rhetorically. The rhetorical triangle, introduced by Aristotle, consists of three key elements—ethos, pathos, and logos—that work together to create persuasive and effective communication.

Ethos appeals to credibility and trust, establishing the speaker or writer as knowledgeable and reliable. In a school setting, for example, a principal might strengthen their ethos by referencing years of experience in education. Pathos appeals to emotion, using storytelling or vivid language to connect with the audience on a personal level—such as highlighting a student's success story to inspire families. Logos appeals to logic and reason, using facts, data, and clear reasoning to make a compelling argument, like presenting enrollment trends to justify a new school initiative. When balanced effectively, these three appeals strengthen communication, making messages more persuasive and impactful.



First, there's the logical scaffolding—or **Logos**, the “if-then” architecture of your argument. You might write something like “If we want our students to develop stronger research skills, then we need to invest in updating our library’s digital resources.” But notice how different this feels from “Either we modernize our library now, or we risk leaving our students behind.” Both are logical structures, but they create distinctly different emotional resonances in your readers.

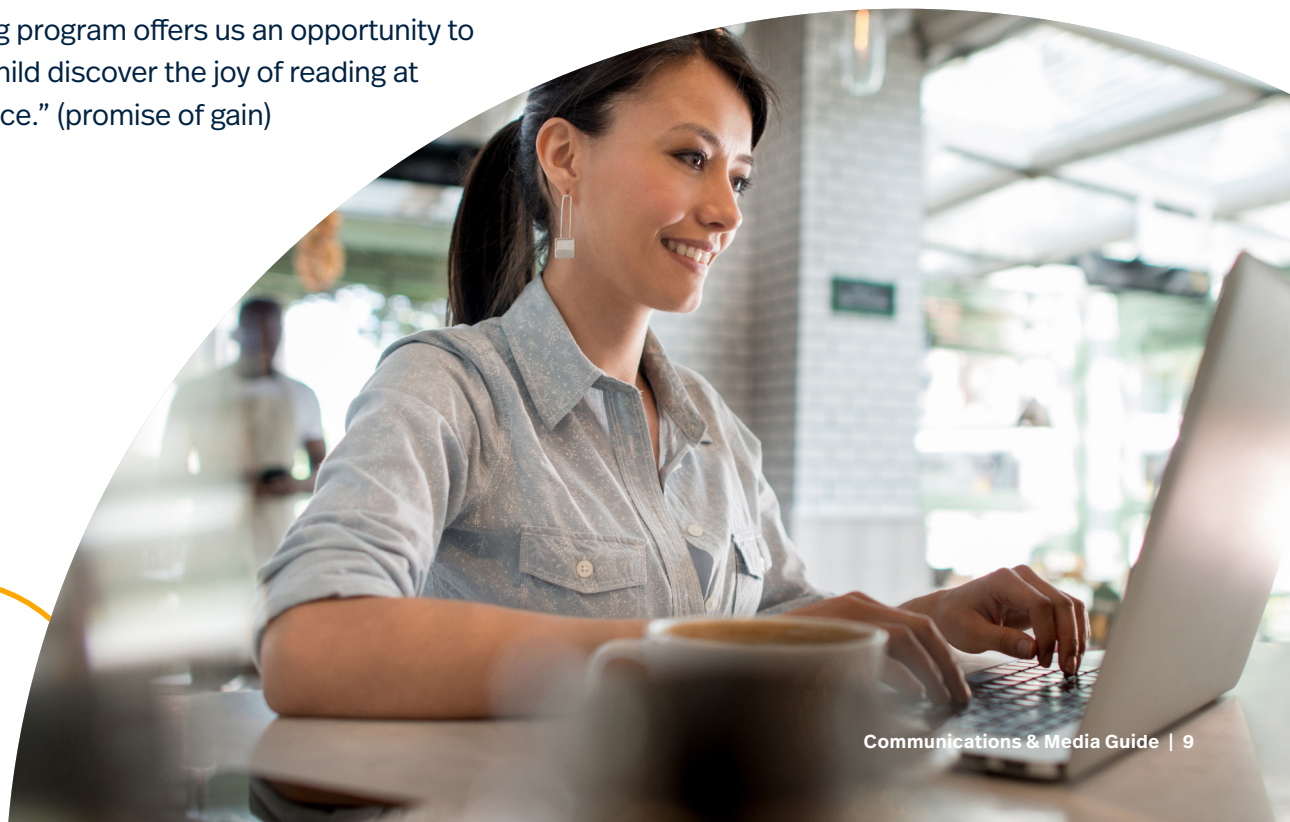
Then there's the question of your credibility (what those Greeks called **Ethos**). As a school leader, you carry built-in authority, but I've found the most effective communications often pair this with vulnerability and shared experience. Instead of just saying “As your principal, I've decided,” you might write “Having spent fifteen years in the classroom before moving into administration, I understand both the excitement and anxiety this change might bring.”

The emotional landscape of your writing (**Pathos**, to the Greeks) requires particular finesse in educational settings. Consider the difference between these approaches:

- “If we don't implement this reading program, our test scores will continue to decline.” (fear of loss)
- “This reading program offers us an opportunity to help every child discover the joy of reading at their own pace.” (promise of gain)

What is rhetoric? Isn't that something politicians use?

In spite of its bad rep, rhetoric isn't just about spin or manipulation—it's about effective communication. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion—how we use language to influence, inform, or engage an audience. While it's often associated with politicians and public speakers, rhetoric is everywhere, from marketing messages to classroom discussions. Anytime you craft a message with a purpose—whether it's convincing families to enroll their child in your school, inspiring teachers to adopt a new initiative, or even writing a school newsletter—you're using rhetoric. It's not just about persuasion; it's about clarity, connection, and making sure your message resonates with your audience. When used ethically, it's a powerful tool.





Both might be true, but they create vastly different emotional environments for your community to consider the change.

Understanding these patterns can help us write with more intention and humanity. We can choose them more consciously, more ethically. We can ask ourselves: Am I using fear or hope? Am I building credibility through genuine connection or just asserting my/the board's authority?

For school leaders, this awareness transforms routine communications into opportunities for community building. That budget update becomes a chance to demonstrate shared values. The disciplinary policy revision becomes an invitation to collective wisdom. Even a simple thank-you note can weave together logical appreciation (“your work made X possible”), credible observation (“I’ve seen firsthand how...”), and emotional resonance (“your dedication reminds me why we chose this profession”).

And when in doubt, lead with the heart.

EXPERT TIP

The next time you write an email, try mapping out the rhetoric of your message, beginning with what your purpose is. What are you trying to persuade your audience to do/think/feel? Think about whether you are communicating with your whole self—your mind, your heart, and your expertise to your school community.

So What? The CTA (Call to Action)

Here's the kicker—your persuasive message needs a clear next step. That's where a strong call-to-action (CTA) comes in. Once you've engaged your audience, guide them toward action—enrolling, donating, or getting involved. Rhetoric draws them in, and a well-placed CTA ensures they know how to follow through.

TIPS FOR STRONG CTAS

Every email, flyer, and website page should answer: What should the reader do next? If it's clear and compelling, they're more likely to take action.

Be Clear and Direct – Make it specific, direct, and easy to follow. Instead of saying, “Learn more about our school,” say, “Schedule a tour today.” Instead of “Consider donating,” say, “Give \$25 to support student learning.” Tell your audience exactly what to do.

Use Action-Oriented Language – Start with a strong verb that inspires movement (e.g., “Join,” “Discover,” “Claim,” “Start”).

Create a Sense of Urgency – Encourage immediate action with time-sensitive words (e.g., “Limited Spots Available,” “Sign Up Today,” “Don't Miss Out”).

Keep It Short – A CTA should be concise and easy to understand in just a few words.

Make It Stand Out – Use buttons, bold text, or contrasting colors to draw attention.

EXAMPLES OF WEAK CTAS (AND WHY THEY DON'T WORK)

“Click Here” – Too vague; doesn't tell the audience what they're getting.

“Learn More” – Passive and generic; doesn't create urgency or excitement. Alludes to more clicks to get to the action.



EXAMPLE TEXT:

Dear school community,

Our recent student engagement survey has revealed both challenges and opportunities we need to address together. The survey highlighted our students' appreciation for project-based learning. This enthusiasm for hands-on work points to an opportunity to expand our STEM programming.

Survey Highlights:

- 85% of students said they learn best through hands-on projects.
- 70% expressed interest in more STEM-focused activities.
- Current lab spaces were rated as needing upgrades to support deeper exploration.

Our current lab facilities, while adequate, could be transformed to better support this kind of active learning. By reimagining our lab spaces, we're not just updating facilities; we're creating new possibilities for our students to discover their potential as scientists and innovators. Your support can turn possibility into reality.

A donation today will help us transform our labs into state-of-the-art learning spaces where students can explore, experiment, and create.

Invest in the next generation of problem-solvers and innovators—donate today at the link!

CTA: Give \$25 Toward STEM Programming

I'm excited to bring this project to life alongside you.


Go Tigers,

Martin Urbank, CEO Mountain View Schools

- ✓ Establishes credibility by referencing **a student engagement survey**, showing that the need for improvements is based on real feedback rather than assumption.
- ✓ Highlights students' **enthusiasm** and love for hands-on learning, tapping into the shared desire to support their growth and future.
- ✓ The call to action—**"Invest in the next generation of problem-solvers and innovators"**—frames the donation as an opportunity to make a meaningful impact.

CTAs Belong on Your Website, Too!


Your website is a tool to engage visitors and guide them toward action. Strong calls to action should be placed strategically throughout your site, making it easy for prospective families, donors, or partners to take the next step. Whether it’s **“Schedule a Tour,”** **“Apply Now,”** or **“Download an Enrollment Packet,”** every CTA should be clear, compelling, and easy to find.



FREE DOWNLOAD

Want to optimize your website’s user experience and make sure your CTAs are working?

Check out our **UX Guide** for practical tips on designing a site that drives action!



Voice and Tone

The question of tone keeps many of us up at night (perhaps you’ve stared at an email to a difficult parent, cursor blinking, unsure how to begin).

Think about how you move through your day as a school leader. In the morning, you might share a joke with your administrative assistant (casual, warm, the language of shared context), then pivot to addressing the board about budget priorities (measured, evidence-based, but still authentically you). Later, you might write in your reflection journal about a challenging interaction with a teacher—here, the words can spill out unfiltered, like talking to an old friend.

What’s fascinating is that in each of these moments, you’re still yourself. Your essential voice—your way of seeing the world, your values, your particular insights—remains constant even as your tone shifts to meet each situation.



It's the same with writing. As a school leader, you can convey authority without authoritarianism, warmth without sacrificing professionalism. Whether you're drafting a school-wide email about a sensitive issue or commenting on a teacher's evaluation, your tone should reflect both the gravity of your role and your humanity.

There's an important distinction here: The school's voice is different than that of the ED or CEO, and messages to the community will come from both, regardless of who they are written by. A school's official communications—whether a newsletter, website, or social media post—should be in the voice of the school—it represents the collective identity of the school, not just one person.

EXPERT TIP

The goal isn't to sound like someone else's version of a school leader, but to be intentional about how your natural voice adapts to serve your community in different contexts.

Creating a Written Communications Guide for Your School

A written communications guide can help you maintain consistency and clarity, and can help define the type of writing that “feels” like your school (without being as vague).

Here's what you can include in your guide:

- **Tone and Style:** Define the tone (warm, fun, scholarly, approachable, etc.) and writing style that aligns with the school's values and mission.
- **Audience Considerations:** Provide guidelines on how to communicate with different groups—families, students, staff, and the community.
- **Content Guidelines:** Outline the types of communication (emails, newsletters, social media posts, etc.) and specific dos and don'ts for each.
- **Crisis Communication:** Include a section on best practices for handling sensitive or emergency communication.

Once approved, the guide will provide a solid foundation (remember our architecture metaphor?) for crafting effective, cohesive writing that represents your school.

EXPERT TIP

It's important that everyone who writes on behalf of your school is aligned about the voice and tone they want to project. Conflicting tones or messages can confuse the community and diminish trust.

How to Describe Your Voice and Tone

Here's a list of common voice and tone descriptors to help define your school's voice and tone.

Voice Descriptors:

- Friendly
- Professional
- Empathetic
- Conversational
- Casual
- Inspirational
- Supportive
- Clear
- Respectful
- Confident
- Approachable
- Conversational
- Direct
- Engaging
- Warm
- Inclusive

Tone Descriptors:

- Optimistic
- Urgent
- Reflective
- Serious
- Encouraging
- Playful
- Sympathetic
- Reassuring
- Humorous
- Neutral
- Excited

Teaching AI Your Voice and Tone

Want to save time at all this? AI can help. But to ensure that your AI-generated writing aligns with your or your school's unique voice and tone, it's essential to "teach" AI to write like you. This is where your Written Communications Guide can come in handy.

This is by no means meant to be a comprehensive guide to using AI to generate content, and it goes without saying that using "raw" or unedited AI content is a sure way to invite inaccuracies and errors into your writing. There are also ethics and policies to consider, which you can find out more about with the free webinar AI and Your School.

WEBINAR

AI and Your School

Watch this free recording of the live event exploring AI in schools—its potential uses, what safeguards to employ, and its transformative potential for school leaders, teachers, and students. Get actionable tips on incorporating AI literacy and ethics into your STEM curriculum, get tips for writing your school's AI policy, and protect your students, staff, and your data.



1. Introduce AI to Your School's Voice and Tone

One of the most effective ways to teach AI your voice and tone is by providing clear examples of well-crafted communication. Share templates for emails, newsletters, social media posts, and official announcements that you feel were well done. These examples help AI recognize nuances like sentence structure, word choice, and overall messaging tone.

2. Refine AI with Feedback

AI is not a one-stop shop; it requires ongoing tinkering. Once AI starts generating written content, review it carefully to ensure that it reflects the right voice and tone. Then, review it again.

If the output doesn't quite capture your school's style, provide specific feedback.

For example:

- If the AI's tone is too formal, suggest making it more conversational or approachable.
- If the voice feels too stiff or corporate, encourage more warmth and inclusivity.

3. Train AI to Adapt to Different Contexts

While your school's voice should remain consistent, the tone will naturally vary depending on the context. Teaching AI how to adjust tone appropriately is critical. For instance:

- In crisis communications, AI should adopt a tone that is calm, empathetic, and reassuring.
- For routine updates, AI can use a more neutral, straightforward tone.
- In celebratory or promotional content, the tone can be more vibrant, enthusiastic, and uplifting.

4. Maintain Consistency Across Platforms

AI can assist with content creation across multiple platforms, from social media posts to email newsletters and blog articles.

- Social media posts may be more casual and engaging, with a friendly and approachable tone.
- Emails to families may be slightly more formal but still warm and informative.
- Press releases or public statements may require a more professional tone.

5. Use AI as a Collaborative Tool, Not a Replacement

The heading says it all, but I'll say it again:

Use. AI. As. A. Collaborative. Tool. Not. A. Replacement.

While AI is a powerful tool for drafting, it doesn't replace human beings. Review and refine AI-generated content—always and forever.





Nuts and Bolts: How to Achieve Clarity in Written Communication

Here are some simple, practical tips to help you achieve the the voice and tone you want in your writing.

1. Focus on Your Audience

To keep your communication clear and focused on the needs of your audience, try to avoid starting sentences with “we” and “our,” especially in repetition. Instead, shift the focus to your audience by using “you” and restructuring your sentences.

For example:

- **Instead of:** “We are offering a new course this semester...”
- **Try:** “Your students can now enroll in an exciting new robotics course!”

By putting the reader first, you emphasize the benefit to them, making the message more engaging and relevant.

2. Follow Clear Grammar and Punctuation Guidelines

While we won’t dive deeply into grammar and punctuation here, adhering to standard guidelines helps keep your writing clear and easy to read.

At Grow Schools, we follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*, which is a great resource for general writing practices.

3. Decide Upon and Stick to Writing Conventions

Here are some basic writing conventions that will help your writing look polished and be easily understood:

- **Dates:** Always write the full date with the day of the week, month, date, and year. Different people abbreviate dates differently, so this will remove any confusion.
 - **Example:** “Wednesday, January 15, 2025”
- **Bold essential information, and use bullet points.** This makes key concepts stand out and organizes complex ideas into digestible pieces.
- **Capitalization:** Stick to standard capitalization rules. Use title case, capitalizing major words in titles or headings (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs). Do not capitalize conjunctions, articles, or words like “to” or “as” unless they are the first or last word in a title.
 - **Example:** “Building Strong Enrollment Strategies for the Future”

4. Make Your Communications Accessible

The goal of communication is connection. Keep your writing accessible by:

- Using plain language wherever possible
- Breaking up long paragraphs
- Ensuring that your messages are free from complex vocabulary or technical terms that could alienate your audience

Putting Your Writing Skills into Action

Writing is discursive—it’s about engaging in a conversation between the writer and reader, whether it’s a formal report, an email, or a press release. It’s easy to get caught up in rules, formats, and expectations, but at the end of the day, if we approach writing with empathy, authenticity, and the intent to connect, our messages will resonate.

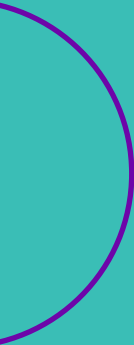
With voice and tone and writing conventions established, the next step is to focus on mastering email and text messages—these are most direct form of communication schools use. By applying the same principles of tone, structure, and clarity to email and text communication, you can connect with your audience and ensure your words make an impact.





Section Two

**Strategies for
Effective School
Email and Text
Communication**



Strategies for Effective School Email Communication

By Michael Barber

Email is one of the most direct and effective ways schools communicate with families, staff, and the broader community. But without a clear approach, messages can become inconsistent, unclear, or overlooked.

Whether addressing a routine update or a critical issue, having a standardized approach to subject lines, formatting, and messaging can improve engagement, build trust, and streamline communication.

How you show up in someone's inbox matters more than you might think—it helps you engage current families, increase enrollment, and maintain your positive reputation in your community.

Metrics that Matter

Here's something I've learned after years of working with schools. Your email metrics aren't just numbers, they're telling a story about how well you're connecting with your community. Let's talk about three key metrics that can help you gauge if your messages are hitting home:



Open rates tell you if your subject lines are resonating with your busy families and staff (and trust me, in the education world, everyone's busy). But take them with a grain of salt: Open rates are also historically misleading, so don't put all your eggs in that basket.



Clickthrough rates show if your content is compelling enough for people to take action.



Reply rates tell you how much your content resonates with its readers one-on-one and whether your subscribers feel a connection with your school or you.



Bounce rates tell you if your messages are reaching your community's inboxes.



Unsubscribe rates tell you if your messages aren't relevant to certain subscribers.

The secret sauce isn't just tracking these numbers—it's understanding how to use them to build stronger connections with your school community. Whether you're reaching out to families about tomorrow's field trip or sending staff updates about professional development, these metrics help ensure your message isn't just sent, but actually received and valued.

A Deeper Dive into Open Rates: Are Families Reading Your Emails?

The from name and subject line are the first things your subscriber sees when they receive an email, and both play a pivotal role in whether your email gets opened or ignored. Craft the from name to make a connection and subject lines that not only grab attention but also inspire action.

To maximize the impact of these crucial elements, consider the following strategies:

MAKE YOUR “FROM” NAMES RECOGNIZABLE

Your email’s “From” name is more than a technical detail—it’s your digital handshake with the recipient. Ensure your name is immediately recognizable and provides context, making recipients think, “I should care about this message.” In our busy school communities, this split-second recognition can make the difference between an opened email and an ignored one.

Tailor your “From” name to the subscriber’s relationship with your school. For subscribers who opt in for email marketing from your website, use your school name. However, for current families or students, consider using the name of a familiar individual, such as your school’s executive director or principal. This personalized approach increases the likelihood that your emails will be opened and read, fostering better communication with your school community.

KEEP SUBJECT LINES SHORT AND SWEET

Keep subject lines short and powerful to maximize visibility and impact. Aim for a maximum of 5 words or 35-50 characters. This concise approach is crucial because many people check email primarily on mobile devices, where long subject lines get cut off on smaller screens, potentially leading to confusing or embarrassing truncations.

Moreover, in our fast-paced world, brevity captures attention more effectively. When crafting your subject line, consider a busy family in the carpool line—what few words would make them think, “I need to read this now”? Sometimes, one powerful word is all you need to convey urgency or importance.



EXPERT TIP

Always ask yourself: When families or staff see this name pop up, is it immediately recognizable and relevant to them? By carefully selecting your “From” name, you can significantly improve your email engagement rates and strengthen your connection with your school community.

To ensure your subject lines are effective:

- Test them on mobile devices before sending to avoid unforeseen formatting issues or cropping.
- Focus on action words or intriguing phrases that demand attention.
- Consider the context of your readers' busy lives and what would make them pause to open your email.

USE ACTIONABLE LANGUAGE IN SUBJECT LINES

Use strong action verbs in your subject lines to clearly communicate what recipients should do or what benefit they'll gain by opening the email. Action-oriented subject lines create a sense of purpose and excitement, compelling readers to engage with your message.

For instance, a subject line like "Don't Miss October's Family Events!" immediately conveys urgency and value, encouraging families to open the email to learn more about upcoming activities.

USE PREHEADER OR PREVIEW TEXT EFFECTIVELY

Preview text is the snippet of text that appears next to or beneath the subject line in most email inboxes. This is a great opportunity to further entice the reader to open the email. Make sure your preview text complements the subject line and provides additional context or value. A well-crafted preview text can be the nudge that pushes someone to open your email. It should not repeat the subject line but rather give them a taste of what's inside.

BE CLEAR AND HONEST

If your subject line doesn't match the content of your email, your open rates might suffer in the long run as people lose trust. Clarity ensures that readers know what to expect, leading to better engagement.

EXPERT TIP

Curious about what's working and what's not? A/B testing allows you to send out two variations of the same email with different subject lines to see which one performs better. You can test different elements, such as length, tone, or urgency, to discover what resonates most with your audience. Experiment with sending emails at different times of day to determine when your audience is most likely to open them.



Pro Tips for Creating High-Impact Emails

Consider these strategies to create high-impact emails that resonate with your school community.

OPTIMIZE FOR MOBILE VIEWING

With many families and staff checking emails on their smartphones, ensure your emails are easy to read on smaller screens. Use headlines of at least 30px, body text no smaller than 16px, and line spacing between 1.5-2 for optimal readability. This mobile-friendly approach ensures your message is clear and accessible, regardless of the device used to view it.

CHOOSE PROFESSIONAL, WEB-SAFE FONTS

Stick to tried-and-true fonts like Arial, Georgia, or Helvetica. These professional choices work across all devices and maintain a consistent, polished look for your communications. While fonts like Comic Sans might seem fun, they can undermine the credibility of your message.

IMPLEMENT SINGLE-CLICK CONTENT

Enhance engagement by offering single-click content within your emails. This approach allows recipients to instantly access valuable information or perform actions without leaving their inbox. By reducing friction and respecting your readers' time, you're more likely to see increased interaction with your email content.

RESPECT YOUR COMMUNITY'S TIME

Families and staff are juggling numerous responsibilities. Make your emails clear, concise, and impossible to ignore by getting straight to the point. Every word should earn its place in your email. Before sending, ask yourself: "If I were a busy family member or teacher, would this email make me stop and pay attention?" Break up content so key information stands out, avoiding overwhelming text walls.



EXPERT TIP

Always put yourself in your reader's shoes. Ask, "Would this email capture my attention if I were a busy family member or teacher?" This perspective can guide you in creating emails that truly resonate with your school community.

All About Newsletters: Connecting with Your Current Families

Newsletters are a great communication tool—one that, when used effectively, can help you build a strong school community and foster family engagement. Newsletters are more than just a simple email—when carefully crafted, they can deliver value to your community.

DECIDE ON A REGULAR SCHEDULE

Set a regular schedule for your newsletters, whether it's weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. Stick to it so your readers know when to expect updates—and remember that consistency builds trust.

CHOOSE A PLATFORM

There are a plethora of newsletter platforms—find one that aligns with your school's specific needs and resources. Consider the following factors when making your choice:

- **Templates:** Look for platforms offering customizable templates to streamline your newsletter creation process.
- **Cost:** Ensure the platform fits within your budget constraints.
- **User-friendliness:** The platform should be intuitive, making it easy for your team to create and send newsletters without extensive technical knowledge.
- **Analytics and reporting:** Choose a platform that provides comprehensive insights into your newsletter's performance, allowing you to refine your strategy over time.

WORK WITH YOUR IT TEAM

Collaborate with your IT team to:

- Create and manage secure opt-in lists for both prospective and current families.
- Ensure compliance with data protection regulations.
- Implement security measures to protect subscriber information.
- Set up and maintain the technical aspects of your chosen email platform.





Crafting Your Content with Clarity, Consistency, and Connection

A strong email is a tool to inform, engage, and strengthen relationships with your school community. By following a consistent structure, keeping messages clear and concise, and always considering the reader's perspective, schools can ensure that emails are read, understood, and acted upon. Thoughtful communication strengthens trust, and trust strengthens your school.

Consider the following when crafting your email content:

- 1. Capture Attention:** The from name, subject line, and main headlines are your audience's first impression. Rather than sticking to the basics, try out intriguing headlines that hint at the content's value. Use action words, pose questions, or share snippets to ignite curiosity.
- 2. Use Images:** Include photos of students, teachers, and school events to add authenticity to your newsletter. Avoid stock photos if you can—they come across as generic. You can also experiment with infographics, charts, and visuals.
- 3. Make It Accessible:** You'll want to be sure your emails, and especially your newsletter, are accessible (able to be used by people of all abilities). Make text large and clear enough to read, use consistent colors that contrast appropriately, and don't rely on images alone to convey information. You'll also want to be sure your newsletter is optimized for various screen sizes—smartphones, tablets, and desktops.

4. Be Concise: Break your newsletter into smaller sections with clear headings. Use bullet points and write short paragraphs. Lead with, highlight, or bold key takeaways and important dates to ensure your audience doesn't miss it.

5. Share Success Stories: Highlighting student achievements, teacher spotlights, and event recaps can humanize your newsletter. Showcase the impact of your school's efforts and the contributions of your staff and students.

6. Ask for Feedback and Continually Improve: Invite readers to share their thoughts, feedback, and suggestions—that way your newsletter is always evolving toward the needs of your community.

EXPERT TIP

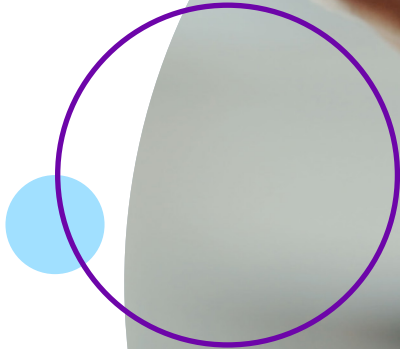
Regularly analyze open rates, click-through rates, and reader engagement. Experiment with different content types, layouts, and subject lines to understand what resonates best with your audience. Use these insights to refine your newsletter strategy.



FREE DOWNLOAD

Your Newsletter is One Part of Your Digital Marketing Strategy

For a deeper look on how to set your school's strategic marketing goals and refine your messaging, download the free Charter School Digital Marketing Guide.





Leveraging Text Messaging for School-Wide Engagement

Let's talk about text messaging—that double-edged sword of school communications. When done right, it's the most effective way to get urgent information to your families (because let's be honest, who doesn't check their texts?). But use it wrong, and you'll have families hitting "unsubscribe" or "STOP" faster than a middle schooler can say "whatever." Here's how to make text messaging work for your school, not against it.

Best Practices for School Text Messaging:

- **Keep It Brief and Essential:** Think breaking news, not a weekly newsletter. Weather closures, security updates, or critical reminders about tomorrow's field trip? Perfect for texts. The monthly lunch menu? Save it for email.
- **Time It Right:** Nobody wants a 5 AM text about spirit week (unless school's cancelled - then wake me up). Send texts during reasonable hours (think 8 AM to 7 PM) unless it's genuinely urgent.
- **Make It Actionable:** If you're sending a text, be clear about what you want families to do. "School closing at noon today - please pick up your student from their usual dismissal location" works better than "Early dismissal today due to weather."
- **Segment Your Audience:** Not every message needs to go to every family. Use your messaging system's groups feature to target specific grades, classes, or activities. For example, the chess club families don't need updates about football practice.
- **Mind Your Frequency:** Text messaging is like spicy food - a little goes a long way. Save it for when it really matters. If you're sending more than 2-3 texts per week, you might want to rethink your communication strategy.

- **Provide an Easy Opt-out:** It's not just about complying with messaging laws—it's about respecting your families' preferences. Make sure families know how to opt-out, but also make your texts so valuable that they won't want to.
- **Test Before Sending:** Nothing says "unprofessional" quite like a follow-up text correcting your typos. Double-check everything - links, dates, times, and spelling - before hitting send.
- **Have a Backup Plan:** Text messaging shouldn't be your only emergency communication tool. Always have backup channels ready (email, phone calls, website updates) for critical information.

Remember, every text you send competes with messages from friends, family, and that group chat nobody can figure out how to leave. Make your messages count and keep them clear, and your families will thank you for it.

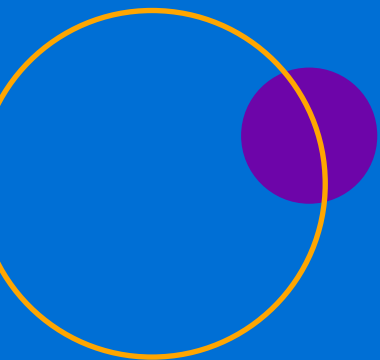
With thoughtful, consistent, and well-crafted communications, you'll not only keep your current families engaged but also attract prospective ones, ultimately contributing to the growth and success of your school. In the digital age, effective communication is more than just sharing information—it's about fostering a sense of community that extends beyond the classroom walls.





Section 3

Strategic Communication and Media Relations



Strategic Communication and Media Relations

By Jean Shields Fleming

Building Trust with Your Community

Building trust with your community is a complex process, and your communication plays an integral role. Built in part from an aligned voice and tone, strategic communications also lean on your organizational values to establish and nurture relationships with all who have a stake in your work: Students, families, donors and the community at large.

When your school's communications reflect unity and clarity, it can foster a sense of security within your community—at all times, not just in times of big announcements, or even a crisis. This alignment can also build stronger relationships with external stakeholders, such as families, donors, and the local media, and can lead to steady enrollment.

In this section, we'll uncover how to work with local media to tell your school's stories and how to build a robust plan for communicating in a crisis.

Let's dive in!

Proactive PR: Building Relationships with Your Local Media

MEDIA AS A POWERFUL ALLY

Whether you're focusing on enrollment, celebrating student achievements, or navigating community relations, local media can be a powerful ally, if you cultivate real relationships. A well-placed article, TV or radio segment, or social media mention by a trusted journalist can elevate your school's profile, build credibility, and attract new families.

Media coverage provides external validation, showcasing your school's impact and offering an endorsement that resonates beyond your website or brochures.

By fostering consistent communication with local journalists and sharing wins regularly, your school can establish itself as a vital part of the community, ensuring that people know your accomplishments and think of you when they are shopping for schools.



Here's why this partnership is critical:

1. Community Connection

Local media serves the community you're part of—your neighbors, families, and caregivers. These outlets are constantly looking for relatable stories that resonate with their audience. Highlighting how your school enriches students' lives aligns perfectly with their mission.

2. Credibility Through Validation

An external media outlet validating your school's achievements builds trust within your community. When families hear about your successes from a respected source, it bolsters enrollment efforts.

EXPERT TIP

Treat media interactions as a partnership, not just a transaction.

3. Managing Through Crisis

Establishing and maintaining relationships with the media proactively, before a problem arises, can help smooth the way when issues occur. This foundation enables a balanced narrative if challenges arise.

Who's Who in the Media

Understand the roles within media organizations before you reach out to them.

1. Reporters

- Gather and fact-check information.
- Write stories or produce segments for radio/TV.

2. Editors

- Oversee content creation and approve stories.
- Manage the balance of stories published in a given cycle.

3. Producers (Radio/TV Specific)

- Coordinate logistics for segments.
- Blend roles of reporting and editorial oversight.

While the media often come in for criticism, remember, they have a tough job to do too. Most reporters need to find two independent sources to verify information, then shape a compelling narrative that grabs attention. And they have to do it fast!

So as you prepare to engage with the media, keep in mind the complexity of their work. It's a bit like running a school!





Tips for Reaching Out to Local Media

Building positive media relationships requires intentionality. While of course you want coverage when you have a big win, if you only reach out then, you're missing a huge opportunity. Consistent, low stakes engagement establishes your school as a reliable source of inspiring stories. Journalists look for narratives that connect with the community and showcase meaningful work.

Tip: Identify local newspapers, radio stations, and online publications. Many communities have niche outlets that focus on education. Build a list of local outlets and reporters that you can regularly email.

To maximize your media efforts, a thoughtful approach to outreach is key. Journalists are tasked with finding stories of interest to their audience. Here are some actionable strategies to help your school leverage local media effectively.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS EARLY

Don't wait for a major announcement or crisis. Proactively share good news early in the school year—such as enrollment milestones, innovative programs, or community events. Establishing a rapport with journalists before you need one positions your school as a trusted source for compelling stories. Consider setting up a quarterly email automation that uses data from your school's dashboard to generate highlights.

HOW TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPORTERS

1. Start Small and Strategic

For many school leaders, reaching out to a reporter can feel daunting, but it doesn't have to be. Early in the school year, send a short introductory email to a local journalist, highlighting your school's mission, achievements, and willingness to serve as a resource.

2. Contextualize Stories for Local Concerns

Local media want stories that resonate with their audience—often families, businesses, and community members. Schools should frame their updates to reflect these interests:

- **Share what matters.** Focus on how your school contributes to the community, whether through student success stories, partnerships, or unique programs. Highlight milestones and wins like grants, new facilities, or academic achievements.

- **Align with current events.** Tie your stories to larger narratives. For example, if your school is participating in events aligned with the Olympics or local celebrations, share how your students are involved. Reporters are more likely to cover stories that fit into ongoing news cycles.
- **It’s not all about you!** Lead with what is happening in the community, and then lead to your school’s contribution. For example, if finding qualified workers is a local concern, show how your impressive results are preparing kids in the community to step into the jobs of the future. Frame your updates to emphasize the broader impact on the community rather than solely promoting your school.
- **Be prepared.** Have media releases and permissions ready for student appearances. Identify “camera-ready” students, staff, or administrators who are comfortable speaking on behalf of the school. Provide concise, impactful soundbites that highlight your key messages.
- **Think visually.** Strong visuals captivate audiences and increase the attractiveness of your story. Whether it’s a classroom experiment, a sports event, or a school celebration, consider the visual appeal when pitching stories to television or online platforms.

3. Think Long-Term

Relationship-building takes time. Don’t be discouraged by an initial lack of response—reporters are busy, and timing is everything. Regularly share updates to keep your school top of mind for future stories.

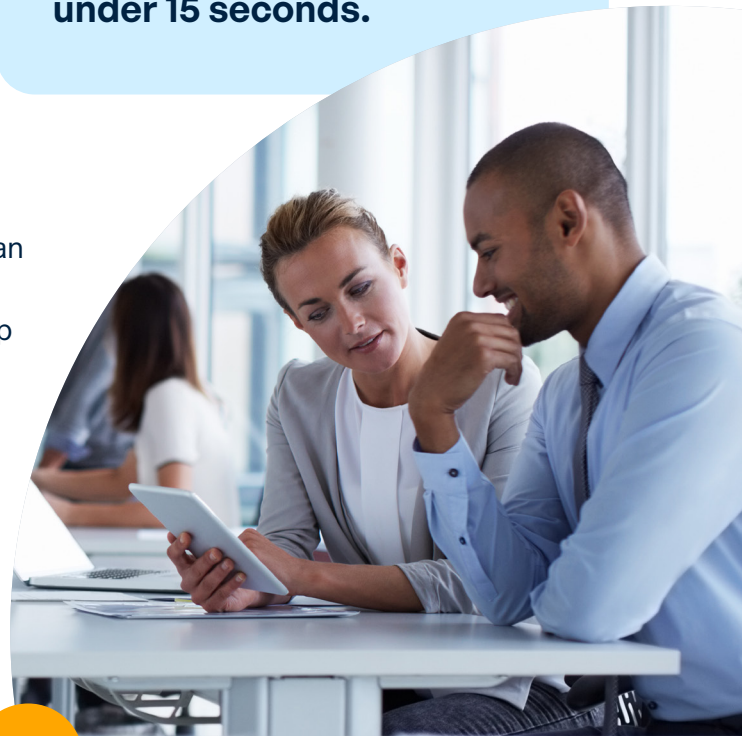
4. Make It Easy

When pitching a story, think about the reporter’s needs:

- What’s the hook?
- Why is this story relevant now?
- Is it visual? For television outlets, suggest how cameras could capture engaging footage of students or events.

EXPERT TIP

Hone an elevator pitch. An elevator pitch is a short, compelling summary of what makes your school unique, and it should be something every leader and staff member can confidently share. Whether you’re talking to a potential student, a new community member, or even a potential donor, having a prepared pitch helps convey your school’s mission, vision, and values in a few impactful sentences. Practice it until it feels natural and can be delivered smoothly in under 15 seconds.



5. Be a Consistent Resource

Even if your initial outreach doesn't lead to coverage, reporters will remember your proactive approach when they need a perspective on education.

Crisis Communications for School Leaders: Be Prepared, Not Scrambling

Engaging with the media is an essential part of shaping your school's public image, but strong communication isn't just about proactive storytelling—it's also about being ready for the unexpected.

Before a crisis occurs, charter school leaders should establish communication protocols that outline who is responsible for speaking on behalf of the school and how key messages will be crafted and delivered. This includes defining the primary spokespersons—typically the school leader or designated PR personnel—who will relay official updates to the community, staff, and external stakeholders.

Preparation is Everything

You don't want to be thinking this stuff through when the proverbial fan is already spinning.

Here's how to be sure you're prepared:

- 1. Build Your Crisis Response Team:** Start by identifying your crisis response team. This group might include school leadership, a communications specialist, and a representative from your governing board. Ensure roles and responsibilities are clear—who speaks to the media, who updates families, and who coordinates internally.
- 2. Anticipate Potential Scenarios:** Take time during staff meetings to brainstorm possible crises your school could face. These could include safety concerns, natural disasters, malfeasance, financial audits, academic challenges, or local political disputes.
- 3. Develop a Communications Plan:** Outline a loose plan that includes key messages, communication channels, and contact lists. Make sure this plan is accessible and regularly updated.
- 4. Establish a Relationship with Local Media:** Being proactive with media relations can help schools control the narrative when crises arise. Build relationships with local journalists and outlets so that they're familiar with your mission and values.

EXPERT TIP

Use email to contact reporters. Email is the preferred method for journalists, allowing you to craft thoughtful, concise pitches that highlight your story's importance. Be persistent—media professionals receive lots of pitches daily, and consistent follow-up keeps your school on their radar.

INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL CRISES: KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

The first step in preparing for a crisis is understanding the difference between internal and external issues. Internal crises often stem from within the school, like financial mismanagement or issues around academic performance. These situations may be tough to handle, but they are usually something that can be anticipated or identified early.

External crises, on the other hand, are typically things that are less predictable, like a security breach, media backlash, natural disaster, or act of violence in the community. They require a swift and coordinated response to mitigate any damage to the school's reputation or operations.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PREPARATION

Despite your best efforts at preparation, things can still take a turn unexpectedly. When a crisis hits, take a moment to regroup, review your plan, and get your ducks in a row before reacting.

Make an internal document to gather the facts of the situation:

- Document what happened, when it happened, who was involved (both people who may have actually done something and those who are impacted); what is the impact to your key stakeholders (i.e., families, students, staff, community); what actions you have taken or plan to take
- Do not share this document externally or with people not on the designated crisis team.
- It is the basis for developing your response and messaging.

PROACTIVE OR REACTIVE RESPONSE?

You will need to determine if the situation requires you to respond proactively or to react when questions come up. In general, a bias toward proactive responses is a best practice. However, certain situations are better handled reactively. Examples of such situations include targeting on social media or other types of “baiting.” Transparency and accountability are key during internal crises. Whether it's a financial issue or a lapse in governance, being transparent with your leadership team and your community is essential. If a mistake has been made, it's important to own it. You don't have to apologize endlessly, but acknowledging the issue and offering a solution, along with a timeline for updates, can go a long way in regaining trust.

For external crises, the focus shifts to managing your public messaging. Whether it's a media report or a social media frenzy, having a spokesperson ready with key messages can help control the narrative. It's crucial to think about what should and shouldn't be said, and how you'll handle questions that arise.



A quick and easy communications framework for crisis is as follows:

- What happened - state the problem as simply and clearly as you can.
- Who's impacted - acknowledge the emotional impact as well as material
- Steps to solve - share what you are doing to resolve the problem.
- Next update - set expectations on when you will provide more information.

ALIGNING ON COMMUNICATIONS: A KEY ROLE FOR CHARTER SCHOOL BOARDS

One of the most critical factors in effective crisis management for charter schools is ensuring that the school's board of directors is aligned on communications. When a crisis strikes, mixed messages can create confusion and damage trust with the community. The board's role is to set the tone for how the school communicates both internally and externally, helping to present a united front during times of uncertainty.

Based on the school's communications protocol, Board members should make sure they understand how school leaders plan to handle public statements and media interactions. For example, if a board member is approached by the media to comment, he or she should deflect that request to the proper person as designated in the communications plan. Board members should not speak "off the record" or as a favor on a developing situation unless they have been briefed on messaging and cleared to speak.

EXPERT TIP

Board members should understand when to refrain from commenting publicly to avoid unintentionally complicating the crisis response.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS: KEY STRATEGIES

When responding to a crisis, there are a few key points to remember:

- 1. Own the issue.** If it's an internal problem, be transparent with your community and take responsibility where needed. Provide updates regularly so people know what's being done.
- 2. Use Your organizational values.** Crisis situations are the perfect time to demonstrate your school's core values. Values like integrity, honesty, and transparency should guide your messaging and decisions.



3. Be strategic with social media. Social media can either help or hinder your crisis management efforts. Use it to identify sentiment and misinformation in the community, and if appropriate, as a tool to share important updates. Do not engage in online arguments. Monitor conversations closely, and know when to respond and when to turn off comments or even disable social media profiles temporarily.

A REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE: FINANCIAL AND ACHIEVEMENT CHALLENGES

Let's consider two common areas of crisis for charter schools: financial management and academic achievement scores. These issues can quickly become flashpoints in the community, especially given the skepticism that often surrounds charter schools.

If a charter school faces financial struggles, the key is to be proactive. Don't wait for the media or others to uncover the issue. Be the one to deliver the news to your community, framing the situation and offering solutions. When it comes to academic achievement, the same principle applies. If test scores are lower than expected, put those numbers into context. Whether it's a school focused on credit recovery or one with a high proportion of at-risk students, framing your achievement data with context can help manage the narrative and remind people of the progress your students have made.

PREPARING FOR THE UNPREDICTABLE

In the end, the most important part of crisis management is preparation. A crisis plan is a tool you hope never to use, but when you need it, you'll be glad it's there. So, while you can't predict every scenario, having a plan in place can help you respond effectively when a crisis arises. By being proactive, transparent, and strategic in your communications, you'll be better equipped to handle whatever comes your way.



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