



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

Effective (and Easy) Communications: Tips for School Psychologists

Effective communications is vital to achieving the goals and objectives of school psychology, whether trying to improve services at the building level, secure funding at the state level, or shape policy at the national level. Failure to communicate well can result in negative outcomes and missed opportunities.

Leadership role in communications: All school psychologists can be leaders at the building district or state level. Good communications is also an important leadership tool. Either as a leader in the profession or a professional developing your leadership skills, you can leverage your opportunities and knowledge to reach a wide range of stakeholders. Important aspects to this leadership role are:

- Knowing and reaching out to key audiences/stakeholders.
- Recognizing communications opportunities.
- Developing and conveying key messages.
- Providing useful, relevant information to groups or individuals.
- Making use of resources provided by NASP and/or your state.
- Coordinating with colleagues within NASP and/or your state.
- Encouraging fellow school psychologists to be active communicators.

Key message areas: Developing clear, memorable messages is critical to effective communications. Determining what your most important messages are depends on the goal and the specific situation but there are a few global issues that are central to the profession today. NASP is working to help develop and disseminate key messages on these global issues to a variety of stakeholder audiences and for use by individual school psychologists. These include:

- **NASP Practice Model:** School psychologists are a potentially untapped resource. The Practice Model helps districts make the best, most effective use of school psychologists' expertise.
- **Expertise with data:** School psychologists are highly trained in data collection and analysis, and data-based decision-making.
- **School improvement:** School psychologists are valuable members of the school improvement team, understanding individual, classroom and school-wide needs and interventions.
- **School safety and positive school climate:** School psychologists have expertise in violence prevention, crisis response, and creating positive learning environments.
- **School-wide prevention and intervention:** School psychologists are leaders in school-wide programs that improve behavior and academic achievement, such as PBS and RTI.
- **School mental health services:** School psychologists are advocates for the social-emotional well-being and mental health of children and youth, promoting wellness and providing mental health interventions and support.

Developing Your Messages

Identify your target audiences: There is no “general public.” Messages even on the same issue should be tailored as narrowly as possible to the specific audience because they have different concerns and perspectives.

- Administrators
- Teachers/Other educators
- Allied professionals
- Parents
- School Boards/Polymakers
- Advocacy Groups
- Media
- School Psychologists

Consider your audience's:

- Level of knowledge/awareness.
- Primary concerns/expectations.
- Perspective.
- Possible barriers to understanding.
- Ability/likelihood to take action.

Focus on your objective: Consider why the issue is important, to whom, and why at this time. What do you want to accomplish?

- Raise awareness of your role/value to students/adults.
- Raise awareness of a specific issue.
- Increase your involvement/effectiveness on an issue.
- Build support for specific policy/resource needs.
- Encourage parents/teachers/students to act.

Be relevant:

- Relate the issue to a state/local context.
- People focus on issues they are concerned about.
- Articulate impact on students/school (link to NCLB).
- Include some supporting points about what parents/teachers/students can do.
- Provide your contact information.

Be clear and concise:

- Pick your main point.
- State it at the outset. (Bullying is unacceptable, *preventable* behavior that undermines students' well-being and academic achievement.)
- Back it up with 2-3 facts.
- Provide specific suggestions.
- Provide personal examples.
- Use audience appropriate language.
- Avoid acronyms/technical language.
- Use active tense.
- Use bullets to the extent possible.
- Ask a colleague to review.
- Proof your work (or ask someone else to)!

Things to keep in mind:

- Most people will only remember 2 or 3 points in any communications.
- Be brief.
- Think about the perspective of your audiences.
- You know **way more** than your audiences need to hear/read.
- Incorporate language relevant to others.

Resonate:

- Appeal to emotion as well as intellect.
- Use “social math,” not just statistics.
- Put a “face” on the issue. Tell stories, not just facts.
- Be a good listener.
- Need a clear “call to action”
- Don’t allow (or expect) your target audience to guess what you need

Consistent points to make: No matter what the topic, there are a few standard points to make in any communication intended to promote best practices and school psychology. Always:

- Emphasize the importance of prevention and early intervention.
- Identify the link between the issue/topic and learning and behavior.
- Reiterate that effective interventions and proper supports improve children’s outcomes.
- Describe, at least briefly, the school psychologist’s role in addressing the issue.
- Encourage people to seek additional information from you/their local school psychologist.

Getting Your Message Out

Know your district communications tools:

- Weekly newsletters
- PTA newsletter
- Handouts home to parents
- Website(s)
- Meetings/school events
- Hallway bulletin boards

1. Reach administrators

- Newsletter articles
- Handouts/fact sheets
- Data collection/analysis
- Personal meetings (Really important. Try early morning coffee once a month.)

2. Reach parents

- Newsletter articles/school lunch menu
- Handouts
- Parent meetings/workshops
- PTA presentations
- Back-to-School night
- School/PTA listservs
- School bulletin boards/hallways

3. Reach teachers

- Newsletter articles
- Handouts/fact sheets
- In-service trainings
- Data chats
- Brown-bag lunch discussions
- Classroom visits (pre-arranged)
- School bulletin boards/hallways

4. Reach community service providers

- Fact sheets/handouts
- Presentations at their conferences/meetings
- Personal meetings
- Workshops (invite to in-service trainings)
- On-site school visits

5. Reach school boards/policymakers

- Presentations/testimony
- Fact sheets/policy briefs
- Legislative initiatives
- School Psych Awareness Week proclamation
- Media articles
- On-site school visits (very effective)

Coordinate your efforts:

- Combine efforts with other school psychologists in your district.
- Share activities/presentations/materials (*HCHS* // handouts, NASP adaptable materials).
- Team up with other personnel (counselor, social worker, nurse).
- Ask to be listed as a resource in materials sent home or posted on the web.

Make the most of your presentations:

- Know how much time you have. PRACTICE.
- Use short declarative statements for verbal remarks.
- Make your major points up front.

- Provide facts but avoid reading lots of statistics (unless you have visuals).
- Use real examples but focus on important details.
- Provide written materials (handouts, testimony, etc.)
- Written remarks can be longer than verbal remarks.
- Provide your contact information.
- Leave time for Q&As if possible.

Make the most of the media:

- Submit brief articles to local paper (tips for parents are popular in family/life/education/health sections).
- Offer to be a media spokesperson/"local expert."
- Clear media activities with your supervisor/district communications office.
- Be clear what issues (e.g., discipline, test anxiety, school climate) you are comfortable addressing.

Speaking as an "expert:"

- Plan what you are going to say.
- Practice your main messages (no more than three).
- Stay on message. Don't hesitate to repeat important points.
- Research/know your facts.
- Avoid controversial local issues unless you have specific direction/instructions from your district communications office.
- Focus on "best practice" comments.
- Feel free to say, "I do not know."
- Avoid commenting on the specifics of issues with which you are not involved.
- Redirect questions about specifics to general practice knowledge. "I am not familiar with the specifics of this case, but generally adolescents..."
- **Expect everything you say to appear on the front page of *The New York Times* (and that your mother, children, and boss will read it)!**

Possibilities, Opportunities, Suggestions

- Familiarize yourself with and work with colleagues to promote the NASP Practice Model.
- Familiarize yourself with the key issues/messages and related NASP materials. Check the website frequently for new and updated information.
- Identify a couple of people in your district/state to help reach out to various audiences.
- Establish personal relationships with other school psych and allied professional leaders.
- Ask colleagues in other professions whom to contact in their associations/other key groups to offer information.
- Offer allied professional organizations information regarding issues of shared concern to include in newsletters or their website. MOST ORGANIZATIONS LOVE THIS if the information is relevant and concise.
- Identify a local or state initiative/issue related in some way to one of the NASP themes. Use this as "hook" to promote an article, handout, letter-to-the-editor, etc.
- Kill two birds... Submit an article to more than one group (e.g., state PTA and principal's association) but let them know you are offering the piece to other groups.
- Offer to be a regular or periodic contributor to a news outlet. Use NASP materials as the base but print pieces usually need to be unique to the paper. (See Practical Strategies for additional tips.)
- Present on a relevant topic at an allied professional conference or meeting.
- Use your state association or district website. Use adaptable resources on the NASP website.

This handout and other communications resources are available for members on the NASP website by at www.nasponline.org/communications. Please send questions, suggestions, and updates on your communications efforts to NASP Director of Communications, Kathy Cowan at kcowan@naspweb.org.