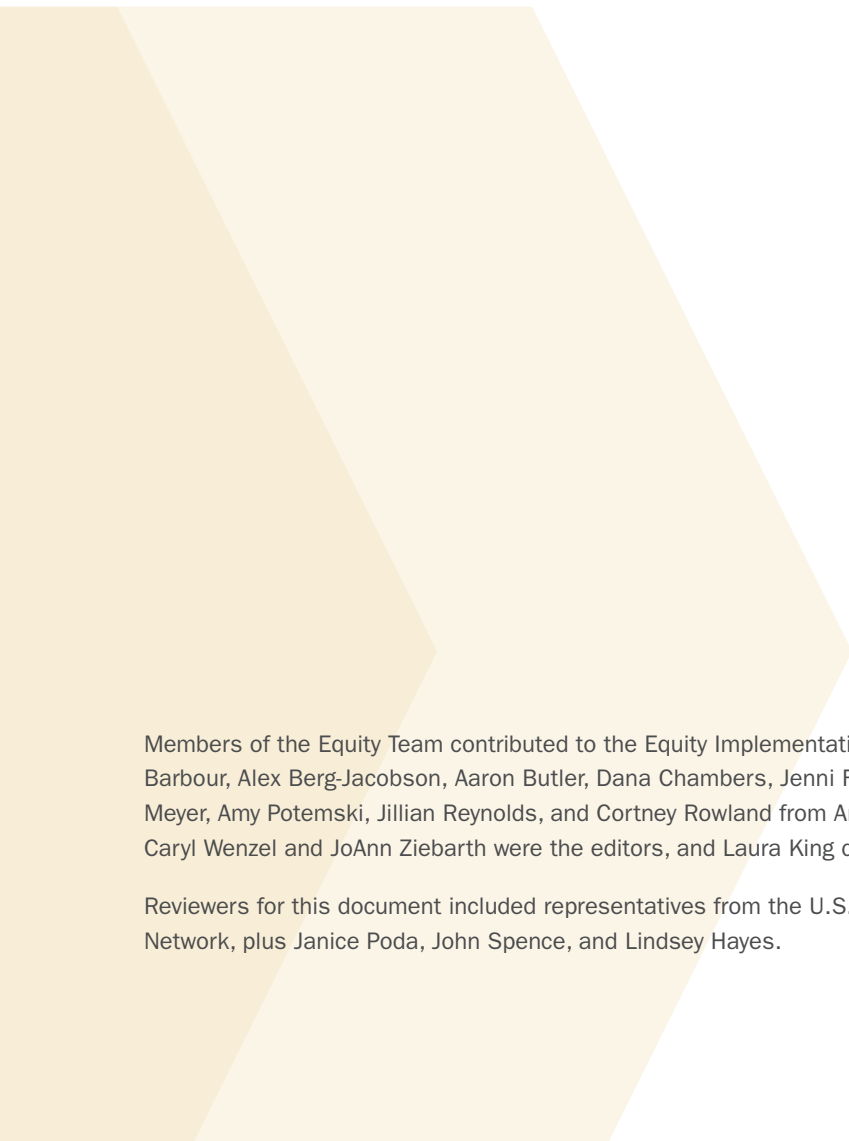# Center on
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The Equitable Access Implementation Playbook
COMMUNICATION GUIDEBOOK

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Contents

As states prepare to implement their Equitable Access Plans, it is crucial that they continue to engage external stakeholders as part of a comprehensive communication strategy. State education agency (SEA) teams can use this four-step guide to create a communication plan for disseminating key messages related to (1) the Equitable Access Plan and its specific components, (2) the next steps for plan implementation, and (3) progress reporting.

SEA teams should use this tool in collaboration with the SEA's director of communications to develop a communication plan and coordinate its execution. The SEA communications team should be engaged in this planning and implementation process to coordinate messages and outreach across multiple educator effectiveness initiatives. In addition, SEA leaders may wish to adapt this tool for local education agencies to use in communicating about equity work under way at the local level.

Five Key Communication Steps

This communication guidebook is organized according to the following steps:

- **STEP 1.** Identify audiences and messengers.
- **STEP 2.** Identify and implement communication channels.
- **STEP 3.** Develop key messages.
- **STEP 4.** Develop a communications project management plan.
- **STEP 5.** Monitor the effectiveness of communication.

All five steps should be considered prior to implementing an Equitable Access Plan. In addition, four activities are provided to facilitate the development and implementation of this communication plan.

Playbook Tool Connection

This *Communication Guidebook* may be useful for states that have completed Step 1 of the *Equitable Access Implementation Playbook: Implementation Planning Tool,* which assesses community readiness and suggests a next step for creating a communication plan.

STEP 1: Identify Audiences and Messengers

The first step in developing a communication plan is to identify your different stakeholder audiences, as well as the messengers or spokespersons you will use to communicate with each audience. In the Equitable Access Implementation Playbook: Implementation Planning Tool, you may have already identified your stakeholders in Step 1 (plan for community awareness). If you are not using the *Implementation Planning Tool*, you may consider starting with the key stakeholder groups you engaged with while developing the Equitable Access Plan. Such groups may be important early partners in communications related to implementing the Equitable Access Plan.

The types of communication strategies and tactics used by your SEA may differ by stakeholder group. In addition, the amount and type of information shared may need to be modified depending on the audience and the timing of the communication. For example, because of their role and perspective, classroom teachers and school-level administrators may want (or need) a different set of details about the Equitable Access Plan than parents or the public may desire.

Disseminating key messages for Equitable Access Plan release may be most effective if delivered by key stakeholder messengers. Target individuals who were involved in developing the plan; these people may be in the best position to relay information and address misconceptions. Proactive engagement of possible messengers will give the SEA internal team an opportunity to get ahead of any misconceptions or concerns that exist among stakeholders or the public.

Use Activity 1 as a brainstorming activity to identify the audiences and messengers for Equitable Access Plan communications and initiate the communication process. You will complete a more detailed planning process for each audience in Activity 3.

ACTIVITY 1: Identifying Audiences and Messengers

Which stakeholders did you engage with while developing the Equitable Access Plan?

Among the groups you have listed, who should hear about the ongoing implementation of the Equitable Access Plan? How best should we communicate with each group?

Once informed, who can help inform others about the release of the Equitable Access Plan (i.e., good messengers)? Consider whether any stakeholders engaged during the development process would be good candidates.

STEP 2: Identify and Implement Communication Strategies

After you have identified the key audiences and messengers, the next step is to develop a strategic plan for communicating with each identified stakeholder group. Five strategies of communication exist (Table 1). SEA leaders should consider both existing channels (e.g., an electronic mailing list of teachers) and other channels that may need to be specially arranged (e.g., an in-person gathering of parents). In addition to these channels, you may want to coordinate closely with your state chief or other key SEA staff to ensure that key messages about the equity initiative are included in all communications from these offices (e.g., speeches, blogs, media interviews, and presentations).

Table 1. Communication Strategies and Specific Considerations for Their Use

Communication Strategies	Considerations for Use
Collateral. Create print and electronic materials to serve as key content for use in tandem with other strategies. This collateral can be shared in hard copy or in meetings, posted on a website, and disseminated through social media.	Consider what equitable access collateral your state already has, what you hope to develop, and how you will use this collateral to inform your key audiences. Examples of collateral might include the following: ■ Create a one-page overview document that covers the impact of the Equitable Access Plan on key stakeholder groups. ■ Develop a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document to provide basic information about the Equitable Access Plan, including its development process, the plan components, and next steps for implementation.
In-Person Meetings. Provide opportunities for face-to-face exchanges regarding the plan and its implementation. This strategy is essential for engaging key stakeholders and empowering key messengers with the information they need to spread the word.	■ Develop a calendar of opportunities for face-to-face meetings with possible stakeholder messengers. These individuals would serve as liaisons to their peers regarding the Equitable Access Plan and its implementation. ■ Ensure that questions and concerns are addressed both accurately and in a timely manner by assigning one knowledgeable person within your SEA to field questions. Ideally, inquiries should receive a response within 24 hours.
Digital Media and Electronic Communication Strategies. Create on-demand access to documents and information through digital media (such as websites, databases, webcasts, and podcasts). The primary purpose of such digital media is to create a central and accessible location for all materials and information related to the Equitable Access Plan. To drive audiences to these materials and information, consider strategies such as e-mail blasts and press releases.	■ Consider creating and regularly updating a website that has basic information about the Equitable Access Plan, its development, its implementation, and the national context. On this website, include an FAQ page, links to resources that can inform district decision making, and downloadable collateral (see the first section of this table). ■ Consider creating e-mail blasts and targeted press releases for dissemination prior to and following the implementation of key elements of the Equitable Access Plan.

Communication Strategies	Considerations for Use
Social Media. Use multiple social media platforms to engage in an online dialogue about important equity implementation issues and updates. Social media can be used to not only disseminate information but also collect input and feedback on issues and challenges that may arise during implementation.	■ Consider using current SEA blogs, Facebook, or Twitter accounts to update audiences about the Equitable Access Plan and its implementation. ■ Designate someone to monitor comments and discussion that might ensue. Look especially for opportunities to direct people to the central website and address misconceptions. ■ Advertise updates such as the launch of key elements or strategies of the Equitable Access Plan.
Traditional Media. Use traditional media— television, radio, newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and other print publications— particularly when communicating with the public and the general community. Use these media strategically at the right time and for very specific purposes.	■ Use traditional media proactively at strategic points to further the goal of stakeholder understanding and support beyond those directly affected. ■ Prepare talking points and answers to questions that may be asked of any internal SEA staff member requested to provide background or direct quotes.

STEP 3: Develop Key Messages

For some, implementation of the Equitable Access Plan may represent a positive step in state education reform, whereas for others it may raise concerns about overly burdensome reforms. The Equitable Access Plan also may bolster concerns about inequities for students from low-income and minority backgrounds and the lack of effective strategies to close equity gaps in the past. SEA teams must understand the diverse perspectives on the issue and communicate key messages that will promote accurate information about the SEA plan and its components. In doing so they also must maintain the support and buy-in of the diverse stakeholders invested in the plan's success.

SEAs should develop key messages for each stakeholder group prior to implementing the Equitable Access Plan and provide regularly scheduled updates to these stakeholders and the public about progress being made to implement the plan and close equity gaps. Key messages are the core concepts that people should understand about the equitable access initiative. Generally, key messages should be focused on basic questions of who, what, why, and how. In addition, consider what matters most to each stakeholder group and anticipate common concerns or misconceptions about the initiative to support the overall clarity of messages.

> ### KEY RESOURCE
>
> #### *K12: Equity & Disparities*
>
> Looking for specific guidance on communicating with stakeholders about equity topics? This webpage from the Frameworks Institute offers a video and links to several print publications that can help inform and guide messages, including the following:
>
> ➤ Gaps in the public's understanding of disparities in education
>
> ➤ Dominant cognitive frames that are used by the media when talking to the public about equity issues

Effective Messages

Following are general tips on effective messages, common key messages, and ways to counter myths and misunderstandings.

General Tips for Effective Messages

All key messages, including messages about data, require some basic checks to ensure that they are clear, effective, and sensitive to the perspective of particular stakeholder groups. Table 2 is a checklist to consider when drafting key messages.

Table 2. Checklist for Key Messages

✓ Is the language understandable (simple and clear) for the intended audience? (Ask one or two stakeholders from the intended audience to read the key message. Ask for feedback and suggestions to improve clarity or perception.)

✓ Is the terminology used correctly and consistently? Is it free of jargon?

✓ When and how do you plan to revisit your key messages to ensure that they are working as you intended?

✓ Is the message accurate? Key messages must not be created based on what you believe the audience wants to hear. Instead, they must reflect the reality of your state's priorities, as expressed with forethought.

Common Key Messages

Key messages likely will differ for each group. However, some key messages, such as messages about equitable access (Table 3) and stakeholder engagement (Table 4), may apply to all stakeholders.

Table 3. Sample Key Messages About Equitable Access

- "Equitable access to excellent teaching is important because our state upholds the ideal that all students, regardless of their background, should have equal opportunities to succeed in life and their careers. Fundamental to this opportunity is receiving an education, and fundamental to that is access to excellent teaching."
- "Research across the United States has consistently shown that students from low-income families and students of color are systematically taught by less experienced teachers and often experience less effective instruction. In our state specifically, data show that...."

Table 4. Sample Key Messages About Engaging Stakeholders

- "Engaging stakeholders is important to our state because stakeholders are deeply affected by teacher effectiveness policies. Their perspectives will help make the implementation of our Equitable Access Plan stronger."
- "Our state is committed to gathering and applying feedback from individual stakeholders to enhance our ability to strengthen our Equitable Access Plan, as well as accurately explain and effectively implement our state's Equitable Access Plan."

Countering Myths and Misunderstandings

In addition to developing strategic, positive messages, it is important to consider common myths and areas of misunderstanding about Equitable Access Plans and develop messages to directly counteract them. These myths may include the following:

- "The Equitable Access Plan will force teachers to move to schools and districts where they do not want to teach."
- "The Equitable Access Plan will lower the quality of high-performing schools by replacing strong teachers with weak ones."
- "The Equitable Access Plan will be costly to taxpayers."

In your messages, confront the myths, misunderstandings, and areas of concern in your state.

Continually Refining Messages

After developing strategic messages, consider how best to incorporate and continually build on these messages at later points in the implementation and when reporting progress on closing equity gaps. Regularly convene your team to ask questions such as the following:

- What are the main messages?
- Who should hear these messages?
- Who would best deliver these messages (i.e., SEA staff, key messengers)?
- When and how should messages be delivered?

ACTIVITY 2: Key Messages Activity

Activity 2 is a template for considering current key messages about your state's Equitable Access Plan at subsequent points in time.

Instructions: *Using Table 5, develop sample key messages relevant to the intended audiences in your state today. Keep in mind that these messages will likely evolve as you progress through implementing your Equitable Access Plan.*

Table 5. Key Messages

Key Considerations
For all questions, consider the following:
■ "Checklist for Key Messages" (Table 2)
■ "Countering Myths and Misunderstandings" (see page 7)
For questions involving data, also consider the following:
■ The source of the data and possible perceived biases
■ The primary challenge identified by the data
■ The guiding questions to develop an accessible narrative
■ Contradicting trends in the data
■ Any assumptions made as a result of missing data

Equitable Access Plan Implementation	
Specific Questions	**Key Message for Intended Audience(s)**
How will implementation of the Equitable Access Plan benefit students? Teachers? Communities?	
How does the process described in the Equitable Access Plan get us from where we are to where we want to be?	
How will the Equitable Access Plan be implemented (e.g., under what timeline and under whose oversight)? How will each stakeholder group be affected?	
During and after implementation of the Equitable Access Plan, how will our SEA obtain feedback from stakeholders on how well it is going?	
(Other)	

ACTIVITY 3: Differentiating Communication to Stakeholders

Activity 3, which is adapted from the Reform Support Network's *Educator Evaluation Communications Toolkit* (published in 2013), will help SEA leaders differentiate among different audiences and identify what they need to know, when they need to know it, what you need to learn from them, and the best method of communication.

> **Instructions:** *Please complete Table 6 to determine strategic approaches to communication with each distinct stakeholder group that you identified in Activity 1. Consider your state's specific context and add specific relevant parties as you complete the chart. Various stakeholder groups are listed as placeholders, and the first row is completed as an example.*

Table 6. Communication to Various Audiences

Stakeholders	What They Need to Know (including key messages from Activity 2)	When They Need to Know It	Communication Channels (e.g., "Tactics" from Step 2)	Possible Messenger (e.g., can help disseminate information)
Example *Jane Smith (professional association representative)*	*Example* ■ *Milestones in the Equitable Access Plan implementation process* ■ *Impact of the Equitable Access Plan on teachers* ■ *Opportunities to participate and provide feedback during implementation*	*Example* ■ *Prior to public release of the Equitable Access Plan* ■ *Throughout the implementation process*	*Example* ■ *In-person: one-on-one* ■ *Collateral: one-page*	*Example* *Yes*
(Media)				
(Civil rights groups)				
(Legislators)				
(Principals)				

Stakeholders	What They Need to Know (including key messages from Activity 2)	When They Need to Know It	Communication Channels (e.g., "Tactics" from Step 2)	Possible Messenger (e.g., can help disseminate information)
(District administrators)				
(Parents)				
(Students)				
(Local school board members)				
(Teacher leader/ teacher voice organization members or fellows)				
(Professional organizations)				

Stakeholders	What They Need to Know (including key messages from Activity 2)	When They Need to Know It	Communication Channels (e.g., "Tactics" from Step 2)	Possible Messenger (e.g., can help disseminate information)
(Local business leaders)				
(Higher education partners)				
(Policymakers, state and local education leaders)				
(Researchers and technical experts)				
(Other)				
(Other)				

STEP 4: Establishing a Project Management Plan for Communications

In Activity 3, your team identified "communication channels" for each stakeholder type. To develop and distribute these communication materials or plan and host communication events, you will need to establish a project management plan. The *Equitable Access Implementation Playbook: Implementation Planning Tool* includes a Project Management Tool (see Step 5) that you can use to establish a timeline, key steps, the person or persons responsible for each step, and resources needed.

For each communications activity (e.g., a communications document or event), use the Project Management Tool in Step 5 of the *Implementation Planning Tool* to establish the process and timing.

Playbook Tool Connection

The *Equitable Access Implementation Playbook: Implementation Planning Tool* includes a Project Management Tool (see Step 5) that you can use to establish a timeline, key steps, the person or persons responsible for each step, and resources needed.

STEP 5: Monitor the Effectiveness of Communication

Often, policy leaders learn that their communication efforts were not sufficient when it is too late. Ongoing feedback on the effectiveness of communication strategies can lead to continuous improvements in stakeholder outreach and implementation of the Equitable Access Plan. The following activities can help SEA leaders monitor the effectiveness of communications:

- Utilize the community readiness section of the GTL Center's *Equitable Access Implementation Playbook: Monitoring Tool* to gauge the success of communication efforts.

- Analyze comments submitted through the website and social media sites to see if they relate to communication efforts.

- Include questions about the effectiveness of communication strategies in any survey or focus groups.

- Request that stakeholder groups solicit input from their members on communication strengths and weaknesses.

- Monitor internal communications for consistency in messages.

Playbook Tool Connection

The *Equitable Access Implementation Playbook: Monitoring Tool* includes strategies for establishing and implementing a monitoring plan for each area of the equity work.

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITY: Communication Best Practices

Table 7 lists communication best practices. Review this table with your team and brainstorm proactive steps your state can take to implement these best practices in your implementation communication.

Table 7. Communication Best Practices

Best Practices	Proactive Steps
Be proactive. Provide information about equitable access as it becomes available but offer it in a purposeful way so that audiences feel supported and not overwhelmed.	
Be responsive. Listen to and promptly address questions and misconceptions about equitable access.	
Be consistent in messages. Use the proper terminology and branding for all materials.	
Be consistent in both where and how information becomes available. For example, if your state's website has a section devoted to the Excellent Educators for All initiative, ensure that it is a reliable repository for downloadable documents and other information. Reserve mass e-mails for important announcements that affect a large number of people and are time sensitive.	

Best Practices	Proactive Steps
Avoid jargon. Keep the language simple and clear for the intended audiences, particularly when communicating the metrics used to assess equitable access, such as value-added measures.	
Keep in mind that myths spread quickly, so proactively counter them. For an example of a "myths and facts" document, see Appendix B of the *Educator Evaluation Communications Toolkit*.	

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