

**CONTRA COSTA COUNTY
OFFICE OF EDUCATION**

COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN



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Comprehensive Communications Plan

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INTRODUCTION

In its efforts to foster productive relationships and effective communication with its employees, students, parents, and the broader community, the Contra Costa County Office of Education (CCCOE) has developed a Comprehensive Communications Plan that incorporates *New Standards for the School Public Relations Profession* from the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA).

NSPRA defines educational public relations/communications as follows:

Educational public relations/communications is a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization.

Educational public relations/communications programs assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities which earn public support and understanding.

The following components of the CCCOE Comprehensive Communications Plan apply agency-wide, involving not just the Communications Office, but the way in which we all interact with employees, students, parents, news media, elected officials and the community at large. It is our goal that this plan, together with our involvement in Continuous Quality in Education (CQE) supports a culture in the CCCOE of proactive, customer-focused quality service.

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Governing Board –

The Contra Costa County Board of Education understands and models its policy-setting responsibilities on actions that are in the best interests of students and their achievement. The Board:

- Adopts and ensures periodic review of policies and regulations for the CCCOE.
- Has in its Bylaws a Code of Ethics that includes modeling respect, civility, and integrity (Section 9271).
- Builds relationships with the Superintendent and staff based on mutual trust and respect.
- Seeks input from CCCOE stakeholders before developing policy and clearly communicates its actions and the reasons for them.
- Recognizes that the Board, Superintendent, and Leadership Team have separate and distinct roles and responsibilities. The Board is responsible for making policy and the Superintendent, with the Leadership Team, is responsible for translating such policies into a plan of action that will demonstrate performance and achieve results.

Communication Policy –

The County Board has adopted written policies to guide the CCCOE's communications and public relations efforts. These policies can be found on the CCCOE website under Board policies, Series 0000, Sections 0000, 0100, 0200, 0300, 0400, 0500. They include:

- A policy that commits the organization to providing comprehensive communications and public relations in an open and honest way that meets the needs and desires of all internal and external publics and in accordance with legal, regulatory, fiscal, and ethical requirements.
- A policy regarding the release of information about individual staff, students, or clients.
- A policy that describes public involvement in the agency's decision-making.
- A policy that enables employees, parents, and others to appeal policy or administrative decisions.
- Policies that require the CCCOE to learn what employees and customers want to know and to provide that information in various ways.
- A community involvement policy that encourages interested citizens to review the CCCOE's vision, mission, goals, and objectives; and to become educated about and offer opinions on issues that may require action in the future.

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)

Communication Procedures –

- The CCCOE has written procedures to implement the Board’s policies and to provide clear direction for staff roles in public relations and communications.
- Procedures are in place that outlines various communication responsibilities in crisis situations (see pages 16-29).
- Procedures clarify a policy of openness and honesty in interacting with the news media. Job descriptions clarify staff responsibilities in communicating with and through the news media.
- Existing procedures describe formal and informal methods of communicating with CCCOE employees.
- Procedures are in place that describe formal and informal methods of communicating with parents and the broader community.
- Existing procedures describe how the CCCOE seeks the views of employees and customers on a regular basis.

Communications Office –

Provides communications, partnership and community relations services, which increase understanding of, satisfaction with, and support for public education including CCCOE and school district programs.

- The Chief Communications Officer (CCO) is a member of the Superintendent’s Cabinet, directly accountable to the Superintendent and involved with the strategic management processes of the CCCOE.
- Strategic management processes includes communication programs for interacting with key publics, especially those who might be affected by a decision.
- Part of the CCO’s responsibilities include leadership for an issues management process to ensure that potential problems and issues are identified and dealt with in a strategic fashion.
- The budget for communications/public relations is sufficient to achieve program goals.
- The CCO ensures that educators and the community are aware of trends and other forces that may impact the school system, students and the broader community.
- The CCO counsels the Board, the Superintendent, other CCCOE administrators and staff, and upon request, school district personnel, in public relations and communications strategies.

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)

- Professional requirements for the Communications staff include:
- Commit to improving educational opportunities for all.
- Commit to professional performance and ethical behavior as described in the NSPRA Code of Ethics. (See page 13)
- A minimum of a bachelor's degree from an accredited university or equivalent experience in the field.
- A comprehensive working knowledge of internal and external public relations and communications programs for an educational organization.
- A mastery of communications skills.
- A thorough knowledge and understanding of communications theory and research.
- Appropriate training for their responsibilities.
- The ability to provide expertise and advice to top management.
- Participation in public relations seminars, conferences, workshops, and institutes.
- Refining their skills and expanding their knowledge by reading, researching, writing, speaking, and consulting in education, public relations, and communications.

Training –

Provide communications and public relations training opportunities.

- Training opportunities are provided for CCCOE administrators in effective public relations practices, including interaction with the news media.
- Opportunities are provided for teachers and other staff to become effective public relations ambassadors for the CCCOE, and to deal with students, parents and others in ways that promote their involvement, understanding and cooperation.
- The CCCOE works in conjunction with other county and non-profit agencies to provide regular workshops and trainings for emergency and crisis communication, media relations, customer service, CQE and other topics of interest. (Public Information Network)

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)

Research –

Before major communication and public relations efforts are initiated, each CCCOE department or program determines relevant factors relating to the demography and opinions of the community and its various components. (See Template for Developing a Marketing/Communication Plan at http://www.cocoschools.org/supe/com_plan.html)

- The CCCOE's goal setting is based on research and direct involvement with stakeholders to determine their educational priorities.
- The CCCOE's public relations and communications efforts are research-based (i.e., our planning and strategies are based on research that indicates various audiences' perceptions, desires, interests, opinions, and needs for information and involvement).
- The CCCOE regularly elicits both quantitative and qualitative information through means such as formal and informal surveys, advisory councils, and focus groups that involve both internal and external publics.

Planning –

The communication and public relations efforts are planned on a systematic (annual) basis to support the achievement of the CCCOE's Strategic Plan and its goals and objectives.

- The plan has the approval of the Superintendent. (See Strategic Plan focus areas - page 15, and each department's annual goals and objectives in the CCCOE Budget binder.)
- The plan focuses on meeting the goals of the CCCOE and ultimately improving education, and enhancing student achievement.
- The plan identifies the needs of target publics and uses research data to identify key messages and strategies for delivering those messages.
- Communication plans for specific program changes or initiatives are developed in conjunction with the staff responsible for them.
- Communication plans identify the various publics who will be affected and the strategies for reaching them.
- Communication plans include measurable goals for behavior change or accomplishment, deadlines, responsibilities, resources, and strategies. (See Template for Developing a Marketing/Communications Plan at http://www.cocoschools.org/supe/com_plan.html)

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)

- Plans are reviewed regularly to ensure that communication efforts remain relevant, are on schedule, and are adjusted whenever necessary to reach planned goals or to deal with emerging needs and opportunities.
- The Comprehensive Communications Plan aligns with the current Strategic Plan.

Communicating –

CCCOE communicates with all publics using a variety of channels based on research and planning, and are appropriate to the communications goals.

- CCCOE and its departments' communications include opportunities for target publics to obtain further information and to respond if desired.
- All communication is timely, meets the needs of the target publics, and uses language and format that are appropriate for particular audiences.
- The language, format, and general presentation of all efforts are planned so that they communicate effectively.

Employees –

The CCCOE has procedures and strategies that stimulate regular, two-way communication with all employees. Those include:

- *E-Circuit*, an electronic communication newsletter that provides information employees need to be well informed and to do their jobs effectively. This publication, distributed to every employee, is available in electronic version.
- New programs or initiatives are planned with staff input and are communicated in appropriate ways to each employee group.
- E-mail, voice mail, intranet, and other electronic systems that allow for easy communication with and among employees, accompanied by procedures for the appropriate use of the system(s). (See the *Employee Handbook*, *Employee Resource Guide*, *Positive Communications and Stylebook Guide*, available in print and electronic versions)
- A comprehensive crisis plan for the CCCOE, its programs, the Stewart Building, and individual school sites that is up-to-date.

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)

- An ongoing program that recognizes the efforts of individual staff and CCCOE departments and thanks them for their contributions. (*E-Circuit, website.*)
- An up-to-date Employee Handbook and Employee Resource Guide with CCCOE policies and procedures are conveniently available to all employees. (Print and electronic versions available at http://www.cocoschools.org/stewart/resources/res_new.html.)
- A directory – available to all employees – that contains the CCCOE structure; names, titles, and telephone numbers of personnel in each department; and how to access needed services. (website for searchable Public Schools Directory available at <http://www.cocoschools.org/directory>), printed version, various other department directories available, Stewart site directory)
- A variety of vertical and horizontal two-way communication opportunities within the CCCOE structure.
- Regular meetings of employees with supervisors where a spirit of openness encourages questions and suggestions for improving education and/or dealing with other work-related issues.
- New employee orientations to acquaint them with the CCCOE's goals, structure, and culture; their specific job responsibilities.
- Systematic, annual plans for each department of the CCCOE, spelling out strategies for communicating with employees and with the organization's many constituents.
- Regular opportunities for employees with similar responsibilities to meet and discuss issues of common interest.
- Regular training for various employee groups addressing their public relations and communications roles in the CCCOE and within the community. (Customer Service training, CQE)
- Regular meetings of the Superintendent with representatives from various groups within the CCCOE to discuss matters of mutual interest.
- Formal and informal methods for asking employees, at least annually, to evaluate the agency and its departments on the availability, relevance, and responsiveness of communication efforts. (*E-Circuit* survey)

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)

Students –

The CCCOE has practices and procedures that encourage sound communication with students and encourage their involvement in their school. These include:

- Student handbooks. (Court and Community Schools, for example, has a handbook that is distributed to and reviewed with every student to help them understand school rules as well as academic; behavioral, and other expectations.)
- Involvement of students in ways that will make it possible for them to contribute to the CCCOE's strategic goals and initiatives.
- Information that is communicated to students and their parents/guardians about various topics including safety.
- A safe, welcoming learning climate, with staff that encourage students to achieve their best.
- Principals and teachers who communicate regularly with students about the school environment and issues of concern to both students and staff.

Parents –

The CCCOE has practices and procedures that encourage regular, two-way communication and help to develop appropriate mutual expectations between parents and their schools or programs.

- Regular school communication vehicles exist to communicate important events, dates, and news about the school, staff, and student accomplishments.
- Regular opportunities are provided for principals and teachers to meet fact-to-face with parents.
- All communication and interaction with parents is based on mutual respect and an attitude of true partnership in their children's education.
- Parents and others in the community are encouraged to volunteer at the school in ways that are important for students. There is a set of guidelines for volunteers and school staff, that regularly recognize the contributions of volunteers.
- Teachers and parents receive guidelines for holding productive parent-teacher conferences.
- School staff is accessible to respond to parents' questions, inquiries, or ideas.
- A parent-complaint procedure exists to ease the resolution of problems at the lowest possible level.

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)

- In addition to regular reports, teachers are encouraged to communicate regularly with parents about each student's educational progress. Well-established, effective procedures exist for communicating and resolving concerns about a student's behavior or education progress.
- The CCCOE gives support and encouragement to related parent and community organizations.
- Parents are surveyed annually to evaluate the school climate, program and communication efforts.

Community –

The CCCOE has regular, two-way communication with various segments of the community.

- CCCOE leadership and other employees are encouraged to belong to and participate actively in civic and service organizations.
- The Superintendent maintains regular, two-way communication with business, civic and religious leaders, and other influential members of the community.
- The Superintendent maintains a key communicator network and uses it for regular communications with its members, inviting them to contact him for information or to alert it to misinformation and rumors.
- Community members are regularly sought to serve on CCCOE and departmental advisory committees.
- The CCCOE uses multiple channels of communication to reach citizens who do not have children in the schools. The Chief Communications Officer is accessible to and visible to the community.
- The CCCOE has a website that is well-constructed, user-friendly, and contains timely information for use by staff, parents, and community members, and helps recruit future employees.
- The CCCOE makes regular efforts to communicate with citizens of various cultures who are not fluent in English to seek their involvement, input, and support.
- The CCCOE seeks partnerships with local businesses that provide mentors and other support to students and their schools and other CCCOE programs.
- Community views are sought in periodic public opinion surveys.

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)

News Media –

The CCCOE has policies and procedures that promote good communication with the news media.

- Personnel in the Communications Office have a complete list of local and regional news media outlets and reporters, and make information about the CCCOE available to the news media on a regular basis.
- CCCOE policies and procedures support responding to news media inquiries in a timely fashion, designation of a spokesperson or spokespersons (such as during a crisis), confidentiality as well as the public release of information, publication of student names and photographs, and notification of all public meetings and events (see pages 16-29).
- Personnel in the Communications Office conduct periodic in-service training for staff in news media relationships, including forums with reporters.
- The staff alerts the news media promptly in the event of any crisis or other newsworthy situation.
- The Superintendent and the Chief Communications Officer periodically meet with the newspaper and other news media editorial boards to alert them to the background and the CCCOE's position on issues that have the potential to become controversial.

Elected Officials –

The CCCOE recognizes the political leadership exercised by elected officials and makes regular efforts to communicate with them.

- The Superintendent maintains regular, two-way communication with elected officials.
- The CCCOE communicates regularly with local and regional governments and their officials, especially when an educational issue is likely to have an effect on their scope of responsibilities.
- The CCCOE regularly communicates with state legislators and the state education agency to ensure that these officials are well-informed about the CCCOE, its goals and objectives, and any issues that may arise before these groups.

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (CONTINUED)

Evaluation –

Every major communication effort is evaluated to determine whether planned goals were met and objectives achieved.

- The CCCOE and its departments engage in both formal and informal evaluations of its communication practices and the levels of satisfaction with its performance.
- Annually developed goals and objectives also include a focus on communication responsibilities.
- Evaluation methods are built in to each element of the CCCOE's annual plan. These evaluations are used to create, modify, or discontinue practices or projects.
- Each of the CCCOE's regular communication channels and vehicles is evaluated periodically to determine its relevance, interest, and ability to communicate important information.