CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

EMPOWERING STUDENT EXCELLENCE

Strategic Communications Plan

Engaging Our Community in Student Achievement

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Mission, Vision & Core Values

Mission

Cambridge Public Schools delivers an excellent education that inspires, acknowledges, empowers, and supports **every student** on their personal journey to achieve their highest potential in and beyond school and as productive members of their communities.

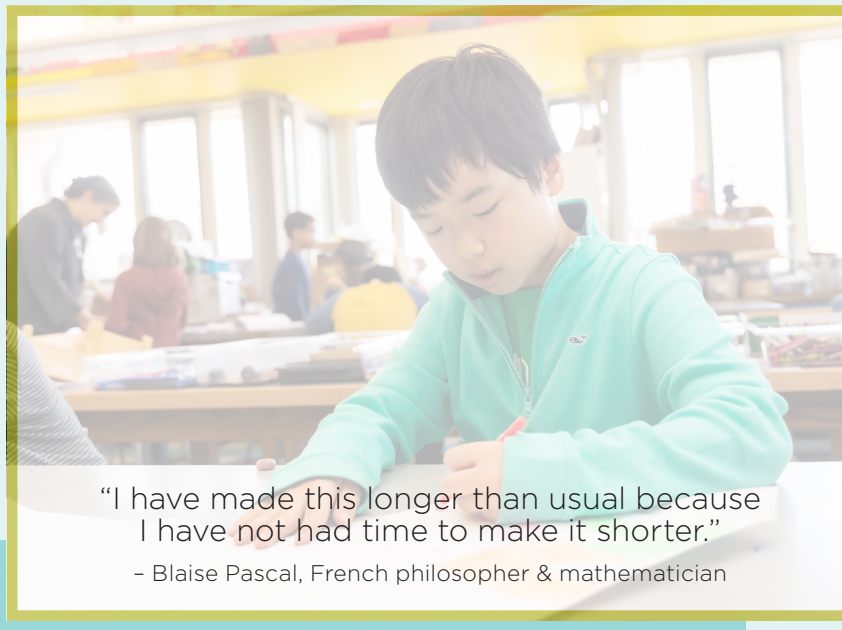
Vision

Cambridge Public Schools is widely recognized as an institution of excellence. **Our schools** deliver an inclusive, safe, high-quality learning experience that cultivates every student's potential, works to dismantle educational inequities, and strengthens family and community partnerships. **Our students** are critical thinkers, lifelong learners, and builders of a more equitable society who graduate prepared to make informed choices about their future.

Core Values

- High Expectations
- Equitable Opportunity
- Joy of Learning
- Wellness
- Sense of Belonging
- Personal & Collective Responsibility
- Partnership
- Continuous Improvement

Introduction



Communicating and sharing news, announcements, thoughts, information, ideas, questions, and curiosities, creating an authentic dialogue between every individual invested in an organization, and raising awareness about the organization's strengths, successes, and opportunities for growth are fundamental to its success. However, communicating effectively, simply, and transparently can be a challenge–one that must be met with commitment and a strategic vision for steady improvement.

Historically, Cambridge Public Schools' reputation has been one of excellence. It's a reputation that we have perhaps taken for granted at times, failing to celebrate, highlight, and show in a consistent, proactive, and meaningful way our academic strengths, rigorous focus on teaching and learning, and strategic plan for improving outcomes for all students. We also understand that to foster and build trust with our school community the importance of being transparent about opportunities for growth and challenges the district is facing.

Our **Office of Communications** leads this realm of work, invested in implementing systems and processes to strengthen our communications and engagement with students, staff, families, and community stakeholders so that they are empowered and informed about learning, progress, and the achievements of individual schools, programs, staff, students, and district leaders. Our **Strategic Communications Plan** is a roadmap that lays out our priorities and long term approaches to achieve and maintain a high-standard of communication, marketing, and branding with an emphasis on collecting data for continuous improvement.

Purpose & Key Objectives

Purpose

The **purpose** of the Strategic Communications Plan is to: Ensure that schools and district offices maintain the highest standards in all forms of communication, across schools and district offices, so that students, families, staff, and the community are informed, engaged, and invested in the district's mission to empower every student to achieve their highest potential.

Objectives

Our four **key objectives** are to:

1. **Elevate** CPS's reputation for excellence through a consistent focus on high performance at all levels of the organization to foster satisfaction, pride, loyalty, and commitment among stakeholders;
2. **Educate** and generate excitement around the District Plan, build understanding about the ongoing collective work ahead to accomplish the district's main objectives and continue to offer opportunities for community engagement;
3. **Establish** a clear, consistent infrastructure for effective internal and external communications and develop opportunities for meaningful community engagement; and
4. **Expand** language access to empower every family with information to support their child's learning.

What is Internal Communications?

Internal Communications is how we as an educational organization communicate and engage with our key internal stakeholders, which includes:

- Students
- Parents/Guardians/Caregivers
- Staff (Certified, Support, Administrators)
- Union Leadership
- School Committee

What is External Communications?

External Communications is how we as an educational organization communicate and engage with our key external stakeholders, which includes:

- Residents and Taxpayers
- Local Businesses
- Community Partners and Faith-Based Organizations
- City Leaders
- Legislators and other Elected Officials
- Prospective New Families
- Prospective Staff
- Funders
- Media

Objective 1: Elevate *CPS's reputation for excellence through a consistent focus on high performance at all levels of the organization to foster satisfaction, pride, loyalty, and commitment among stakeholders.*

The City of Cambridge is known as a hub of innovation, curiosity, and inspiration, and our school district is an integral part of that legacy. We are proud of all our district embraces and offers our students. The Office of Communications strives to share and build capacity in others to celebrate our school community.

Strategies

a. Highlight the achievements of students and staff members by showcasing positive stories in a meaningful and consistent way.

The Office of Communications aspires to celebrate and share the exemplary teaching, learning, and achievements happening in each of our schools every day and beyond the school day. We accomplish this in a variety of ways:

In...	Through...	Examples
Newsletters	• The Bright Spot • Staff and Student Spotlights *Nominations accepted from the school community here.*	
Social Media	• The Bright Spot • Staff and Student Spotlights • Days of Recognition	
Website	• Homepage banners noting top stories/ highlights • News releases, newsletters, and social media feeds • Upcoming Events • Links to the Family Portal, ParentSquare, District Calendar, District Plan, School Committee, and School Registration information	
Multimedia Channels	• Compelling video and photo projects that provide in-depth access to individuals and groups that represent our district's Mission, Vision, and Core Values through personal interviews and unique visuals	
Media Coverage	• TV and radio stations • Newspapers • Blogs	

b. Demonstrate a commitment to transparency and urgency in communicating about challenges and shortcomings, including unexpected incidents and solutions and strategies for improvement.

In order to continue to build trust with our school community, CPS is committed to being proactive in sharing information about challenges and opportunities for growth in a transparent and timely manner. The Superintendent and Executive Leadership Team regularly consult the Office of Communications for support to ensure that stakeholders are informed about decisions that may have an impact on their child's learning or how they support our students. Our monthly staff and weekly district newsletters preview School Committee discussions, summarize results, and link relevant presentations for stakeholders to review. Our newsletters also share school community events, where stakeholder input is always encouraged and sought.

ParentSquare, our two-way communications platform, allows us to share information, especially during emergencies and when unexpected incidents or situations occur. ParentSquare is used to issue urgent alerts and share other time-sensitive details. In preparation for these crises, our team continues to build templates that will allow for timely messaging through ParentSquare.

While we take great pride in our work, we are committed to continuous reflection, improvement, and growth and regularly evaluate our processes and practices, seek feedback, participate in professional learning,and consult fellow school communications professionals to gain fresh ideas and insight.

c. Counter myths and misconceptions about schools and the district.

The most impactful way to correct inaccuracies, misinformation, and, at times, rumors, is to partner with internal and external stakeholders to provide timely and accurate information, personal testimonials, and document-based evidence. When addressing student learning outcomes, we share data proactively on an ongoing basis through our District Plan dashboard. The dashboard provides a level of ongoing transparency while also correcting misinformation or misinterpretations.

Cultivating relationships with news media outlets is also essential in sharing positive stories, building trust, and transparency. This includes local, regional, and national television, print, and radio stations, as well as independent journalists and student-run publications. We also share notable school and district achievements through media releases, which are posted on our website and, at times, shared with the news media. We also offer an inside look into our school community by extending invitations to visit our school buildings and speak directly with educators, students, and administrators. We will create a media calendar to also ensure that annual celebrations are pitched to the media for possible coverage.

d. Build capacity among staff in all schools and central offices in effective communication and customer service through training, coaching, and support.

In order to build consistency in the quality of our communications and services across schools and district offices, it is critical that we equip staff members with skills and information to meaningfully engage with stakeholders. The Office of Communications' role is key and will continue to:

- Lead and/or support professional learning opportunities in customer service and how it relates to our brand, writing communications that are inclusive of all families, and utilizing software and technology.
- Annually review, revise, and distribute a user-friendly *Communications Best Practice Guide* that provides tips for informative, friendly, and easily digestible family-facing communications as well as guidance on when communications should be sent for maximum engagement.
- Support schools and departments with the writing and revision of family- and staff-facing communications.

Objective 2: Educate *and generate excitement around the District Plan, build understanding about the ongoing collective work to accomplish the district's main objectives, and continue to offer opportunities for community engagement.*

District Plan 2022 to 2025

CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Our District Plan is our roadmap or "North Star" and guides our work to improve academic growth for each of our students. The District Plan has four key objectives:

- To Deliver Ambitious Instruction & Effective Supports
- To Implement Accessible College & Career Pathways
- To Implement Effective Staff Learning & Support
- To Build Welcoming & Supportive Schools & District

It is essential that all of our stakeholders have a clear understanding of our objectives and feel invested in this collective work. In order for our community to truly know the District Plan, every school, department, and district office will make every effort in amplifying our objectives by connecting them to learning, activities, events, and initiatives and consistently reinforce them in communications with families and staff.

Strategies

a. **Regularly share key components of the plan and milestones through a variety of channels,** such as internal communications to staff, School Committee presentations, Superintendent's newsletters, website, social media, multimedia productions, flyers, and visible branding in every school.

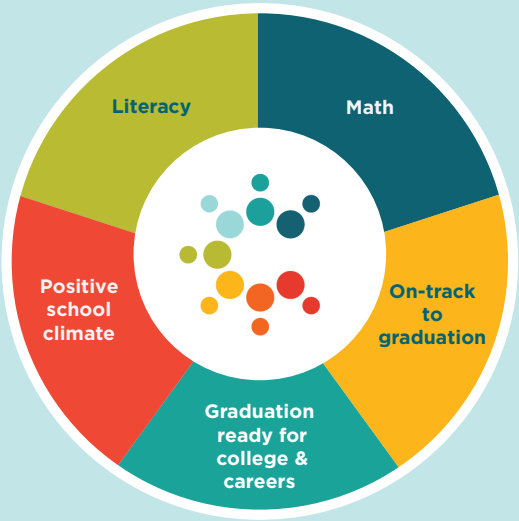
b. **Through video and photography, capture objectives and initiatives "in action."** The most compelling way to create understanding and engagement is to demonstrate how we are "living" each objective in our classrooms daily. On a regular basis, we will capture how each of our objectives is being practiced in the classroom at the elementary and secondary levels and share in a contextual way through newsletters, our website, and social media.

c. **Highlight the progress towards the target set for each outcome.**

On December 20, 2022, the School Committee approved targets for several indicators:

- Literacy
- Math
- Chronic Absenteeism
- Overage & Undercredited
- Individual Student Success Planning
- Advanced Coursework Participation
- Earned College Credits/Industry Recognized Credential
- Graduation Rates

Through our interactive dashboard, stakeholders will be able to track our progress towards our targets.



Objective 3: Establish *a clear, consistent infrastructure for effective internal and external communication and develop opportunities for meaningful community engagement.*

A regular cadence of proactive communication is critical so that our stakeholders are well-informed. The Superintendent's weekly district newsletter and monthly staff newsletter are key touch points for information, resources, and highlights. Each school also shares information specific to their school community on a weekly or monthly basis.

All emergency communications are sent through the district's single, internal system, **ParentSquare**.

Strategies

a. Regularly review and develop templates, standards, and protocols for consistent and accurate communication.

A growing number of school districts have created policies, procedures, and guidelines for consistent, high-quality communication among schools, district offices, families, and the community. In order to align messages and various means of communication, the Office of Communications created two internal communications manuals for the Executive Leadership Team and school building leadership. Each manual establishes processes to ensure information flows in a seamless, thoughtful, and consistent manner at all levels of our organization to support effective communication with our families.

On a quarterly basis, the Office of Communications will review and, as necessary, update the procedures, guidelines, tips, samples of high-quality materials, and resources found in the internal communications manuals.

b. Continued ParentSquare support for all family communication, including emergency notifications.

Over the years, the district implemented a variety of communication systems to meet our evolving needs. However, the availability of multiple communication systems led to little consistency among schools and difficulty in data collection and analysis.

In August 2022, the district launched ParentSquare, a two-way internal communications system, across all schools and at the district level. ParentSquare allows users to choose how they would like to receive information (email, text, and/or app) and when (what time of day). Through ongoing support and outreach, ParentSquare has been adopted with fidelity. We continue to learn and implement the platform's many features, increasing efficiency and accessibility.

c. In collaboration with the Office of Family Engagement, offer a variety of ways for stakeholders to share questions, comments, concerns, and ideas to support their child's success.

In collaboration with the Family Engagement team, the Office of Communications will produce and distribute accessible resources that help families become more engaged in teaching and learning. Given the growing population of families whose preferred language is not English, language access is essential. We will continue to place great emphasis on language access and ensure information is available in the district's top languages based on enrollment data and identify additional means of reaching families in their preferred languages. (See Objective 4 below.)

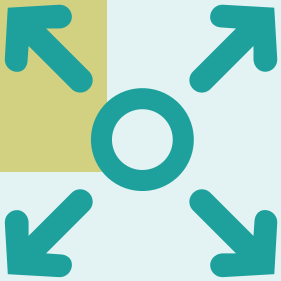
We will also continue to support opportunities for families to engage at district and school events through extensive, targeted outreach, on-hand interpreters, and translated materials.

d. Gather feedback in climate surveys for continuous improvement.

In the private and corporate sectors, marketing and branding are embedded in their strategies with a laser focus on the customer experience with a product or service. Organizations of all types and sizes gather data in an intentional and cyclic way to determine how their product or service measures up to the customer's expectations and competitors.

While a school district may not approach research and feedback on the services they deliver in the same way as the private sector, there are valuable lessons to learn about listening more closely to customers and improving services based on their experiences, both positive and negative. CPS's efforts to (1) strengthen our families' experiences in supporting their child's learning and (2) support and retain staff must also involve gathering feedback throughout the school year to inform how we will improve delivery of services to families and create consistency in services across schools.

Objective 4: Expand *language access to empower every family with information to support their child's learning.*



The partnership between our educators and parents, guardians, and caregivers is critical to student success. As our district centers equity and inclusion, the Office of Communications strives to remove barriers so that all families can play an integral role in their child's learning.

Strategies

a. Write and design messaging that is clear, simple, and easy to understand.

The Office of Communications recognizes that families are more likely to remain engaged in their child's education when communications are brief in length and written in plain language. When necessary, we supply our audience with a link or resource where they can find extended information. We also collaborate closely with our graphic designers to visually enhance messaging with photos and icons that support the message.

b. Implement innovative approaches, such as multimedia content, to explain complicated plans and processes.

The Office of Communications will continue to work with internal photo and video staff and external vendors to create engaging, informative, and entertaining content. This approach provides unique context and perspective on complex topics, such as our budget process and the District Plan. Once families gain an understanding, we hope they will feel encouraged to play a greater role in the processes.

c. Support translation/interpretation services and ParentSquare training for language-specific groups.

We are proud to serve a diverse school community. It is essential that we remove language barriers for parents, guardians, and caregivers. At in-person community events, the Communications Office will continue to work closely with the Office of Equity, Inclusion & Belonging (OEIB) to provide interpreters for families. We will also continue to produce written communications in our six main languages, and collaborate with OEIB and the City of Cambridge's Community Engagement Team to identify additional means of reaching families in their preferred languages. Through our strong partnership with local community centers and advocacy groups, our staff will also coordinate training sessions for parents, guardians, and caregivers on school-based tools, such as ParentSquare, in their native language. The goal is to help all families feel comfortable and connected to district communications.

Emergency/Crisis Communications

Schools experience a range of crises that can significantly impact the mental and social-emotional, and at times, physical well-being of students and educators.

The National Education Association defines a crisis as "any traumatic event that seriously disrupts coping and problem-solving abilities of students and school staff. School crises can be on a large scale, such as severe violence, hostage situations, and natural disasters that require an emergency response from the community. Or, they can be more individualized, such as a car accident or the unexpected death of a student."[1]

[1] *NEA School Crisis Guide 2018*

What is an Emergency?

An urgent situation that calls for immediate actions such as a school shooting, tornado, gas leak, or fire.

What is a Crisis?

An unfolding situation that has reached a critical phase with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome such as a shooting, hostage situation, or terrorism.

CPS Emergency Responses Include:

- **Evacuation:** Students and staff quickly exit the school building if there is a hazard/threat inside. If students must remain outside the school building, students may be relocated to designated sites.
- **Lockdown:** Students are protected from a security threat within the school building by hiding and remaining silent in their classrooms.
- **Secure & Hold:** Students are kept in the school building if there is a security threat outside the school. Exterior doors will be secured but activities within the school will not be restricted.
- **Shelter-In-Place:** Students are sheltered in the building if there is an airborne hazard, such as chemicals released from a transportation accident outside the building. Students may also be sheltered in the building if there is severe weather in the area.

Information for Families in the Event of a School Emergency
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Upcoming/New Priorities for 2024-2025

- **Continuously reflect and implement elements of the feedback received from the spring 2024 Communications and Content Survey to improve strategy**
- **Support ICTS in updating the current website as the district considers transitioning to a new Content Management System**
- **Design a Simplicity Speaks/Plain Language District Training**

Conclusion

Cambridge Public Schools is deeply committed to continue sharing meaningful information with our families, staff, and the community in an intentional and engaging way, while recognizing that continuous growth and improvement are a constant. The approaches, strategies, and tactics outlined in this plan provide a comprehensive and sound roadmap for the work ahead and the Office of Communications is poised to provide the leadership and expertise.

In order to make a lasting impact, however, every employee, department, and school must embrace, participate, and collaborate in the work strategic communications requires to embed it throughout an organization. Every employee, department, and school must recognize the value of stronger communication and execute thoughtful plans to deliver improved services, which will lead to deeper family engagement and raising student achievement.

We welcome your feedback on our communications and this strategic plan. Please do not hesitate to contact the Office of Communications team.

Sujata Wycoff, Director of Communications
Lily Rivera, Senior Communications Specialist
Lavett Holloman, Community Relations Clerk

Appendix

Over the years, Cambridge Public Schools has prioritized communications, however, the district lacked clear and codified processes and strategies necessary for consistency and effectiveness. In October 2021, the district hired a Director of Communications to begin shaping and implementing a clear vision for communications. In July 2022, the Superintendent created the Office of Communications.

Key Milestones Since October 2021

- **November 2021:** Launched monthly staff newsletter, *Staff Connection*, which is published the first Wednesday of every month.
- **January - August 2022:** In collaboration with the Information, Communications & Technology Services (ICTS) Department, began the process of vetting vendors for a district-wide communications system, chose ParentSquare, and launched a months-long planning, training, and implementation process.
- **February - August 2022:** Created internal communications manuals for the Executive Leadership Team and school-based leadership that outline and standardize communications priorities, expectations, practices, and templates.
- **March - July 2022:** For the first time in several years, overhauled the district's 40+ page marketing publication, *Schools at a Glance*, in collaboration with the Creative Services division of ICTS, all schools, and multiple district departments.
- **June - August 2022:** Created, designed, and distributed user-friendly *Communications Best Practice Guide* that provides tips for informative, friendly, and easily digestible family-facing communications as well as guidance on when communications should be sent for maximum engagement.
- **August 2022:** Rebranded weekly Superintendent's newsletter, which launched in August 2021, to *Greer Gazette*, which is published every Monday. Created a nomination form for *The Bright Spot*, a branded segment to consistently highlight noteworthy student and staff achievements.
- **August 2022:** Launched ParentSquare, a comprehensive tool that elevates our commitment to accessible, accurate, and timely communication with our school community. Ongoing support and training provided.
    - We can reach at least one student contact for **99.8%** of our students.
    - **67.9%** of our parents/guardians have registered for ParentSquare.
    - **85.9%** of our students have at least one parent/guardian registered for ParentSquare.
    - Our communications are being translated into **39** languages in ParentSquare!

- **September 2022:** Introduced our 2022-2025 *District Plan*, a roadmap that outlines a clear and shared vision, determines how progress will be defined and measured, and identifies priorities for improvement that will support meaningful and lasting improvement for our students.

  Logo 1 | Logo 2 | Mission, Vision, & Core Values 1 | Mission, Vision, & Core Values 2 | Outcomes, Objectives, & Core Values | Outcomes & Indicators | Flyer | Bookmark | Slide Deck | Postcard

- **October 2022:** Created and distributed *Information for Families in the Event of a School Emergency*. (አማርኛ | عربي | বাংলা | Kreyòl ayisyen | Español)

- **November - December 2022:** Updated Department Pages of the District website.

- **January - March 2023:** Led communications for the Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Process.

  Planning for the FY24 budget process involved deep collaboration between our Offices of **Communications, Creative Services, Family Engagement, Finance, and Research & Strategy**. Our Creative Services team spent several weeks designing compelling graphics to visually enhance our messaging.

  Web Banner | Postcard | Community Engagement Sessions Flyer |Community Engagement Session 1 Flyer | Community Engagement 2 Flyer | Student Session Flyer | Slide Deck | Online Budget Book | Superintendent's Survey Video

  After the design phase, we thoughtfully outlined our Communications plan for families, staff, and students to **maximize attendance at community, staff, and student engagement sessions and participation in the multilingual survey**.

  The Office of Communications and Creative Services Division were awarded a National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) 2023 Golden Achievement Award for this work.

- **April 2023:** Supported the launch of the bi-monthly Principal Newsletter, *Principal Connection*, which is published on the first and third Thursday of every month.

- **August 2023:** Unveiled a new district-wide motto and incorporated the new motto in our logo. The motto, Empowering Student Excellence, stems from the work our students did on the Mission, Vision, and Core Values and reaffirms our shared commitment to providing each of our scholars with a high-quality education that prepares them for a successful future.

- **2023-2024 School Year:** Maintenance, review, and improvement of systems and structures built while maintaining the day-to-day responsibilities of the Office of Communications

  - **Spring 2024:** Communications and Content Survey for Families

  - **June 2024:** For a second consecutive year, NSPRA honored Cambridge Public Schools with eight awards for excellence in Communications, Design, Branding, and Marketing, including another **NSPRA Golden Achievement Award** for strategic communications and seven **Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards** in the Infographic, Marketing Materials, Video Production, Handbook Design, Newsletter Design, and Special Purpose Publication categories.

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