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Healthy Students Learn Better

Creating a healthy school environment is a collaborative effort among educators, students, parents, and the community. To improve school health, you will need to build support from school leaders, teachers, students, and the community.

This **Healthy Students Learn Better Practice Guide series** gives you resources, tips, and tools to create a healthy school physical environment.



PRACTICE GUIDE 4

Engage Partners and the Community in Your Efforts

PRACTICE GUIDE 4 is a community awareness toolkit. It contains strategies and examples for promoting the success and sustainability of your initiative.

Other Practice Guides in This Series



PRACTICE GUIDE 1 provides practical strategies and resources to measure, improve, and track school environmental health.



PRACTICE GUIDE 2 gets students involved in citizen science projects for school environmental health.



PRACTICE GUIDE 3 provides resources to support school environmental health.

How can I build a successful communications plan?

Improving environmental health in schools is a community effort. You will need the support of school and district leaders, teachers and staff, parents, and organizations that support education, such as parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) and education-focused nonprofits. These audiences can help identify areas of concern, design projects to address those concerns, and raise funds to support your initiatives. You will need a communications plan that raises awareness and recruits people to support your project. This practice guide outlines four key steps to building a successful communications plan (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Key Steps to Successful Communications



Define Your Audience

STEP 1

Identify the people you want to reach. Consider the support and resources you need and who can provide them. **Who might be interested in helping because their missions and values are aligned with yours? What specific kinds of help can different audiences provide?**

The other practice guides in this series provide activities for students, parents, community members, and school staff. Each one of these groups is a different audience. Each audience might have a smaller audience segment as well. For example, community members might include local business owners or supportive residents who could offer their time, expertise, or financial support.



Use this guide to craft a message that resonates with each audience. Then plan how to get your message to them.



Crafting a Compelling Message

To create a compelling message that will resonate with your audience(s), consider the following guidelines:



KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Look at each audience you hope to reach. Think about their unique concerns, values, and priorities. How does your initiative align with those values? How can your initiative address their concerns or meet their needs?

START WITH A STRONG HOOK

Begin with an attention-grabbing statement, question, or anecdote. A compelling hook draws readers in and sets the stage for your message.

USE DATA AND EVIDENCE

Understand what data and evidence might help to support your message. Consider what sources of information different audiences might trust and whether they have biases that might conflict with the data you are presenting. For example, school board members might react to data showing the financial impacts of environmental health, but parents may be more interested in data linking environmental health to student performance.

BE CLEAR AND CONCISE

Use simple, straightforward language to convey your message. Avoid or explain jargon and technical terms—words that might confuse your audience. Maintain awareness of political sensitivities in your community. Avoid using words or discussing topics that might alienate potential supporters. Keep messages short and to the point.

TELL A STORY

Personal stories and testimonials can tap into people's emotions and make your message more relatable and impactful. People are more likely to act if they feel an emotional response to your message. Tell a story using examples of how improvements in school environments have positively affected students and staff.

ADDRESS COUNTERARGUMENTS

Anticipate and address possible objections or opposing views. When you refute counterarguments, you strengthen your position and demonstrate a thorough understanding of the topic.



MAKE A CALL TO ACTION

State what you want your audience to do. Whether it's donating time or money, attending a meeting, or spreading the word, make sure your call to action is clear and specific. Where possible, provide an opportunity to act immediately.

Examples:

- ◆ Donate now.
- ◆ Email to get information on attending our meeting today.
- ◆ Support our mission.
- ◆ Help us reach our goal.
- ◆ Make a difference.

ESTABLISH CREDIBILITY

Establish your credibility by demonstrating knowledge, expertise, and trustworthiness. Use credible sources and provide evidence to support your claims.



FORMULA FOR A COMPELLING MESSAGE

When crafting your message, consider using the following formula:

1. **Build consensus.** Start with a simple statement that your audience will agree with.
+
2. **Present a barrier.** Follow your statement with an obstacle or barrier to achieving that goal.
+
3. **Share data and evidence.** Provide your audience with compelling data and evidence.
+
4. **Provide a solution.** Tell your audience how your initiative will overcome that barrier.
+
5. **Close with a specific call to action.** Ask your audience to do something that aligns with their mission, values, and resources.

YOUR MESSAGE

"We want our students to do their best."

"However, air pollution makes health problems like asthma worse and makes it harder for students to focus on their schoolwork."

"Our students found that the indoor air quality in their classrooms is close to the unhealthy range when outside air pollution is high, even with our new HVAC system."

"Our initiative will put air purifiers in every classroom, which showed reduced air pollution and contributed to better student achievement in [study name/evidence source]."

"You can help us by [donating to our crowdfunding site/ attending our fundraiser] so we can purchase and maintain the air purifiers."



Tailor Messages to Your Audiences

Ensure your message resonates with the values and interests of your audiences to make it engaging and impactful. Here are some tips:

Understand Your Audiences

- ◆ Learn about the norms and values of the communities you want to reach.
- ◆ Include people with different perspectives in conversations as you plan your initiative and draft key messages.

Write Messaging That Resonates With Your Audiences

- ◆ Highlight the benefits of your initiatives for everyone.
- ◆ Use images and testimonials that your audiences can relate to.

Provide Language Support

- ◆ Provide materials in the languages spoken by your key audiences.
- ◆ Use professional translation services for accuracy. You can easily find freelance translators online through a variety of services. Expect a cost of 10 to 30 cents per word, depending on the complexity of your materials. (Remember to use clear, concise language.)
- ◆ Have bilingual staff or volunteers help with communication.



Considerations and Example Key Messages for Different Audiences

SCHOOL BOARDS

Focus on Long-Term Benefits

Emphasize long-term benefits and cost-effectiveness. Use data and research to demonstrate the positive impact of a healthy school environment.

Highlight Cost Effectiveness

Point out that preventive measures and improvements can save money in the long run by reducing health-related costs due to absences and lost productivity. These measures also will improve overall school performance.

Use Data and Research

Present clear data and research findings that demonstrate the positive impact of a healthy school environment on students' academic success and well-being.

"We all want a school where every student is excited to learn. However, the *[noted condition]* at *[school/school district]* affects students' health and therefore their ability to work at their best. By investing in *[name and focus of your project]*, we can improve *[noted condition]* to help our students do their best. *[Specific call to action.]*"

"Think about the long-term benefits of a healthy school. When we improve our school's environment, we see better grades, fewer sick days, and happier teachers. Our initiative focuses on *[focus of your project]* to measure, monitor, and improve the *[condition discovered in citizen science project]* for everyone. The school board can help make this happen by *[specific call to action.]*"

SCHOOL LEADERS AND ADMINISTRATIONS

Emphasize Student and Staff Well-Being

Highlight how a healthy school environment can improve the well-being of students and staff, leading to a more positive and productive school culture.

Showcase Success Stories

Share examples of other schools that have successfully implemented similar initiatives and the positive outcomes they achieved.

Provide Practical Steps

Offer clear, actionable steps that school leaders and administrators can take to support the initiatives and improve the school environment.

"We all want the students at *[school]* to achieve their highest potential. But our students discovered that *[findings of your citizen science project]*. This can cause more absenteeism, lower grades, and lower test scores. Now our students want to get involved in fixing the problem. Our student-led initiative will *[goals]*. Can we count on your support by *[specific call to action?]*"

"A thriving school environment is vital for students to reach their full potential. Our findings revealed that *[issue uncovered]*. To ensure every student has the opportunity to succeed, we need your help in addressing these challenges through *[specific project or action.]*"



EDUCATION-FOCUSED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Align With Their Mission

Connect your initiative to the organization's mission and goals. Show how supporting these initiatives aligns with their broader goals of improving education and community health.

Highlight Community Impact

Emphasize the broader benefits of a healthy school environment for the entire community. These benefits include improved public health and increased community engagement.

Encourage Collaboration

Invite these organizations to partner with the school on specific projects and provide opportunities for collaboration and shared resources.

"You work every day to improve the lives and well-being of our community members. Our student-led initiative aligns with your mission to *[organization's mission]* by *[details of your initiative]*. By improving our school's environment, we can work together to help our students succeed and improve our community's well-being. Help us by *[specific call to action]*."

"Think about the difference a healthy school can make for our children. Better attendance, higher test scores, and happier students are just a few of the benefits. Our initiative is working to create a healthier school environment. Learn more about how you can get involved and make a difference by *[specific call to action]*."

PARENT-TEACHER ORGANIZATIONS

Focus on Student Success

Highlight how a healthy school environment directly contributes to student success. Examples of success include better attendance, test scores, and overall well-being.

Use Relatable Stories

Share personal stories and testimonials from parents, teachers, and students who have benefited from an improved school environment.

Provide Opportunities for Involvement

Offer specific ways for parents and teachers to get involved. Examples include volunteering, attending meetings, or advocating for the initiative at school board meetings.

"Every day, our students and teachers spend hours in our school building(s). A healthy environment means they can focus on learning and teaching without worrying about air quality or unsafe materials. Our initiative aims to create a safer, healthier school. *[Specific call to action]*."

"We all recognize the invaluable support that you provide to *[school]* and the opportunities you create for our students. We worked with your children to *[goal of citizen science project]* and found *[results]*. This sets our students back by affecting their health and ability to work at their best. Now, your children want to be a part of the solution. You can help us and them by supporting our initiative. *[Specific call to action]*."



Example Social Media Posts Using Key Messages

When writing social media posts, tailor your message to the audience you hope to reach and to the platform you are posting to. For example, X (formerly Twitter) emphasizes short, frequent messages, but LinkedIn is more suited to longer, less frequent messages. The University of California, Santa Barbara published a [guide to social media best practices](#) that has more advice on tailoring your posts to each platform.

Include compelling images with each post. Encourage your partners and social network to like, share, and comment on posts from your initiative to help reach more people.

Here are some examples of social media posts that have been tailored to different platforms and audiences:

SAMPLE POST ACROSS PLATFORMS: SUPPORT CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND EDUCATION

in LINKEDIN POST



Your Organization Name

64,245 followers
6h · 🌐

We want our kids to thrive! Poor air quality can lead to health issues like asthma, affecting their learning. Our initiative is installing air purifiers in classrooms to create a healthier environment. Let's support our kids!
#HealthySchools #CleanAir

f FACEBOOK POST



Your Organization Name

3h · 🌐

We all want our children to thrive in a healthy school environment! Poor indoor air quality can lead to health issues like asthma and allergies, affecting students' ability to learn. Our initiative is installing air purifiers in every classroom to create a healthier learning environment. Let's support our kids' health and education!

📷 INSTAGRAM POST



orgname · Follow

We all want our children to thrive in a healthy school environment! Poor indoor air quality can lead to health issues like asthma and allergies, affecting students' ability to learn. Our initiative is installing air purifiers in every classroom to create a healthier learning environment. Let's support our kids' health and education!
#HealthySchools #CleanAir

X POST



Your Organization Name @yourorganizationname · 6h

We want our kids to thrive! Poor air quality can lead to health issues like asthma, affecting their learning. Our initiative is installing air purifiers in classrooms to create a healthier environment. Let's support our kids!
#HealthySchools #CleanAir



A comprehensive communications plan that uses effective strategies can help you reach your audiences better. By setting goals, choosing the right communications channels, building partnerships, and ensuring accessibility, you can build a communications plan that helps maximize your impact.

Elements of a Communications Plan

Draft a clear plan that outlines your steps, timeline, budget, and responsibilities for achieving your goals. Here is what should be included:



GOALS

Clearly state the goals that your initiative aims to accomplish. This provides clear direction and helps in evaluating the success of your efforts.

AUDIENCES

When looking at your goals, think about the people you will need to reach. Write down each audience and outline your key messages for each one. Some messages may echo across audiences. Others may resonate only with certain audiences.

KEY TASKS

Break down the project into smaller, manageable tasks. For example, you may need to create a Facebook group. The key tasks for that activity would be choosing an image to represent your group, writing a description for the group, setting up the page, asking people to join, and posting initial content.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Assign people to do the work. If you have several people on your team, assign one person to develop content and another person to edit and review content. Collaboration and review will improve the quality and effectiveness of your messages.

TIMELINES

Set a timeline for each task, including start and end dates. This helps keep the project on track. It also ensures that all activities are coordinated and completed within the desired time frame. Remain flexible and adjust timelines as needed.

RESOURCES

Identify the resources needed to complete each task. This includes people, budget, and materials.

EVALUATION

Think about how you will measure success. This ensures that your communications stay on task and that you continue to move toward your goals.





Set Goals

Work with your partners to decide what you want to achieve with your outreach. Are you trying to *raise awareness* about the issues that your citizen science project has identified? Are you trying to *raise money*? Are you trying to get a local organization to *partner with you*?

Once you have outlined your goals, put them into the SMART framework to ensure they are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. Here are example SMART goals using the previous questions:

- ◆ Gain 100 members in our Facebook group over the next 6 months. *(to raise awareness)*
- ◆ Raise \$1,000 for our project by September 2026. *(to raise money)*
- ◆ Get the parent-teacher organization to partner with our initiative in the next school year. *(to build partnerships)*

If you are aiming high with your initiative and want to build toward large goals, consider breaking your large goals into smaller short-term goals to help you build toward success. This ensures that you don't get discouraged and helps you make progress.

Choose the Right Communications Channels

When you build your communications strategy, consider which communications channels will reach your audiences. Different audiences get their information in different ways. Consider where the people you want to reach are getting their information. Is there an active Facebook group with local parents? Are school board members avid readers of the local paper? Local newspapers are often receptive to stories about community members making a difference in local government operations, like schools.



Put your message out in the places your audiences are already looking. Consider using different channels to ensure your message is received by as many people as possible. Be strategic about your choices to save time and resources.

Here are some suggested communications channels, including the benefits and drawbacks of each channel and strategies to maximize your impact with each one.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Benefits: Social media platforms like Facebook, X, Instagram, and LinkedIn let you quickly reach large and diverse audiences. They are great for sharing regular updates, success stories, and engaging content like photos and videos. Social media also enables real-time interaction with your audiences.

Drawbacks: The fast-paced nature of social media means that posts can quickly get buried in users' feeds. It requires consistent and frequent updates to maintain visibility and engagement. You may need to pay to promote posts if you want to reach a reasonable number of people.

Strategies:

- ◆ Use eye-catching visuals and videos to capture attention.
- ◆ Post regularly and at times when your audience is most active.
- ◆ Consider who uses each platform. For example, you are unlikely to reach students on Facebook, but their parents may be active users.
- ◆ Understand the best frequency for posts on each platform. You want to keep your feed active but don't want to overwhelm your audience.



EMAIL

Benefits: Email is a direct line of communication to your audiences. It is effective for sharing detailed information, progress updates, and upcoming events. Email can be personalized, making it a powerful tool for building relationships.

Drawbacks: Email open rates can vary, and there's a risk that your messages might end up in spam folders. Email also requires a well-maintained contact list and regular content creation.

Strategies

- ◆ Personalize your email messages to make them more engaging.
- ◆ Use a person's name in the "From" field, rather than your organization name.
- ◆ Use compelling subject lines to increase open rates. Avoid vague subject lines like "November Newsletter."
- ◆ Use short, concise blurbs with compelling visuals. Include clear calls to action and links to more information.
- ◆ Separate your contact list into multiple smaller lists to reach specific groups with relevant content.

LOCAL MEDIA

Benefits: Local newspapers, radio stations, and TV channels can help you reach a broader community audience. Media coverage adds credibility to your initiative and can attract attention from potential supporters and donors.

Drawbacks: Securing media coverage can be challenging and may require building relationships with journalists and media outlets. You also have less control over how your message is presented.

Strategies

- ◆ Develop press releases with compelling stories and data. Reporters are more likely to pay attention if you link your initiative to a larger trend. For example, "Schools have seen declines in student achievement nationwide. Local schools are no different. Our initiative hopes to turn the tides for [local school]."
- ◆ Offer interviews with key people to provide insights into your initiative. If a community leader or other person with high visibility supports your initiative, reporters might pick up the story for the chance to feature them.
- ◆ Build relationships with local journalists and media outlets.
- ◆ Pitch your story to media outlets that align with your initiative's goals.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY EVENTS

Benefits: Events like health fairs, open houses, and town hall meetings provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction. They enable you to engage directly with the community, gather feedback, and build personal connections.

Drawbacks: Organizing events can be time consuming and resource intensive. Attendance can vary, and it may be challenging to reach a large audience.

Strategies

- ◆ Promote events through multiple channels to increase attendance.
- ◆ Provide interactive and engaging activities to attract participants.
- ◆ See if you can present at an existing event to share their audience and reduce the burden of planning.
- ◆ Use events as opportunities to build relationships and network.



WEBSITES AND BLOGS

Benefits: A dedicated website or blog can serve as a hub for all information related to your initiative. It enables you to provide detailed content, resources, and updates.

Drawbacks: Maintaining a website or blog requires regular content updates and technical upkeep.

Strategies

- ◆ Use social media, email, and other outreach to drive people to your website.
- ◆ Use search engine optimization (SEO) principles and tools to help improve your ranking in search results.
- ◆ Keep your website and blog updated with fresh content. Search engines will rank sites with newer content higher in search results.
- ◆ A blog section lets you easily share stories, updates, and insights—for example, those based on citizen science project findings.
- ◆ Provide easy navigation and clear calls to action.

PODCASTS AND WEBINARS

Benefits: Podcasts and webinars offer a platform for in-depth discussions and expert insights. They can reach audiences who prefer audio or visual content and can provide opportunities for interactive Q&A sessions.

Drawbacks: Producing high-quality podcasts and webinars requires planning, technical skills, and equipment. It also can take time to build an audience.

Strategies

- ◆ Plan and script your content to ensure clarity and engagement.
- ◆ Promote your podcast through social media, email, and other outreach.
- ◆ Invite guest speakers to present diverse perspectives.
- ◆ Contact the hosts of established podcasts to be a guest speaker and increase your own visibility.
- ◆ Record and archive sessions for future access.

FLYERS AND POSTERS

Benefits: Physical flyers and posters can be distributed in schools, community centers, public libraries, religious institutions, and local businesses. They are a tangible way to share information and can reach people who may not be active online.

Drawbacks: Printing and distribution costs can add up, and there's limited space for detailed information.

Strategies

- ◆ Design eye-catching and informative flyers and posters.
- ◆ Distribute them in high-traffic areas to maximize visibility.
- ◆ Include QR codes or links to online resources for more information.
- ◆ Regularly update your materials to keep information current.
- ◆ Partner with local businesses and organizations for distribution.



Build Partnerships

Build partnerships with people and organizations who already have relationships with your audiences to increase your reach and make your message more effective.

- ◆ Partner with local health organizations, environmental groups, and community organizations to amplify your message and reach a broader audience.
- ◆ Engage local businesses as sponsors and partners. Offer them opportunities to support your initiative through donations, in-kind contributions, and employee volunteer programs.
- ◆ Work with local government agencies to secure funding, resources, and policy support for your initiative.
- ◆ Work with local community leaders and community influencers to build trust.
- ◆ Get community members to help you learn more about specific audiences, ensure your language is understandable, and write engaging messages.

Ensure Your Message Reaches Everyone

Review [Section508.gov](https://www.section508.gov) to learn about best practices for designing and disseminating messages and materials that are easy for everyone to access.



Follow these tips for making sure your message reaches all audiences:

CREATE EASY-TO-UNDERSTAND MATERIALS

- ◆ Use simple language. Avoid complex or loaded terms. A loaded term may suggest bias or provoke a strong negative reaction.
- ◆ Provide materials in different formats like print, video, and audio.
- ◆ Make sure online and printed content follows [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG 2.1\)](#).

PLAN USER-FRIENDLY EVENTS

- ◆ Choose venues with ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms.
- ◆ For larger events, provide sign language interpreters, real-time captions, and recordings. The National Deaf Center has resources to help you find interpreters and speech-to-text services. You can expect a cost of \$80 to \$150 per hour for professional live captioning support.

USE SOCIAL MEDIA FEATURES

- ◆ Include captions on any video content. If you use AI to generate captions, make sure someone reviews and edits them for accuracy. Don't rely solely on auto-captioning features provided by social media platforms.
- ◆ Add alternative (alt) text to your images. Most platforms provide an option to add alt text after you upload an image for a post. Alt text is a brief description of the image for screen readers.

DIGITAL CONTENT CHECKLIST

- ☒ Do all images have alternative (alt) text?
- ☒ Do videos have captions?
- ☒ Is your text large enough?
- ☒ Are you using simple colors?
- ☒ Does your text color stand out from the background color?
- ☒ Are you using simple language, headings, and bullets?
- ☒ Does your content have a meaningful order?
- ☒ Does the text for your links and buttons tell your audience what they are about? Links and buttons shouldn't say "Click here."



Maintaining an effective communications plan for your audience requires routine monitoring and adjustments. Here are some easy ways to monitor and measure the effectiveness of your communications efforts. You can use this information to improve your communications strategies. You also can use it as a guide to planning for a project evaluation in [PRACTICE GUIDE 1](#).

- ◆ **Gather Feedback:** Establish ways to get feedback from your audiences. For example, you could create and disseminate surveys, provide suggestion boxes, or get feedback at meetings.
- ◆ **Identify Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** KPIs that align with your goals will help you measure progress and determine how effective your implementation plan is. Here are some common KPIs:

ENGAGEMENT

Track how many people attend events, participate in activities, and ask you questions about your initiative.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Measure likes, shares, comments, and overall engagement on social media posts. Most social media platforms will provide these numbers for free, though some require paid accounts.

EMAIL CAMPAIGNS

Track the number of people who open your email messages and click on the links for email campaigns. Email services can be low cost. Many have free versions that will help you manage your list, track KPIs, and ensure you comply with regulations like the CAN-SPAM Act.

WEBSITE TRAFFIC

Monitor the number of visits to your website, the length of visits, and the pages viewed. Low-cost services that help you build a website will often include a way to view these numbers as part of your website package. Free analytics services also can help you track website traffic, but it may take time and effort to learn how to track these data.

MEDIA MENTIONS

Monitor the number of times your initiative is mentioned in the media. You can set up a free email alert for the name of your initiative. You also can set up an alert for people who might speak to the media about your initiative. If you are working only with small local sources, like local newspapers or television stations, you can track these mentions manually.

SURVEY RESPONSES

Gather survey feedback from your audiences to gauge their awareness and perception of your communications efforts.

SURVEY EXAMPLE

Do you know about our [initiative name]?

YES

NO

If yes, how did you find out about it?

☐ Option 1

☐ Option 2

☐ Other

☐ Stay informed about [initiative name]?

Please enter your [email address]

SUBMIT

Thanks for your feedback and support!

✕ f in @

- ◆ **Adjust and Improve:** Adjust your plan based on the feedback you receive from your audiences. This could involve changing your message, using different channels, or setting new goals. Continuous improvement is key to the success of your initiative.

Summary

Creating a healthy school environment is a collaborative effort that requires the active participation of teachers, students, parents, and the community. By using the strategies and tools in this Community Awareness Toolkit, you can effectively communicate the importance of your Healthy Students Learn Better initiatives and build strong support for these efforts.

Remember, the key to successful community engagement lies in

- ◆ crafting compelling messages that resonate with your audience;
- ◆ using a variety of communications channels; and
- ◆ continuously monitoring and evaluating your efforts.

By doing these things, you can ensure that your initiative not only raises awareness but also inspires action and fosters a healthier, more supportive learning environment for all students.

Use the other practice guides in the series to learn about your school's environmental health issues and make a feasible plan to address them ([PRACTICE GUIDE 1](#)); gather evidence for school environmental health improvement as citizen scientists ([PRACTICE GUIDE 2](#)); and get the funding you need for your program ([PRACTICE GUIDE 3](#)).



Learn more about Healthy Students Learn Better and other projects made possible by the AIR Opportunity Fund.



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