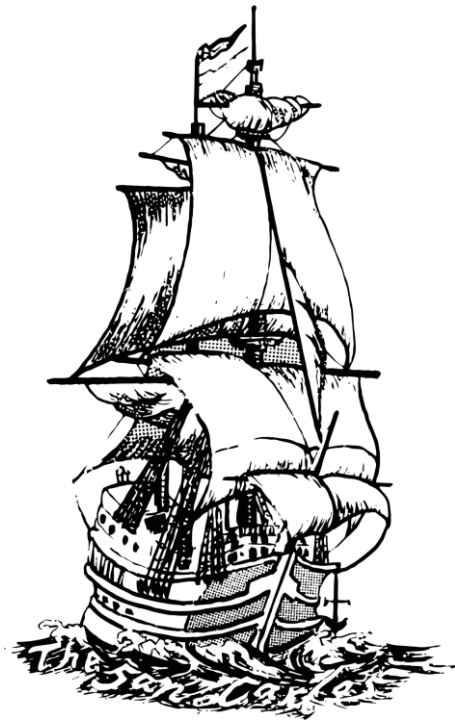


# San Carlos School District



## Communications Framework

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The San Carlos School District (SCSD) enjoys both community support and a solid reputation amongst its peers for building innovative educational models. Stakeholders across the landscape perceive SCSD as being uniquely committed to the whole child in its schools, its superintendent is recognized for his deep knowledge of the education space, and the district has built several bridges with community and government partners. Even amongst those who do not have children currently enrolled in the district, respect for SCSD and its staff's competency is high.

Yet, SCSD's position as a lighthouse seems more attributable to informal word of mouth conversations than to a thoughtful, strategic communications effort carried out by SCSD itself. In fact, almost all stakeholders perceive the district as being behind the ball in terms of communications. Stakeholders would like SCSD to be "proactive" in public conversations and to "engage community" when making decisions. This presents a variety of opportunities for SCSD to amplify its reputation, strengthen relationships with existing partners, and build a wider audience for its work.

The purpose of this document is to provide a clear framework for communicating within the San Carlos community and, more broadly, within the field of education and education funders. Staff and school site support will be necessary for SCSD's Communications Framework to be successful. SCSD staff and teachers are at the frontlines of the district's interactions with families, peers and partners, who in turn are your best ambassadors. Clearly communicating key messages is vital, not just for the district, but to effectively engage learners as well.

The following pages provide communications objectives and sample tactics that could be used for each of SCSD's primary audiences. The tactics are divided into an initial foundation-setting period for six to nine months, followed by several examples of what could be done in the longer term. The document ends with a breakdown of all of the district's current and potential communication channels, and a brief discussion of how to measure impact around the district's communications goals.

Both the framework and sample tactics provided herein have been articulated after a careful review of SCSD's Communications Audit, and several conversations with key stakeholders. Several recommendations have been made herein, with the idea that a specific communications plan can be created from here to choose which of these options to implement at which time and with which partners. It is absolutely not expected that SCSD would take on all of these projects in their entirety simultaneously.

## **COMMUNICATIONS OBJECTIVE**

The objective of SCSD's overall communications strategy is to provide information that builds recognition, understanding, and engagement around SCSD's innovative

approach to educating students amongst the district's key stakeholders. The hope is that by building this knowledge, families, staff and partners will be better able to resource and support each child's success and learning.

This plan addresses three main types of SCSD audiences: (1) school communities (students, teachers, parents, community partners, and staff); (2) peers in the field of education (thought leaders, education collaboratives, and fellow practitioners); and (3) existing and potential funding partners. The overall objective and commitments defined above manifest in specific ways for each of these groups.

- **For school communities**, SCSD seeks to use proactive communications to (1) engage community members and staff in two-way conversations; (2) build an understanding of the “why” and “how” of SCSD's approach to student learning; and (3) arm them with accurate and accessible information to share with others, given their role as the frontline messengers about SCSD's work.
- **For peer educators**, SCSD seeks to highlight and share the best practices developed in our schools.
- **For existing and potential funders**, SCSD seeks to exhibit innovative education practices and show the impact of these practices on student outcomes.

## **COMMUNICATIONS VALUES**

SCSD commits to meeting its communications objectives by

- (a) Engaging in two-way conversations with key stakeholders;
- (b) Being proactive and thoughtful about where, when and how to communicate;
- (c) Highlighting the accomplishments and innovations of SCSD staff;
- (d) Using a variety of channels to reach stakeholders where they are; and
- (e) Providing clear, consistent communications about district-wide issues.

It is of note that this communications framework focuses primarily on thought leadership and forward-looking communications strategies for SCSD. It does not address crisis communications around particular issues or emergency communications. Those plans are held elsewhere. This communications framework is instead intended to provide guidance on how to share the best parts of what is happening in the district, with the ultimate goal of increasing resources and support for San Carlos schools and learners.

## **COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES – SETTING A FOUNDATION**

SCSD should consider employing a range of strategies to meet these communications objectives in the long-term. However, the district will need to invest in several key infrastructure projects upfront to lay a strong groundwork for all of the objectives, regardless of key audience.

The following strategies are the ones that would be completed first, within the initial six to nine months of rolling out a new communications plan. Given the heavy lift required here, these activities would be best managed in large part by an external consultant or communications firm who would report to SCSD staff.

- **Strong Visual Identity**

SCSD could consider contracting with an external firm to create a consistent visual brand and voice, including a new color palette and style guide for the district. The new look should reflect the innovative approach and community-driven aspects of SCSD's brand, which are currently missing from SCSD's visual identity.

- **Strategic Plan Communications Tool**

SCSD's strategic plan is the cornerstone of its communications with all stakeholders, though several have never read all the way through the document.

SCSD needs a new depiction of the strategic plan to supplement the existing memorandum. The goal should be to create "a beautiful, visual way to communicate the vision," per one stakeholder. This document should be easily recognizable and understood without the need for live explanation. It could take the form of an infographic, a video or an interactive website. It could be one single artifact or several different, related pieces.

Together, all aspects of the new communication tool would represent:

- SCSD's vision for children - This will help all stakeholders have a common definition for some of the key subcomponents of the strategic plan, including the district's focus on the "whole child," deeper learning, and Habits of the Mind.
- The transformation of learning in SCSD - Audiences should be able to easily grasp where SCSD is coming from and where it is headed.
- The three strategic pillars of the strategic plan (i.e., curriculum, human capital, and learning environment)
- A timeline with key milestones

- **Key Messaging Points**

Once complete, the strategic plan communications tools can then be used to create talking points for district staff around SCSD's values and vision. Currently, an articulation of those values is difficult to find anywhere, though several stakeholders refer to them in different ways, all drawn in part from the strategic plan document itself.

In addition, as part of the process of creating the visuals, SCSD could consider going through an exercise to define the progress it has made against the strategic plan to date as well as work that remains to be done. There may be success stories to share out, which are in high demand, as per the communications audit.

In addition, reporting out on work remaining to be done will shore up community faith in SCSD's transparency.

These key messages can serve as the substantive basis for SCSD engaging with the community proactively.

- **Community Conversations**

During the process of rebranding and creating the new strategic plan visual and corresponding talking points, SCSD should consider engaging in a thoughtfully planned series of community conversations with school communities of parents, staff and students. These conversations can serve as both listening posts and an opportunity to get feedback on some of the materials and messaging being created.

The district could also use this opportunity to share much of the groundbreaking work – controversial or not – that is happening in its schools. The district can provide examples of how it is already doing things that feed into the innovative approaches being highlighted. While the meetings should be forward-looking (i.e. not focused on past complaints or mistakes), it will be important to acknowledge that a shift is being made in response to feedback that has been received from the community.

Providing some sort of public reflection of these meetings, perhaps in the form of blog posts or introductory texts for newsletters, is a good idea to ensure that everyone is getting consistent information, being heard, and that the district is being transparent.

- **Launch**

At the end of the rebranding process and community feedback conversations, SCSD would formally roll out a new look, feel and way of explaining SCSD's work that all tie into each other. This launch should be reflected on the district's website, and school site staff should be trained or familiarized with the key messages. Additional community conversations, or perhaps just a series of targeted editorials, may be considered to roll out the final products with the new branding, which are inclusive of community feedback.

## **COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES – ONGOING**

Once the initial strategies are complete, SCSD can begin the longer-term work of creating and maintaining communications tactics for each stakeholder audience.

Because this work requires an intimate understanding of SCSD's structure and priorities, relationships with key staff, and access to historical knowledge of the district's activities, it would be best for these tactics to be managed by someone on SCSD's in-house staff. Depending on how many of the following tactics and

strategies are employed, it could easily be necessary to hire a full-time staff person to do this work. Alternatively, SCSD could consider a part-time position with additional funding for that person to work without external vendors.

The sections below group goals and priorities by the audience SCSD is trying to reach. Each section includes several sample tactics that could be used. These are suggestions, and by no means a laundry list of a complete plan.

Note that these sample tactics are in no particular order. In some cases, the tactics should follow a clear order, whereas in others, several things could occur simultaneously. This will depend on factors such as district priorities, time of year, staff availability and expertise, etc. My suggestion would be for the district to take an experimental approach to these tactics – piloting a smaller version and learning from that before putting entirely new systems and workflows into place.

### **School Communities Audience**

**Goal:** For school communities, SCSD seeks to use proactive communications to (1) engage community members and staff in two-way conversations; (2) build an understanding of the “why” and “how” of SCSD’s approach to student learning; and (3) arm them with accurate and accessible information to share with others, given their role as the frontline messengers about SCSD’s work.

**Priorities:** The priority with this audience will be to create consistent messaging tools that send out unified messages well in advance of the rollout of new projects. These messaging tools should be easily shareable and should differentiate SCSD’s role from that of its various partners and school sites.

#### ***Sample Tactics:***

1. Create a bi-weekly or monthly district newsletter that goes out to all parents, community partners and staff. The newsletter would focus on big picture educational concepts and showcase SCSD’s partnerships. This newsletter would be sent out earlier in the week than the school site newsletters, so that principals have an opportunity to build on stories from it at the school level. To facilitate these newsletters, it would be helpful to create and maintain an editorial calendar that includes school sites’ newsletters and other communications being sent to parents.
2. Work with PTA Communications teams at each school to create a more consistent look and feel for SCSD school newsletters. The district office would continue to be the conduit for specific messages that need to roll out to each school site, but that process would be finessed and made more reliable. It may even be advisable to work on getting all school newsletters out on the same day of the week, given that consistency of messaging is a priority.
3. Prominently feature and regularly update the “Ask Dr. Baker” section of the website, or a similar format for community engagement. It would be linked to

other articles/interviews by Dr. Baker or his Twitter page, as appropriate. In addition, once a workflow has been established, SCSD staff could run a mini-campaign to spread the word about this feature.

4. Create a new format for SCSD's Back to School nights. This is a key night for communication to a captive audience. It would behoove the district to rethink SCSD staff's role in the event and to use the opportunity to impart information at each school site about the district's goals and strategies that evening. In doing so, the district would be meeting people where they are with the messages.
5. Create and maintain an interactive dashboard on SCSD's website, which would show progress towards the district's strategic goals. The visually appealing dashboard would be refreshed annually. Statistics and information could be easy to share, so that everyone can see and spread the good news.
6. Create specific communications campaigns for activities that showcase SCSD's innovative educational approaches. These would include things like the opening of Arroyo, the tours of Central Middle School, SCSD's Habits of Mind, SCSD's approach to the whole child, SCSD's focus on professional development, and the presence of preschool in all SCSD schools. Focusing on these items will both inspire pride in SCSD's closest stakeholders and build understanding of the district's approach.
7. Create a pilot communications plan to test a few methods for reaching out to the broader San Carlos community. While the schools do not regularly touch these stakeholders, they influence the parent community and funding. SCSD needs them to hear its message and to take pride in the work, even if they're not interested in all the details. The goal would be for every San Carlos resident to be able to share at least one great thing happening in the district.

Consistent talking points/messaging will help with this, but the district needs concrete distribution tactics to reach this group. That could mean joint online chats with the city government for residents. Or maybe more presence at city council meetings. Perhaps targeting a broadening of the external community members on the email list through outsourcing. Or maybe it's a dedicated newsletter or media outreach for this group.

### **Education Field Audience**

**Goal:** For peer educators, SCSD seeks to highlight and share the best practices developed in SCSD schools.

**Priorities:** The priority for this group is to share the things that SCSD does best, and that are scalable or reproducible in other places. They should be conveyed in a way that gives other educators material they can easily use and share with their colleagues.



### ***Sample Tactics:***

1. It would be helpful to provide an annual “theme” of what the district is hoping to highlight in the coming year about its work. SCSD staff could then also be given communications training to showcase the different ways in which they could be interacting with peers about that aspect of the work on their own. This could mean anything from Pinterest trainings to sending out links to panel submissions for conferences, depending on what the district is trying to accomplish that year. Accompanying talking points and collateral could also be developed and provided for staff that year.
2. Create a consistent public voice in the education field for SCSD’s superintendent. This could be a more active Twitter feed or a regular column on the SMCOE blog/website or in an education-focused publication like EdWeek or Edutopia. It may just involve a well-thought out plan for conference speaking opportunities. The idea would be for the superintendent to regularly provide the “in the trenches” view of education reform to a broader audience of educators.
3. Expand reporter relationships beyond the few local media outlets that are currently on the SCSD press list, with a focus instead on trade/education press. One way to do this could be to align with communications teams within SCSD’s corporate funders to get exposure when their funding is covered.
4. Incorporate a press area / newsroom on the SCSD website with basic facts, statistics, and messaging points. In a similar vein, have at least two SCSD staff on Haro or a similar journalism database as expert interviewees.
5. Coordinate SCSD’s communications staff with SMCOE’s communications team, both on (1) talking points and (2) editorial calendars, since they target the same audiences. This relationship can also be leveraged for greater visibility for SCSD within the region.
6. Continue with tours of Central Middle School for visiting education professionals, and perhaps run a campaign to solicit more attendees for this opportunity. The district could more broadly share the collateral developed for these visits. The district could also invite reporters to join the tours from time-to-time.
7. Create a support system that incentivizes SCSD staff to attend conferences and speak to their peers about their work with the district. This would require standard messaging points and collateral to be created around the most innovative aspects of SCSD’s work.

### **Funder Audience**

**Goal:** For existing and potential funders, SCSD seeks to exhibit innovative education practices and show the impact of these practices on student outcomes.



**Priorities:** The priority for this audience is to show that SCSD is a stable investment that shows high returns for the amount invested. The message here should be crafted with a tone of partnership and excitement about the work.

***Sample Tactics:***

1. Tier SCSD's existing funders by donation level, and create a separate communications strategy for each tier. The district office would touch all funders at some point during the year, and SCSD needs to decide how to make these touches consistent and authentic. It would also be helpful to clarify for the funder what those touches are at the beginning of the funder relationship, to manage expectations accordingly.
2. Host an annual "State of the District"-type event, where SCSD can talk about progress being made and the field more broadly. Everyone would be invited to this effort – funders, partners, the broader San Carlos community, the press – and it would be pushed out and live-streamed/recorded through multiple distribution channels. This will give the district an opportunity to lay out a vision for the future to attract new funders and highlight exciting projects in the works. It also creates useful content that can be shared and repurposed in different ways across different communications channels for the next year.
3. Create a template for SCSD to request Board approval on marketing projects, which would lead to a tighter, more strategic definition of audience, tactic, and project goals for new opportunities. It might also reduce costs for such projects.

## **DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS**

To create the types of outcomes envisioned here, it will be necessary to think carefully about which distribution channels to use to engage with which group of stakeholders. The key will be to meet audiences where they already are, instead of trying to get their attention in new places that are custom-built for SCSD's engagement with them.

So, for example, fellow practitioners and education thought leaders are most likely to be found at conferences, on Pinterest and on media sources like EdWeek or The Teaching Channel. As such, using a blog on SCSD's homepage or a LinkedIn page may not be the best way to engage this group.

With that in mind, the following is a brief breakdown of the types of content and engagement that SCSD could consider in various distribution spaces.

### **Social Media:**

**Facebook** – This seems to be the best place for SCSD to engage with families and school communities. Several people are already connected with the district through this venue, either directly or through school sites. It's a great venue for sharing

success stories, upcoming news or articles about innovations in the education space that relate to SCSD's own work. A formal submission and solicitation process for social media posts could also be created for SCSD staff.

**Twitter** – This is a great space to highlight SCSD's educational expertise and connect with other thought leaders in the field. It would be most effective if used to amplify the personal voice of SCSD's superintendent or to share articles from the field about SCSD's work. It is likely to be less successful as an institutional account (given the individual nature of Twitter), but that could still be a starting place for SCSD communications staff to listen and learn.

**LinkedIn** – Networks are key to thought leadership. Even if SCSD staff isn't engaging with external parties on LinkedIn, it's an effective way to showcase the strength, diversity and experience of staff. At the very least, SCSD should have an official LinkedIn page that is linked to the profiles of individual school site staff. Beyond that, SCSD could also provide social media training to staff on how to leverage LinkedIn as a thought leadership tool when they attend conferences or meet others in the field.

**Pinterest** – Pinterest is where most education practitioners are looking for examples and information about innovative education projects. As the district collects more content and ideas from SCSD classrooms, it might be worth using Pinterest to curate and showcase best practices, e.g. around project-based learning or ROPES projects, to grow a presence in the field.

**Slideshare/YouTube** – Both of these channels would be a great place to provide a database of sorts with easily accessible and engaging information about the district. It isn't recommended to use these, however, until there is a fair amount of content, or at least a plan for producing that content, that could be shared on these pages.

#### **Media:**

**Academic Education Journals/Publications** – These outlets, e.g. EdWeek or university journals, can be targeted for outreach around major events or activities that add know-how to the field of education. They could also be a helpful advertising partner, in some cases.

**Digital Education Spaces** – These outlets, e.g. Chalkbeat, Mindshift or Edutopia, are fantastic for reaching practitioners who are looking for resources that they can use. This would be the best distribution channel for actionable items – lesson plans, classroom layouts, grade-level-specific best practices – for educators.

**Non-Education-specific Media** – These outlets, e.g. Huffington Post or The Atlantic or San Jose Mercury News, are best for reaching a broad audience about the shifts in education. They could be approached for regular authorship in the form of a column or simply as an expert willing to provide quotes (perhaps through a service like Haro, or through a conscious/consistent building of reporter relationships.)

### **SCSD's Website:**

As SCSD's face on the internet, it is important for SCSD's website to be current and authentic. The majority of the site, though, should be intended to provide basic information to newcomers and those who know little about the district. A visit to the site should leave the audience with a feeling that SCSD (1) has strong school communities; (2) is at the cutting edge in terms of advancements in the education field; and (3) values and highlights its teaching staff. The website should be the main place for SCSD to share

1. Its official stance on things;
2. Basic information about schools, district-wide activities and enrollment; and
3. Opportunities to engage in two-way conversations with the district.

### **Conferences and Convenings:**

These are great spaces to build excitement and buzz about SCSD's approach, and to create alliances. They should be leveraged often, and perhaps worked into staff's annual workplans, as they are a valuable way to create a thought leadership role for SCSD.

### **Emails:**

Emails are particularly helpful for two things: (1) emergency or last-minute announcements and (2) consistent newsletters with generic information. It's important to remain aware of how much email is going out to various audiences, and how many people are opting out, which would mean they're finding it unhelpful or burdensome.

### **Printed Collateral:**

These are essentially backpack items – the type of information that most families will need to reference repeatedly over some period of time. Printed collateral could also be made available online. Close consideration should be given to when it might be necessary to translate printed materials for non-English speakers.

## **MEASURING IMPACT**

1. Set 6-month, 1-year and 3-year targets for this communications framework, based on the objectives identified for each audience. Targets should focus on engagement and the spread of knowledge about SCSD's innovative educational practices. They might even be represented by the number of media mentions or interactions with peers who mention familiarity with SCSD's work.
2. Create a culture and space of storytelling about SCSD's work. Highlighting stories is a key qualitative part of measuring impact, both internally and with funders.
3. Create a tracking system for staff who speak at conferences and promote their work. These staff members should be publicly recognized for their efforts to spread the district's thought leadership.

4. Maintain a social media dashboard with target engagement metrics for Facebook and Twitter (at the very least). Every September and March, remind people that they can follow their schools and the district on Facebook. Use the pages to measure engagement and gauge topics of interest among school communities, as well as to show responsiveness to community members.

## **BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS**

Major costs for this communications framework would be (1) the upfront foundation setting work; and (2) staff time and/or the hiring of a new staff person to manage communications in the long term.

Beyond this initial infrastructure approach, costs will vary, depending on which communications tactics are adopted and whether existing staff and school communities can be trained to manage the communications needs of the district (e.g. around graphic design or meeting facilitation), or whether outside vendors are needed for this work.

With regards to the implementation of specific communications tactics, several things could be done to keep costs down. These include:

1. Piloting smaller versions of specific tactics to get feedback, learn what works, and then scale up to the entire district level;
2. Using community members to assist with discrete design projects;
3. Training school site staff to manage some aspects of communications, though this needs to be done carefully and would not be recommended until a strong handoff is possible; and
4. Entering into long term retainer contracts with key vendors in the design/content/online space.

All of that said, however, it will always be necessary for one staff member or department at the district level to own and manage the various communications tactics being implemented across the board.