



CREATING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES: LESSONS FROM STATES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State education agencies (SEAs) are central players in initiating and leading reform efforts to improve academic achievement for all students. With the adoption of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), SEA leaders have the opportunity and flexibility to rethink how to best educate students for the future. To be effective, SEAs of the future must now incorporate communication into their overall organizational strategy to ensure that both internal and external stakeholders can and will support implementation of new state plans. This report details the central themes that emerged from this year's Strategic Communications Benchmarking Project, which follows the BSCP Strategic Communications Framework (see Appendix A) developed through the 2014 project. Participants for this 2016 Benchmarking Project include the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), Indiana Department of Education (IDOE), Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). The central themes from this year's project by framework component are described below.

Leadership plays a critical role in strategic communications. In SEAs, the chief state school officer (i.e., chief, commissioner, director of education, secretary, or superintendent) referred to in this report in general references as the chief, is responsible for creating structures and processes that make communication more strategic and coordinated across internal and external agency stakeholders. Steps toward greater coherence around communication include:

- Setting the direction of the agency;
- Leading the development of agency goals and major initiatives or strategies;
- Conveying consistent simple messages to align and clarify agency initiatives;
- Creating and supporting formalized internal communication processes to ensure communications are managed and coordinated from one centralized source and that all agency actors are clear about how their role supports the agency vision and goals;



- Creating organizational structures that promote collaboration and alignment between communications and academic staff; and
- Clarifying the role and expectations of staff as communicators who support the agency mission, vision, and goals.

Significant Leadership practices described in this report include:

- KSDE Commissioner Randy Watson helped create a clear agency vision with stakeholder buy-in by engaging in a 20-city listening tour across the state when first arriving in office. The result was a clear mission and vision for Kansas education that became a well-formed campaign called “Kansans Can.”
- Commissioner Watson also prioritized and supported the agency’s communications department by repurposing funds from other divisions to allow the communications director to hire one more staff member. The communications director was able to assess what skills she needed most in a full-time equivalent (FTE) position and was able to find and hire a person with the right skillset.
- ADE Commissioner Johnny Key took his agency through the BSCP Strategic Performance Management process to redefine the agency’s direction, create an organizational structure around that direction, and devise a performance management system to encourage productivity and innovation. The resulting clarity and coherence has seeded conditions for the SEA to create a strategic communications strategy around the agency’s strategies and priorities.
- IDOE Commissioner Glenda Ritz, in partnership with the Great Lakes Comprehensive Center, reorganized the SEA in 2016 to streamline its organizational structure. The resulting structure allowed for easy collaboration between the executive director of communications and the deputy superintendent of public instruction.

Internal communication challenges are often process challenges. It is important to establish policies and processes to ensure communication is clear, aligned, regular, and consistent for both internal and external stakeholders. Communication processes that are ad hoc and rest within individuals rather than in organizational practice are unpredictable and can turn into a liability quickly. Ways to improve internal communication include:

- Implementing clear repeatable processes to ensure information about key initiatives is consistently disseminated vertically and horizontally throughout the agency;
- Clarifying the role and functions of the communications division and matching staff to those functions;



- Clarifying when and how to engage the communications division in agency activities; and
- Identifying and implementing effective methods and timelines for sharing information internally.

Internal communication practices described in this report include those below.

- NCDPI leaders ensure all staff members are apprised of agency priorities through regularly scheduled meetings. Meetings are held weekly with the senior planning team, twice monthly with senior leadership cabinet division directors, quarterly with small cross-division groups, and an annual all-staff meeting.
- NCDPI leaders align internal and external communication by sending memos targeted to districts and schools to agency staff members prior to their release. The memos contain a routing sheet to ensure key agency staff members received them.
- IDE communication is funneled through both the communications director and the deputy superintendent of public Instruction to ensure that messages are correct regarding academic content, clear, and meet the needs of various stakeholders.

External communication should flow from a centralized source and address the unique needs of various stakeholders. One way to ensure that legislators, educators, parents, and community members receive clear and aligned messages is to establish clear processes around external communication by:

- Creating well-coordinated clear processes for website, media, social media, and legislative communications;
- Creating multiple and reciprocal communication mechanisms to reach LEA leaders, teachers, and parents;
- Developing messages and using communication channels consistent with the needs, preferences, and backgrounds of each target audience; and
- Considering ways to effectively engage stakeholders in developing and supporting the SEA vision and goals.

External communication practices described in this report include the following.

- The NCDPI website is easy to navigate and has an effective method to communicate with the general public through its interactive “Let’s Talk!” link. The link is divided into 24 different SEA divisions from which stakeholders can select to submit suggestions or questions.

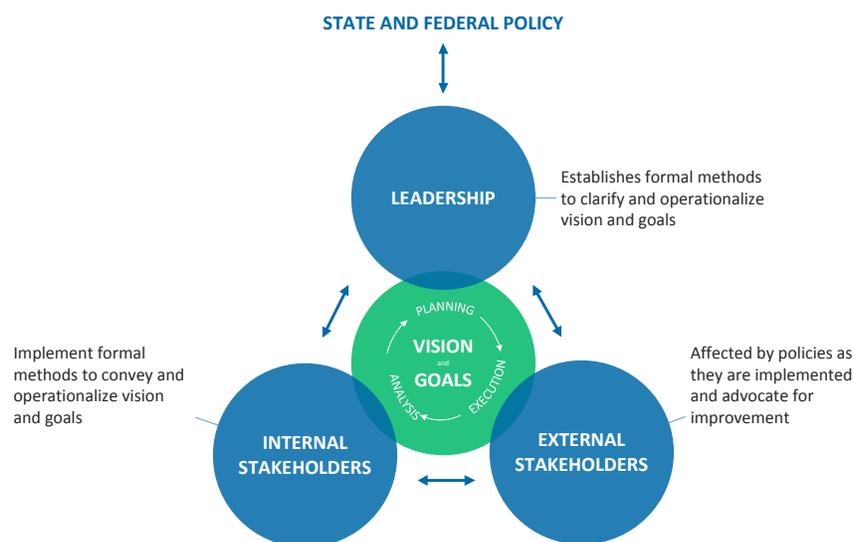
- The ADE webmaster is located in the communications division. The webmaster serves as one point of contact for website content by soliciting information from designated division representatives. Website changes are tracked through a Google doc, and a one-page internal newsletter provides website updates to agency staff every two weeks.
- IDOE has improved communication to teachers by sending information provided to local education agency (LEA) superintendents to teachers in a communication adopted for teachers called the Teacher Dialogue. The agency website includes a link for teachers to share and learn about promising practices from other teachers.
- To increase communication with families, leaders in the IDOE worked with AT&T to develop a mobile application that can be downloaded on a phone and used for free to receive information from the SEA. The app can be updated, enabling IDOE to send messages to targeted stakeholder groups.

Evaluating communication is a critical area of need in SEAs. Because communication is a broad term and is implemented through multiple mechanisms across divisions, SEA leaders should be vigilant in creating a holistic approach to evaluating communication efforts.

Communication evaluation in SEAs should be:

- Holistic with consideration for the type and level of communication;
- Well-defined and have relevant measurement and analysis procedures;
- Meaningful and useful for adjusting communication strategies; and
- Co-developed by evaluation staff using agency data.

BSCP Strategic Communications Framework





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INTRODUCTION

In the BSCP 2014 Benchmarking Project, we examined how state education agencies (SEAs) in Arkansas, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, and Ohio communicated about adopting new state standards. Through interviews with leaders in those states, we documented their communication successes and challenges and learned how communication is affected by different SEA contexts. The BSCP 2016 Benchmarking Project has allowed two SEAs, Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) and Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), to engage in an iterative examination and improvement process by benchmarking their communication practices a second year. The Benchmarking Project also included two new SEA participants, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) and the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) to benchmark their communication practices against an effective strategic communications framework. In addition to learning about their own systems, all participants have been able to learn from one another and share ideas on how to move their communication strategies into a more holistic strategic communications approach.

The fact that SEA communication is created and disseminated from various sources within an SEA makes capturing communication practices difficult, particularly since communication is a complex and fluid activity that constantly changes based on state needs and politics. It also makes shifting those practices into a more centralized and holistic approach even more challenging; however, it is necessary to ensure that SEAs can achieve their goals through clear, aligned, and coordinated communication. The goal of this Benchmarking Project is to work along-side SEAs and their Regional Comprehensive Centers (RCCs) to gather and share effective practices that will lead to coherent and proactive strategic communications approaches in SEAs.

YEAR 4 STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS BENCHMARKING CONTEXT

BSCP selected participants for the 2016 Benchmarking Project based on requests through the Strategic Communications Collaborative, a collaborative formed among 11 RCCs funded by the Department of Education. Benchmarking participants included two repeat SEAs from the previous project, Arkansas and Kansas, and three new participants, Indiana, North Carolina, and Alabama.

Our deeper understanding of the complexity of SEA communication led us to approach the 2016 Benchmarking Project with a few process changes. To identify communication successes and gaps, we spent one day in each SEA conducting interviews with staff members from top-level



executive leaders to those who were leading implementation of policies and working with LEAs. We also worked more closely with RCC state liaisons to assist with site visit preparation and attend interviews to gain perspective on local context and learn about any supports they were providing to the SEA.

Background on Year 4 Participants

Because context greatly influences communication, some brief background on the participants is found below:

Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE)

The ALSDE Communications Office is attached directly to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education in its organizational chart, along with the Office of General Counsel. There are five executive-level divisions directly below the superintendent that include the divisions of Teaching and Learning, Administrative and Financial Services, External Affairs, Career and Technical/Workforce Development, and Technology and Data. Because ALSDE had an interim superintendent in the spring, ALSDE leaders decided to forgo the site visit until a later time. In August of 2016, Michael Sentance became the agency's state superintendent of education. Superintendent Sentance has education policy experience from work in Massachusetts and served in the U.S. Department of Education under George W. Bush. Currently, ALSDE is finalizing a communication plan and has begun listening tours across the state to gather public input for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Arkansas Department of Education (ADE)

In Arkansas, the Communications Office is attached to the Office of the Chief of Staff, who reports directly to Commissioner of Education Johnny Key, as does the Office of General Counsel and Legal Services. The deputy commissioner reports directly to the commissioner. Assistant commissioners from the Offices of Fiscal and Administrative Services, Educator Effectiveness and Licensure, Research and Technology, Public School Accountability, and Learning Services (see Appendix C) report directly to the deputy commissioner. The State Board of Education approved Commissioner Key in March 2015. Before becoming commissioner, he served as associate vice president for university relations at the University of Arkansas System, and he has had an extensive political career, having been a justice of the peace for Baxter County Court and serving three two-year terms in the House of Representatives followed by a tenure in the Senate.

During the past year, ADE has been deeply engaged with the BSCP and the South Central Comprehensive Center (SC3) in an extensive process of identifying a new strategic direction to transform education in the state. After determining direction, ADE has been working with BSCP and SC3 to organize the SEA around its mission and vision by detailing roles and processes



within each division to meet organizational goals. The process, called Strategic Performance Management, or SPM, will help ADE connect its new vision to ESSA.

ADE made many process improvements both during and after the 2014 Benchmarking Project, with the most notable being its improved website that received a new user-friendly facelift and more strategic inclusion of information, as well as a very clear explanation of ESSA and ADE's plans to address the new policy.

Indiana Department of Education (IDOE)

The Indiana Department of Education as of November 2016 was led by Glenda Ritz, who became the superintendent of public instruction in 2012. Superintendent Ritz brought with her a long history as an education practitioner, and she was the first Democrat to serve in the Education Division in 40 years and was the first Democrat to win a ballot race in the state since 1996.¹ During her leadership, she spent time weekly in districts and schools, and her visits are documented on the IDE website through the link "Ritz on the Road." In November 2016, Dr. Jennifer McCormick won the election for superintendent of public instruction over Ritz. At the time of the writing of this document, Dr. McCormick and her new leadership team are organizing IDOE to support their priority initiatives.

Under Superintendent Ritz on the organizational chart collected in Spring of 2016 was the Office of the Chief of Staff. The next level of leaders included six offices: a Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, Government Affairs and School Safety, General Counsel, Communications, Finance and Business Operations, and Chief Information Officer. The next level below included two assistant superintendents under the deputy superintendent of public instruction who managed the office of School Support Services and Outreach. (see Appendix C).

Similar to Arkansas, the IDOE leadership has been engaged in a long-term in-depth process of strategic planning with the assistance of the Great Lakes RCC. This focus has helped IDOE begin to structure the SEA around agency goals, and communication is a high priority with agency leadership as exemplified by the commissioner, who characterizes communication as "a fundamental strategic lever for continuous improvement."

Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE)

KSDE is led by Dr. Randy Watson, who was appointed commissioner of education by the Kansas State Board of Education in November of 2014. Dr. Watson has a background as a teacher, high school principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent.

The KSDE organizational chart is relatively simple; directly below the commissioner are the Office of Human Resources and the Office of General Counsel. Also reporting directly to the commissioner are two deputy commissioners, one representing Fiscal and Administrative Services, and one representing the Division of Learning Services. Communication and



Recognition Programs is housed under the Division of Fiscal and Administrative Services; however, the communication director meets very frequently with the commissioner on a regular basis (see Appendix C).

When he assumed his position in July 2015, Commissioner Watson began an extensive listening tour across the state to understand what communities wanted from their education system. Out of that process was born a strategic direction that defined the State Board's vision mapped to the community vision called "Kansans Can." The Kansans Can strategic plan provided clarity to the agency's vision and goals to both internal and external stakeholders and remains highly visible through a consistent branding process. KSDE leaders are continuing to focus on their strategic direction and have formed a number of cross-divisional groups to address their 11 initiatives that fall under five overall goals.

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)

Dr. June Atkinson was the first woman elected as state superintendent in North Carolina and was one of the longest-standing executive leaders in an SEA, as she had been in that office since August 2005. She has a background as a former business education teacher and has been involved in curriculum and instruction for many years.

In January 2016, the NCDPI has two positions on the same level as the state superintendent: Chief Performance Officer and the Office of Charter Schools. The level below the superintendent had five divisions: Agency Support, Chief Academic and Digital Learning Officer, Deputy State Superintendent, Chief Information Officer, and a Chief Finance Officer. The Communication Services Division was housed within the Agency Support Division (see Appendix C). In October 2016, the structure was revised to reflect Agency Support (along with Communication Services) being moved up to the same level as the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Office of Charter Schools, Achievement School District Superintendent, Chief of Staff, Chief Academic and Digital Learning Officer, Deputy State Superintendent, Chief Information Officer, and Chief Financial Officer as divisions directly below the Office of the Superintendent.

Communication is a high priority for the superintendent and the agency. NCDPI leaders assert that good communication requires communicating messages approximately 10 times and that stakeholder involvement in educational policy is important for gaining buy-in and support. Superintendent Atkinson remains visible to schools and the general public, and she personally answers emails to parents and gathers public feedback.

The remainder of this report provides background on the Strategic Communications Framework that was used to document SEA communication strategies within a systemic structure (see Appendix A) and then details the communication strategies, challenges, and effective practices found within the four fully participating SEAs. The report is organized by components of the Framework: Leadership, Internal Stakeholders, External Stakeholders, and Evaluation.



PROMISING PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES THROUGH THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Benchmarking is an extremely useful process for identifying, understanding, and adapting outstanding practices from any type of organization in order to compare current models against known effective models. Over the past two-and-a-half years, we learned that communication tends to be less structured in SEAs than in other agencies due to their shift over the years from being an inward-facing compliance-driven organization to becoming a public-facing agency expected to lead educational improvement efforts. Therefore, in 2014 we looked outside of education to find a well-established model to inform our strategic communications framework (see Appendix A) and found an effective one developed by the Department of Defense (DOD). The DOD strategic communications model was developed around 2006 to address communication gaps that the agency felt contributed to intelligence concerns around the 9/11 attacks. The model created a holistic communication approach driven from top-level leadership and implemented through consistent practices to align internal and external communication and create points of intersection between those elements. It is adjusted and sustained through a continuous research and evaluation process to ensure communication reaches intended stakeholders for intended purposes.

This year, we updated the framework to reflect the role of state and federal policy as part of the visioning and goal-setting process, and we updated the middle circle to reflect the importance of using the SEA vision and goals as the driver of communication activities. The circle sits in the center to represent the ideal structure and/or processes that would create a centralized division or point of contact that would manage and coordinate communication across internal and external stakeholders. The idea behind the graphic is that communication can and should flow reciprocally among policymakers, leadership, and internal and external stakeholders. Additionally, the graphic illustrates the importance of evaluating the SEA communication efforts as a holistic strategic approach.

The critical elements in the framework include:

- Leadership—Leading and crafting major message points to be used for integrated communication efforts (by top leadership);
- Communication on Agency Vision/Goals—Developing carefully worded messages and agency vision and goals and major initiatives;
- Internal Communication—Disseminating information about policies and strategies toward agency goal achievement;
- External Communication and Stakeholder Engagement—Identifying appropriate dissemination methods for external stakeholders; and



- Continuous Improvement—Refining and monitoring the success of communication processes through a continuous feedback loop.

What is important to note about the above framework is its holistic approach in connecting the five major communication components. The process is operationalized through leadership activities that create and clarify agreed-upon messages about agency goals and strategies that must reach both internal and external stakeholders with diverse communication needs and purposes. The communication purpose for SEA internal stakeholders revolves around making, interpreting, and supporting policies. External stakeholders need information about how to implement policies and how policies will affect them, and LEAs need mechanisms to communicate their needs to the SEA and policymakers. The final critical piece, which is often missing, is creating a thorough process of researching and analyzing needs, planning strategies and processes, executing the strategies, and assessing their success.

Leadership

Leadership is a critical component of strategic communications in any type of organization. Leaders create value and clarity for both internal and external stakeholders by helping them understand the organization’s mission, vision, and values, and how their work or support can directly link to the realization of organizational goals.² In its description about strategic communications, the DOD describes the importance of communication being “leadership driven,” meaning that leaders need to put communication at the core of what they do and appreciate the importance of linking actions and words to plans.³ In SEAs, the commissioner or superintendent sets the agency’s direction; identifies major strategies; and helps convey consistent, clear, simple messages to align and clarify the work. While most SEA leaders have a more outward public-facing role in the agency, they have the authority to set internal processes and structures that can lead to coherent, well-aligned communication practices that provide clarity for both internal and external stakeholders.

The importance of the chief’s role can be challenging to both the individual and SEA staff in light of the high turnover that has occurred over the past few years. The longest average for an SEA chief or superintendent is three years or less, so these leaders have a short amount of time to plan and implement the direction of the agency, often within a challenging political context. Therefore, it is important that leadership consider how communication practices can become a part of the organization rather than just resting in individual people.

The leaders in the four participating SEAs all made positive contributions toward creating proactive communication strategies in their agencies. Their actions can be parsed into two major functions: leading communication and creating clear agency direction and setting communication as a priority through organizational structure.



Leading Communication and Creating Clear Agency Direction

Similar to school district superintendents, a new SEA commissioner has the choice of keeping what exists, starting new with a blank slate, or doing something in between that entails keeping some of what was in place and making changes or additions as needed. Rather than simply follow tradition and adopt the State Board’s vision or create one through an agency-wide retreat, Commissioner Randy Watson of Kansas actively began his leadership with an extensive listening tour across the state to learn what various communities wanted from their schools and for their children. Dr. Watson and his executive team visited 20 cities across different regions and spoke to a number of institutions of higher education, totaling over 2,000 people who provided input on the state’s vision. Upon seeing that the business community was not represented, KSDE leaders hosted local chamber of commerce events in seven regional areas to identify both academic and nonacademic skills that were needed for the future workforce.

After all the data from the tours and events were gathered and analyzed, KSDE hosted an agency-wide retreat to discuss what was learned and spent the next three months crafting the state’s vision. One major theme heard was the need for students to learn “soft skills” for higher education and the workforce such as problem-solving, persistence, and working collaboratively in groups. With that in mind, KSDE leaders worked with the State Board to add components to their plan like civic engagement, tracking postsecondary success, and adopting new reading screeners in pre-K to ensure students were beginning school ready.

Once the vision was developed, the 10-member State Board adopted it with a 10-0 vote—a first for the time. KSDE leaders attributed that success to Dr. Watson’s engagement and ability to “work across the street and aisle.” In addition to garnering State Board support, KSDE had community support for the vision because the general public felt they had a voice in the process, and they were updated along the way throughout the process.

KSDE leaders assert that the listening tour not only created an important connection between the agency and the general public, it also created a tighter relationship among the State Board, the legislature, and KSDE. At the same time, new State Board leadership became more actively engaged in the policymaking process, and several members began attending legislative sessions and events to discuss upcoming issues with legislators. The State Board also worked more proactively with the KSDE communications director on a weekly basis, which helped maintain message clarity and alignment. As a result, the vision became a well-defined campaign and brand called “Kansans Can,” and postcards and fact sheets were circulated to various stakeholders about the vision and strategies.

The final positive outcome from the visioning process begun by Commissioner Watson and his executive staff was that the clarity gained around the agency’s direction provided further coherence and alignment across KSDE’s strategic plan and implementation strategies. With five



discrete understandable goals, KSDE was then able to identify 11 strategies that became the roadmap for the agency.

Similar to Commissioner Watson, other SEA executive leaders interviewed for this project also contributed to directional clarity both within and outside the agency more than is typical of SEAs. All top-level leaders interviewed believed that communication was a priority for their agency, and they understood the importance of involving both internal and external stakeholders when setting agency vision and direction. Several SEAs were not at the point or need of creating a new vision, but rather were in the process of supporting and implementing either what was inherited from previous leadership, their own long tenure, or their legislature. Regardless of their strategic planning stage, they all strived to implement and communicate about policies in a way that would produce favorable results for students, teachers, schools, and communities.

Setting Communication as a Priority Through Organizational Structure

This second round of benchmarking strategic communications practices in SEAs underlined the impact of organizational structure on communication. One important step that is often omitted in the strategic planning process is setting up the organizational structure around the SEA's mission vision and goals and then defining the functions of each division that will help staff members efficiently and effectively work toward achieving agency goals. Setting strategic direction and managing toward that direction begins with the top-level SEA leader. At BSCP, we refer to the process of merging strategic planning with creating a performance management system as Strategic Performance Management.

As seen in the SEA descriptions above, the organizational placement of the communications division varied across the four agencies examined for this project. While all executive leaders believed communication to be a critical part of their work, some communication divisions were embedded a bureaucratic layer below the chief or superintendent, making it challenging for that division to serve as a centralized source of communication. This was not as big of a problem if the communications director had easy access to the commissioner and was invited to attend weekly executive leadership meetings to keep informed about agency priorities and issues. However, even in that case, it was still at times difficult for the communications staff to connect with other agency leaders and implementers, particularly in the absence of formalized processes for vertical and horizontal communication across divisions. Additionally, most SEAs still consider communication to have more of an external-facing rather than centralized role, resulting in a failure to align internal communication across the agency and with external communication processes.

In addition to the organizational placement of the communications division, another organizational issue that appeared to affect agency communication was the structure and function of the academic division. Although agency size and context play a factor in organizational



structure, there still seemed to be more connectivity between the communications division and the academic division(s) when the academic structure was organized within one division or unit. Connecting the communications division with academics is critical for aligning internal and external communication, ensuring academic content is accurately represented in agency communications, coordinating requests and visits to LEAs, and gaining clarity and accuracy with policy implementation. Subsequently, it is important that communications staff review communications from academic division(s) to ensure messaging is clear and appropriate for intended stakeholders, aligns with agency messages and the vision, and can be delivered through the most effective communication channels.

An SEA chief or superintendent can help facilitate connection between communications and academic staff members by creating organizational structures that lend well to collaboration, setting routines and processes for connecting the right staff from each division, and considering ways to centralize the oversight of agency-wide communication across academics and other relevant divisions engaged in cross-divisional implementation of SEA strategies. More details on centralizing communication in SEAs can be found under “Internal Communication” below.

The SEA organizational charts in Appendix C illustrate where each communications division is located within the agency and identifies where any division related to academics resides, including curriculum, professional development, accountability, technology and college/career readiness, and school improvement divisions, for example. The ability for the communications division or another leader to manage communications for accuracy, alignment, prioritization, and clarity with SEA goals depends on the ability of communications staff to interface with the divisions involved in informing and supporting implementation of policy and communicating with external stakeholders. To illustrate the above points, the communications divisions in Appendix C are notated with yellow stars and the academic divisions in blue triangles.

In reviewing the organization charts, it is important to remember that agency size and local context factor into organizational structure, and there is no one right arrangement; rather, the function of each division and the processes around how various divisions interface is what matters. The best scenario is exemplified by IDOE in 2016 where both the structure and processes worked together to centralize and align communications. The IDOE organizational chart in Appendix C illustrates a communications division that was located on the same level as the other divisions below the superintendent, and all divisions related to academics under the Office of the Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction. This latter division was further divided into two divisions led by an assistant superintendent of School Support Services and an assistant superintendent of Outreach. This simple structure worked well for connecting the academic divisions together. The structure was further enhanced by the processes followed by the communications and public instruction deputies. The deputy of public instruction reviewed all communications related to academic initiatives for correct content and then passed them



through the communications division to tweak the wording to meet various stakeholder needs and receive suggestions on the best vehicle for communicating the message.

Internal Communication

The DOD used the term “strategic communications” to refer to the creation of “consistent communications to global audiences over time.”⁴ The DOD’s goal in this holistic organization-wide communication approach was to synchronize programs, plans, themes, messages, products, actions, and images to help key audiences understand and actively support the advancement of U.S. security objectives. Similarly, for SEAs to advance education goals, communication needs to be systemic, clear, aligned both internally and externally, and flow seamlessly from top-level leadership down and across divisions and out to LEAs and the general public.

Once an SEA leader prioritizes and formulates key messages, it is important to establish policies and processes to ensure communication is clear, aligned, regular, and predictable for both internal and external stakeholders. As with many other organizations, internal communication poses a number of challenges. Some sources assert that internal communication problems are really process rather than communication problems.⁵ Processes that could address internal communication issues include setting expectations and schedules around internal meetings, establishing meeting norms to maximize face-time, establishing procedures for communicating updates and policy information, establishing practices around email and listserves, and establishing how communication will be managed to ensure alignment among internal divisions and between internal divisions and external communicators.

During the past two Benchmarking Projects, we have found strengths and gaps in internal communication. The internal communication issues that SEAs and other organizations address are often similar and include issues like:

- Lack of a centralized resource and processes to manage internal communication (which in turn aligns to external communication);
- Lack of processes to communicate across divisions or down vertically;
- Unclear role of communications division;
- Lack of processes on how to handle different types of communication;
- Ineffective use of face-to-face meetings; and
- Lack of personal accountability to obtain/consume agency information.

Below are observations that address these common communication issues that we gathered from the SEA Communications Benchmarking Project participants regarding challenges and effective practices by process topic.



Managing Internal Communication

As the importance of communicating in SEAs gains more attention, there are now some resources about internal communication challenges in SEAs. However, although most of those resources describe communication challenges, they are not in the context of the structure and function of communication goals for the SEA and for the communications division in SEAs. What we found from the past two Benchmarking Projects is that SEA communication divisions have been designed primarily to handle external communication. Some of the communication directors in this project do have some involvement in vetting internal communication messages, particularly around larger initiatives like setting new state standards or creating a new school accountability system. However, for the most part, internal communication in participating SEAs was not managed through a centralized approach. One article that provided some insight on the impact of centralizing or decentralizing communication in organizations discussed where to place marketing departments.⁶ In his article, “To Centralize or Decentralize your Marketing,” Dr. Islam Gouda described centralized marketing structures as having one division controlling marketing and branding, whereas a decentralized structure provides more freedom and autonomy for multiple marketing divisions. When analyzing the pros and cons of the opposing structures, the author points out that a centralized structure works when the product and brand have little variance. Some drawbacks cited for decentralizing marketing included duplication of efforts, deviation of goals, saturating the brand, and failing to see the bigger picture of the market.

In education, the SEA vision and goals can be thought of as a singular product or brand, similar to how Kansas branded its new overall vision and goals through its Kansans Can campaign. Many KSDE interviewees felt the clarity gained around the agency’s vision and goals helped significantly align messages from the agency, added focus to agency work, and diminished the habit of pursuing numerous activities that did not necessarily connect to agency goals. The SEAs that left communication up to individual academic divisions about issues like state standards or school report cards experienced confusion both internally and externally. Because internal messages were not aligned, messages to districts and schools were mixed. Feeling that confusion first-hand, two communications directors in the Benchmarking Project asserted that a more centralized communication approach would help ensure that messages flowed coherently from the chief and then down and across divisions so that policy information and implementation steps would be aligned and clear for external audiences. While organizational structure can help centralize communication, the same can potentially be achieved by establishing processes around one point-person who could prioritize and manage messaging both internally and externally.

Aligning Communication Vertically and Horizontally

Centralizing communication not only requires processes around managing communications from one point of contact, it also means having clear processes about disseminating communications vertically and horizontally to various divisions in an accurate and timely manner. In the SEAs we



visited this year, we found a common structure of a cohesive executive-level team that met face-to-face at least weekly, with some teams that spoke on the phone with the chief daily. Executive-level leaders at all the SEAs stated that they felt well informed about major initiatives and their agreed-upon messages. The main internal communication gaps between agency levels occurred either directly below the executive level at the division-leader level, or between the division leader and their implementation-level supervisees. Potential causes of communication gaps between levels mentioned in interviews included failure to consistently hold scheduled meetings below the executive level, lack of an agreed-upon process for communicating information from executive team meetings to other divisions, and failure to provide meaningful content in meetings.

In the SEAs we visited this year, the process used by executive leaders to communicate meeting content to their staff members was completely discretionary. Some leaders held regular weekly meetings with their staff to impart executive-level meeting information, while others held meetings as needed or sent updates through email. Staff members with supervisors who held regularly scheduled weekly meetings reported feeling well connected to and informed about agency priorities, while others without a clear information loop reported feeling a lack of clarity around their role, with some asserting apathy for what they perceived as a lack of agency interest in their being more actively engaged in the agency's strategic work.

In addition to not having clear ways to communicate information beyond the executive level, there were also examples from division leaders where an executive-level leader requested information directly from their supervisees, essentially "jumping over" that person without his/her knowledge. While tight timelines were theorized as being one likely culprit, staff members stated the end result sometimes caused confusion in the field or in the SEA. When asked if establishing clear communication processes could help with internal communication issues, several leaders discussed their ongoing challenge with balancing the feeling of micromanaging their staff with providing them professional autonomy.

Clarifying Roles, Functions, and Staffing for Communications Divisions

Once the structure of an agency is set, the next important step is to clarify the structure and function of each division. For the purpose of this report, we gathered and examined the structure and roles or functions of the communications divisions in the four participating SEAs (see Appendix B). In interviews, communications directors cited their primary role as being the main point of contact for external communication and being a connecting point internally to the executive leadership team. One of the challenges with an area like communication is that almost everything can fall into that topic. Given that issue, we did not find any SEAs with complete clarity on what their division should or should not do, given the broad auspice of SEA communication activities. Additionally, we found two SEAs with communications divisions that performed some significant activities, like completing all public information requests or



managing survey software, that were not listed in their pre-work. During interviews, these communications directors identified those activities as being very time-consuming and detracting from their ability to meet other communication needs in agency. In other SEAs, the legal and IT divisions, respectively, managed those activities. While there is no recipe for how or in what division certain activities should be managed, we believe that it is important for agencies to have a clear process to identify what activities should fall under the communications division and then ensure that expectations around those activities can be met through current staffing levels and expertise. For two of the participating SEAs, part of managing capacity in communications divisions included removing some activities that affected division effectiveness like managing charity campaigns and teacher award ceremonies.

Regarding staffing, as in many SEAs, the participants in this Benchmarking Project had a limited number of FTEs in their communication divisions to cover a wide range of communication activities. These activities included writing, responding to media, designing graphics, managing a website, and video production. In Kansas, the communications director worked on capacity concerns in her division by working closely with the chief to consider potential solutions. Because the chief saw communication as an agency priority, he solicited other division leaders to forfeit some funding to invest in one more FTE position for communications. Before, the communications director had one staff member in charge of teacher recognition programs, one to do streaming video and interactive television, and a graphic artist. In her words, “It left the true work of communication to one person [her],” which she asserted was “unrealistic for effectiveness.” Having requested two people and receiving funds to hire one, she identified her most pressing need as being a staff member who could help write, so she hired a news reporter. The focus for position posting was for skills in writing and reporting, which yielded many applicants, including those with a marketing background, a skill she did not need. However, she was able to leverage personal connections and found someone who had worked for a local newspaper. Asserting that the hire was a good decision, the communications director stated:

I cannot tell you what an immediate difference it made with quality and timing of material. She has a “can do” attitude. She can rally troops, has a great personality, can easily make connections, she is very well received, and is doing amazing work. Now we can be more strategic. I thought I wanted a social media expert, but now I know I needed another reporter.

Hiring one more person was helpful, but in the future, the communication director believes she needs a few more staff members to round out her team to be truly proactive and centralize communication in KSDE. Her aspiration is to hire one more person and assign each of her staff members to a group of teams in the agency to serve as their communication lead through weekly meetings. Additionally, she would like to create more writing content, tools, and strategies to get more information out to the field.



Increasing Effectiveness Through Established Processes

One way to alleviate internal communication issues is to have established processes for internal communication activities. Well-established processes can clarify who should receive what information and help overcome communication gaps that happen through inconsistent ad hoc practices that are unreasonable in situations where staff members are located on different floors or in different buildings. One of the biggest challenges after creating workable processes is to document, disseminate, monitor, and maintain them. One suggestion mentioned by an SEA leader was to include internal communication processes in an employee handbook. Another suggestion was for supervisors to continually reinforce use of internal communication processes. Below are some internal communication challenges that established processes might help address.

Identifying Effective Methods to Share Information Internally: How to share what information with whom in an organization is a common challenge. SEAs must share a wide variety of information regarding policy creation and implementation with a diverse set of stakeholders who have different information needs. It is important for SEAs to understand the type of information and messaging that would best meet the needs of staff members at different agency levels, divisions, and locations, and the best venues for reaching them. This includes considering which approaches are most effective for different communication purposes, like pushing out information to targeted people, pushing information out in broadcast fashion, posting information on an agency intranet, or imparting information primarily through meetings. While there is no one best solution that will work for the culture and context of each agency, the agencies that had a clear process for communicating information to staff using multiple mechanisms seemed to have staff members who reported feeling informed about what was happening in the agency.

Internal communication in the four participating states was quite varied. In some SEAs, staff members below the executive level stated that they received agency information through external sources like the newspaper or through watching State Board proceedings, and some reported that they received more information from school districts—their clients—than from within the agency. Others received information through weekly internal emails or newsletters provided by the agency. During our site visit to North Carolina, we found a number of effective internal communication practices being implemented to ensure that staff members were well informed and on the same page. One mechanism the state uses is communicating through an agency newsletter. To improve the newsletter, NCDPI's communications director recently changed its content by replacing “fluff” with details about important policies and things happening in the SEA. In addition to the newsletter, NCDPI also posts information on an intranet to communicate to staff. To ensure agency staff members know what information is being shared with districts and schools, staff members receive memos prior to their external release. While this is a common practice in many SEAs, NCDPI is considering sending a signature routing sheet with those



memos to ensure key people receive them. Finally, the NCDPI leadership maintains a regular schedule of meetings to include weekly meetings with the senior planning team, twice-monthly meetings with senior leadership cabinet division directors, quarterly small cross-division group meetings, and an annual all-staff meeting.

Using Meetings Effectively: Mentioned earlier, all four SEAs used meetings as one format to impart important agency information and set priorities. While these meetings appeared to effectively inform leaders at the executive level, information did not always move vertically or horizontally. Meetings that were held consistently and were structured around a pre-formed agenda were more commonly cited as being an effective use of time. Several communications directors cited the importance of having a relevant agenda that thoughtfully leveraged face-to-face time for gaining feedback and having discussions among staff members, rather than just providing verbal report-outs that could be shared through other mechanisms. Interviews with staff members below the executive level revealed a high level of appreciation for being included in meetings about major agency initiatives, as many of them typically were not included in such meetings under previous leadership. Staff members that were included in discussions about agency priorities and approaches asserted that they felt it increased their trust and engagement in their work, whereas prior they felt they were expected to “just keep quiet and keep their head down.”

Using Email Effectively: The use of email came up frequently in interviews. The main email complaint we heard about was in agencies where consistent use of an agency intranet was not required, and thus, emails appeared to overburden staff members. Division leaders and implementers in these SEAs stated that they felt like they could never keep up with requests and information because they were constantly struggling with “clearing out new emails first and then reviewing their inboxes again from the bottom and working their way back up.” Several leaders in these SEAs believed that establishing email protocols would be helpful. In North Carolina, the communications director has been managing email by sending them in batches and prioritizing “need to know” emails over the “nice to know” ones. Two of the SEAs in the project mentioned having rules that disallowed sending emails to all staff members to reduce communication about things like fundraisers in favor of emails that are relevant to the actual work. Others reduced email by providing most of their information on an agency intranet. One staff member said his agency used to scroll relevant agency news on a screen by the elevator; now that it is gone and he misses having the daily easy access to agency information in that format.

Being Personally Accountable: Another issue that came up frequently was the idea that employees need to be accountable for understanding the goals and activities going on in their agency and that reading and seeking out information is a professional responsibility. Several leaders voiced frustration that they would mention a major agency strategy or issue in meetings, newsletters, and emails, and yet some staff members would not know about the topic when asked. Setting processes for how and when to receive what type of information may help set



clear expectations about the type of information each staff member should know and set cultural expectations for pursuing agency information.

External Communication

With the SEA shift from managing compliance to facilitating educational improvement comes a much larger public-facing role. SEAs have been positioned for an external-facing role for the past few years, which is why many of them created communications divisions. Some of the major communication tasks SEAs struggle with include:

- Aligning internal and external messaging;
- Engaging stakeholders effectively;
- Communicating clearly and effectively with LEAs;
- Communicating clearly and effectively with the general public; and
- Establishing processes of when and how to engage the SEA communications department.

Major obstacles cited in interviews in addressing these activities included:

- Lacking a centralized resource to coordinate and align communication between and across internal and external stakeholders;
- Lacking internal processes to align external communication; and
- Lacking a clear process to evaluate the effectiveness of both internal and external communication efforts.

The four SEAs that participated in this project each had strengths and gaps in their external communication efforts that are detailed below.

Establishing External Communication Processes

The first step to aligning external messages, according to some communications experts, is to first align your messages for internal stakeholders.⁷ To ensure all employees are on the same page and accurately represent a company's brand, Subrammania asserts communications should be thought of as using a "communications inside out" philosophy. To do this, the author states, every employee must "understand the brand promise and their role in keeping it," as well be equipped with knowledge and tools to deliver on what is expected.

Similar to the marketing example mentioned earlier, one could think of the agency's vision, mission, goals, and strategies as the brand—something that needs to be clear within the organization to ensure external messages are aligned, accurate, and clear. In NCDPI, the superintendent was involved in crafting most of the messages around major initiatives; her staff



explains that she does not necessarily dictate what is to be said, but she is involved in setting the direction of communications about policy. One way the superintendent leverages her background in marketing is to communicate key agency messages in ways that are simple and to the point. For example, she has promoted the agency's support of public education through the tagline "Public Schools: The Best Choice." In IDOE, communication was funneled from the superintendent to the chief of staff, refined by the communications division, and then filtered through content specialists.

While the information flow about major SEA initiatives typically began with the chief or superintendent, there was wide variance in how information was shared externally through various mechanisms like the media, agency websites, publications, and social media. In some areas like communicating with media, we often found similar clearly established practices. However, in other areas like website management and the use of social media, we found both centralized and decentralized division-driven practices.

Media Communication

The communications division predominantly handled media requests in the four SEAs. In IDOE, the process of handling media requests was outlined in the employee handbook, and in NCDPI, media requests were addressed in new staff training. Most of the SEAs followed the philosophy of having "friendly advocates" in the media and thus focused on building relationships with certain media outlets and reporters. Leaders in NC built strong relationships with the media over time through their willingness to be transparent about the SEA perspective and by not "overstating good news." When questions arose over specific academic content in NC, specialists from those divisions attended media interviews with the communications staff. Handling media was one area where there was almost always a clear process outlined for sending media to one point of contact.

Website Communication

SEAs in both Benchmarking Projects saw their agency website as a major external communication tool. Despite the agency website seemingly serving as a centralized site for information, we found some variance across the SEAs between where the website was developed and managed and how information was posted and updated. In some SEAs, there was a webmaster in the communications division; in others, it rested in the technology division. Regarding process, some SEAs had an unstructured decentralized process for who could post information on the agency website. For example, several SEAs from both Benchmarking Projects gave divisions complete discretion on what information to post on major initiatives like new state standards. Communications directors in those SEAs often reported that messages were not always aligned when posted by individual divisions and that quality varied across webpages.



When we visited Arkansas, we were pleased to see that the agency website had greatly improved since the previous year’s Benchmarking Project. During Year 3, some ADE leaders reported that the website sometimes created more questions from external stakeholders than necessary, which became time-consuming to address. This year, the website is very easy to navigate and hosts a wealth of easy-to-find agency information. During the Year 4 ADE site visit, we learned that the communications office manages the ADE website, which serves as a primary agency communication tool. Regarding process, ADE has one webmaster who posts new information to the website, coordinates with all units to ensure the site is updated regularly, prepares bi-weekly newsletters, and posts messages on social media. Division requests to post information are vetted through designated division contacts and forwarded to the webmaster. When changes are made to the website, ADE has a way to record what was submitted through a Google doc submission tracking system. Additionally, a one-page internal newsletter provides current website updates to agency staff every two weeks. The now streamlined ADE website has a number of products for external communication that are easily found and include press releases, Facebook pages, blogs, YouTube postings, an agency newsletter, and monthly “Key Points” videos.

The website in NCDPI is managed through one webmaster, three web developers, and a web marketing specialist/publication lead. The NCDPI has a set process for submitting information on the agency website and is working toward moving to a knowledge management system. The website is easy to navigate and has a number of mechanisms to communicate to the public. One interactive communication feature is its “Let’s Talk!” link designed for external stakeholders to share “thoughts, suggestions, and questions.” The site is divided into 24 different SEA divisions for stakeholders to click on to submit suggestions or questions. One of the challenges with this communication mechanism is that the communications division has been tasked with managing all aspects of the software behind “Let’s Talk!”

Communicating With Legislators

One of the major roles of an SEA chief or superintendent is to engage with various constituencies to gain stakeholder support for the SEA’s vision, mission, and goals that will drive the strategic plan. In last year’s Benchmarking Project, we learned about the importance of communicating proactively with legislators and providing information from the education field to policymakers. Another finding was the importance of understanding the different communication needs and styles between legislators, educators, and the general public. In general, SEAs assert that legislators appreciate short concise bullets of information; educators prefer information reflecting vocabulary from their practice; and the general public prefers education information to be clear, free from jargon, and connected to their emotional experience of schools.

We also learned about the power of political context in influencing how SEAs construct their communications. While some SEAs would like to communicate about certain reform strategies,



several SEA leaders asserted that they currently could only focus on the laws and policies they inherited from previous legislative sessions. To better understand how political context can affect legislative processes, details about the four benchmarking participants can be found below:

- **Arkansas** has a governor-appointed State Board. The SEA has a director of legislative services to coordinate legislative inquiries. Most legislative communication is handled by the commissioner, and the General Counsel monitors legislative sessions. The SEA's communications director has a relationship with the senate and house communications managers and reaches out to them about major SEA initiatives. The SEA provides information to education committees monthly.
- The **Indiana** General Assembly established the State Board of Education with 8 of 11 members appointed by the governor. The superintendent of public instruction, elected to a four-year term in November of national election years, is the 12th member of the Board. The superintendent communicates about policy and implementation externally and communicates with the general assembly. The chief of staff communicates daily with the superintendent and has an extensive background in executive leadership and policy.
- The **Kansas** State Board of Education consists of 10 elected members who appoint the commissioner of education. The assistant commissioner of finance is the primary contact with the legislature and has many years of experience in building relationships with them. The current State Board has a communications plan and involves the SEA communications director regularly to discuss communication activities.
- The **North Carolina** Board of Education includes the lieutenant governor, the state treasurer, and eight governor-appointed and three at-large appointees who are confirmed by the legislature. The SEA meets regularly with the State Board and has a legislative liaison who answers directly to the superintendent and works with the State Board. A policy advisor also serves as a conduit between the superintendent's office and the communications division.

North Carolina provides an example of the importance of connecting information from the field to legislators. In 2016, the North Carolina legislature passed a senate bill that created two tracks of math instruction: an integrated approach and a back-to-basics algebra I and II course. Among many instructional concerns at the SEA was the burden the policy placed on LEAs to create instructional materials, professional development training, and assessments in response to new course offerings. Fortunately, the SEA had a process already in place that used a tiered legislative communication approach that used face-to-face meetings with small legislative groups to build relationships and trust and then a large annual legislative breakfast before sessions. To address the math issue, the SEA engaged partners in higher education to gather research on the math needs of students and engaged the opinions of teachers, parents, and students through social media tools. After realizing they were mainly speaking to math people, SEA leaders reached out



to special education parents who had very specific concerns about the math issue. Connecting with those stakeholder groups created an immediate contingency of 150 parents demanding a revision of the law. In addition to higher education and parents, the SEA encourages district superintendents to reach out to their legislators with their issues because as stated by the communications director, “Educator voices are much more powerful than ours.”

Communicating With LEAs

Communication between SEAs and LEAs is critical, as LEAs must implement policies that come from the state legislators and SEAs. The connection between LEAs and SEAs has greatly increased since the SEA role has shifted from compliance to leading statewide education reform. Despite that shift, SEAs find that LEAs sometimes still hold a compliance image of them, hampering the ability of the two entities to have an open and trusting relationship that includes having regular communication channels.

What we found in the past two Benchmarking Projects is that communication between the SEA and top-level LEA leaders works pretty well; SEAs feel they do a good job communicating policy updates and meeting with superintendents. Where SEA leaders voice concern is about adequately reaching the school-level stakeholders: principals, teachers, and parents. This year, several participating SEAs are implementing what they believe are effective approaches to improving communication to their LEA stakeholders, particularly in North Carolina and Indiana.

In North Carolina, the SEA serves over 100,000 educators. To offset that challenge, the SEA has worked hard to ensure that communications get down to educators through multiple channels. To forge a tight connection with superintendents, the SEA has a superintendent orientation to ensure they get “a taste of every service” and meet key people they will interact with. Additionally, superintendents receive weekly emails, and principals are invited to two bi-annual principal meetings so they can interact with each other. To reach other educators, the SEA communicates through Facebook and provides quarterly videos for teachers, parents, and other stakeholder groups. Educator feedback can also be through the “Let’s Talk!” link on the SEA website.

Under the previous superintendent of public instruction, IDOE focused on moving communications down to the teacher level for a number of years. Upon hearing that teachers were not receiving information from superintendents from the IDE Daily Dialogue, the agency created a similar communication for teachers called the Teacher Dialogue. IDOE asserted that teachers had voiced excitement about receiving information directly from the agency. Another way the agency was connecting educators to each other was through a number of online communities that were arranged around various topical areas. Creating spaces for small groups of educators to share information and ask questions was cited in the 2016 interviews as an effective way to provide information to teachers. A new initiative on the IDOE website that is very popular with teachers was the “Promising Practices” webpage. The link shares a number of



promising practices from teachers as a way to honor “great classroom instruction” and share information across teachers and schools. The website, found at <http://www.doe.in.gov/outreach/list-promising-practices>, features links by categories, including family and community engagement, research-based practices, climate and culture, and school safety to name a few. Links drill down to a PDF that is listed by school and subject. The site also provides a map with color-coded pins by practice type to show where practices exist across the state. In addition to useful information, each practice topic includes contact information so that educators can contact each other to ask questions and gain more information or resources.

To overcome the challenge of reaching other LEA stakeholders—families—IDE worked with AT&T to develop a mobile application called INschool that can be downloaded on a phone and used for free to receive information from the SEA. The application has helped the SEA overcome the difficulty of keeping up with a large volume of changing email addresses by reaching families through their mobile devices. Through the application, families can find information for agency staff events, training on the YouTube page, resources, and discounts for learning tools. In the next version, the application will allow for targeted messages, so that the communications director can send information directly to specific groups like third-grade parents from one specific district.

In addition to the application, the SEA also communicates to families through its large Twitter and Facebook following, with approximately 22,000 Twitter and 11,000 Facebook followers. Through social media, the SEA shares information with families and communities about things like teacher of the year nominees and other information and resources for families.

Leaders in the Arkansas SEA connect parents to teachers through the “My Child/My Student” campaign. The purpose of the campaign, found at <http://www.arkansased.gov/divisions/communications/my-childmy-student>, is to provide resources, tips, and links to helpful information for parents and teachers on various topics. The page shows a table with questions for parents and for teachers around two or more topics such as college and career readiness or student safety. Another way the SEA connects with LEAs is to communicate monthly via email with a group of district communications directors. To move further down in schools, the SEA recently added teachers to the list of recipients for the commissioner’s memos because they were not getting all the information from leaders who were on the list.

How and When to Engage the Communication Division: In this year’s Benchmarking Project, none of the SEAs had an established process for when to engage the communications division outside of obvious external communication issues like working with media. These issues ranged from how and when the communications division should be aware of events or meetings, how communication should connect to academic divisions that were implementing the agency vision and goals, and how to manage processes around the creation of communication collateral. For



example, no SEA had a process for determining whether a particular speech or presentation required involvement of the communications division based on topic or audience. There were several times during combined interviews with communications directors and executive-level leaders where the communications director heard about a meeting or event that he/she asserted he/she should have attended to help with communication alignment. At other times, communications directors stated that they get pulled into meetings or events at the last minute, making it difficult to coordinate their work and be effective at proactive communication.

One important but often missing connection point in the agency was between the communications department and the academic department(s). Although it was not a written and required process, the Indiana SEA seemed to have the most consistent structure around connecting those divisions for both internal and external communication. There, major initiatives seemed to consistently flow from the deputy superintendent of public instruction to the communications director. However, those processes seemed to rest within the individuals themselves rather than as an established procedure.

Several SEAs also had challenges around how and when to engage the communications division for support with communication-related products. Communications directors in two of the SEAs stated that the decision of whether to engage their division for product support was up to the discretion of individual divisions, and one lacked processes to request and prioritize assistance for things like graphics design. At these SEAs, the lack of processes resulted in inconsistent products, branding, messaging and a lack of efficiency and effectiveness for the communications division to complete and prioritize work.

Stakeholder Engagement

The increased expectation for SEAs to lead education reform in their states is prompting leaders to consider ways to connect more closely to the communities they serve. Several SEAs that participated in the Year 3 Benchmarking Project learned, some the hard way, about the importance of addressing and engaging all stakeholders to gain the necessary support to execute agency goals. Since ESSA requires states to develop a state plan through an inclusive stakeholder engagement process, SEAs must devise strategies to effectively gather and analyze community input and devise a plan that will be well-supported by the public. During our spring 2016 site visits, we found that all four participating states were implementing extensive stakeholder engagement activities either due to new leadership as in Kansas and Arkansas, or as part of preparing to comply with ESSA, as was the case in North Carolina and Indiana.

One of the most impactful engagement processes documented during the Benchmarking Project was the example from KSDE outlined earlier in the leadership section. Reflecting on the process, KSDE leaders asserted that the campaign was extremely effective in connecting the agency to the general public, largely attributed to the ability of the commissioner to use his background as



an educator to connect to different stakeholders and work closely with the State Board of Education. Two noted outcomes from the commissioner’s collaborative outreach strategy were that it was seen as a welcome departure from how things typically transpired, and it built a clear bridge between KSDE and the State Board, while providing a clear direction for the agency for both internal and external stakeholders.

In addition to gaining support for a new vision through public meetings, KSDE leaders also posted videos of teachers discussing their beliefs about how the new vision would positively affect teaching and learning in their classrooms. Another successful aspect of the visioning process KSDE leaders cited was the clear branding used for the Kansans Can campaign, as it became an important way to create clarity, excitement, and visibility to external stakeholders about the new vision.

Similar to KS, leaders in the ADE also placed a high premium on engaging external stakeholders around the creation of a new state vision for students even prior to ESSA. Meetings were held with education associations and teachers of the year, and round tables were convened with charter directors and teachers to allow participants to speak to the commissioner about the agency’s direction. The agency also engaged with students through surveys and student summits and collected community feedback online. The student engagement groups were mentioned several times during interviews, as several leaders were struck by the excitement expressed by students about having their opinion solicited about their education system. To reach underrepresented groups, ADE contacted “people who knew people,” to serve as student advocates and ambassadors and link their networks with ADE. Subsequently, ADE has built a “massive” communications database for the ESSA feedback process with over 10,000 contacts on their distribution list.

Evaluating Communication Strategies

According to The Communications Network (a worldwide network of influential leaders from nonprofits and foundations that are focused on creating a platform for nonprofits interested in communications) and other sources, it is important to evaluate communication efforts because:

- Evaluation improves effectiveness of communications;
- Evaluation can help effectively engage with your audience;
- Situations change; and
- Evaluation helps with effective resource allocation.⁸

Evaluating communication can be challenging because the topic is broad and serves a number of purposes. However, it is critical for SEAs to know if internal and external stakeholders are receiving clear and timely messages; evaluation is critical to support and implement policy.



Despite its importance, we found evaluation to be one of the least strategically implemented components of communication in the SEAs that participated in both Benchmarking Projects. Not that communications leaders were not interested in gaining feedback on their communication efforts, but rather, most of their evaluation strategies were one-of activities like tracking web hits or implementing surveys to small stakeholder groups or on specific communication pieces. While those efforts helped measure certain aspects of their communication activities, we believe a more holistic evaluation approach using a clear set of communication goals and milestones would be much more informative for creating a coherent communication approach tied to the SEA vision and goals.

There are a number of resources for evaluating communication efforts. Evaluation steps provided by The Communications Network that can be easily adopted for any type of context include:

1. **Determine What to Evaluate.** For SEAs, it could be a communication plan, communications around critical strategies, or around a specific communication campaign like adopting a new accountability system or revised state standards. The Communications Network divides these different levels of evaluation activities as being either strategic initiatives or tactical efforts.
2. **Define Your Goal.** This entails defining the long-term goal of communication initiatives, which in turn will define the evaluation approach.
3. **State Your Objective:** Objectives are shorter term and are encouraged to be SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, result-focused, and time-specific.
4. **Identify Your Audience.** For SEAs, it will be critical to remember that internal agency stakeholders connect to external stakeholders and should not be left out of the evaluation process. Additionally, SEAs need to consider the differences between various external stakeholders like LEAs, legislators, and the general public.
5. **Establish Your Baseline.** This step is helpful to capture growth and success of the work.
6. **Pose Your Evaluation Questions.** This step helps guide and focus the evaluation and provides the opportunity to consider the specific type of information desired to inform process improvement.
7. **Draft Your Measurements.** This is a step where collaboration with any research or evaluation divisions in the agency or external partnerships would be helpful.
8. **Select Your Evaluation Techniques.** This step is based on the responses of the above steps and the allowable budget.

The guide referenced in the endnotes of this report also includes useful tools that tie to the above-mentioned steps. Additional resources include a Program Evaluation Framework developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



(<http://www.cdc.gov/eval/framework/>) and a document on evaluating internal communication by the Government Communication Service for the United Kingdom found at <https://communication.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/ic-space/evaluation/4-steps-to-evaluating-internal-communications/>).

The important take-away from these evaluation tools is that the broad nature and purpose of communication requires a thoughtful evaluation process that follows a logical set steps to clearly identify the topic and purpose of an evaluation. Evaluating a focused communications campaign is easier than capturing an entire evaluation process; however, both are important to ensure that communications around operationalizing agency goals are meeting desired outcomes.

CONCLUSION

ESSA requires that states outline statewide accountability systems, support low-performing schools, respond to new data reporting requirements, and submit to the Education Department (ED) consolidated state plans. ED has stated that desired outcomes for ESSA include providing greater flexibility to state and local authorities, creating greater cross-program coordination and service delivery, eliminating unnecessary duplication, and supporting collaboration rather than planning and implementing in silos. It has been a number of years since states have addressed this type of major policy change, and communication will be a critical factor as states go through the process of planning and implementing required state plans. With the opportunities and flexibility provided to states by ESSA also comes greater responsibility for SEAs to become a more public-facing organization skilled in engaging stakeholders, working collaboratively across departments, and communicating clearly to internal and external stakeholders.

The Strategic Communications Framework depicts a centralized, strategic communications approach that outlines the critical roles and their interface in communication. Those roles include the leadership role in establishing processes to clarify and operationalize the agency's vision and goals related to ESSA, the internal stakeholder's role to create and implement predictable and effective methods to inform and engage various internal and external stakeholders, and the critical role of evaluation. In a strategic communications approach, all components of the framework must be considered to result in clear, timely, accurate, and coherent communication that will meet desired communication goals.



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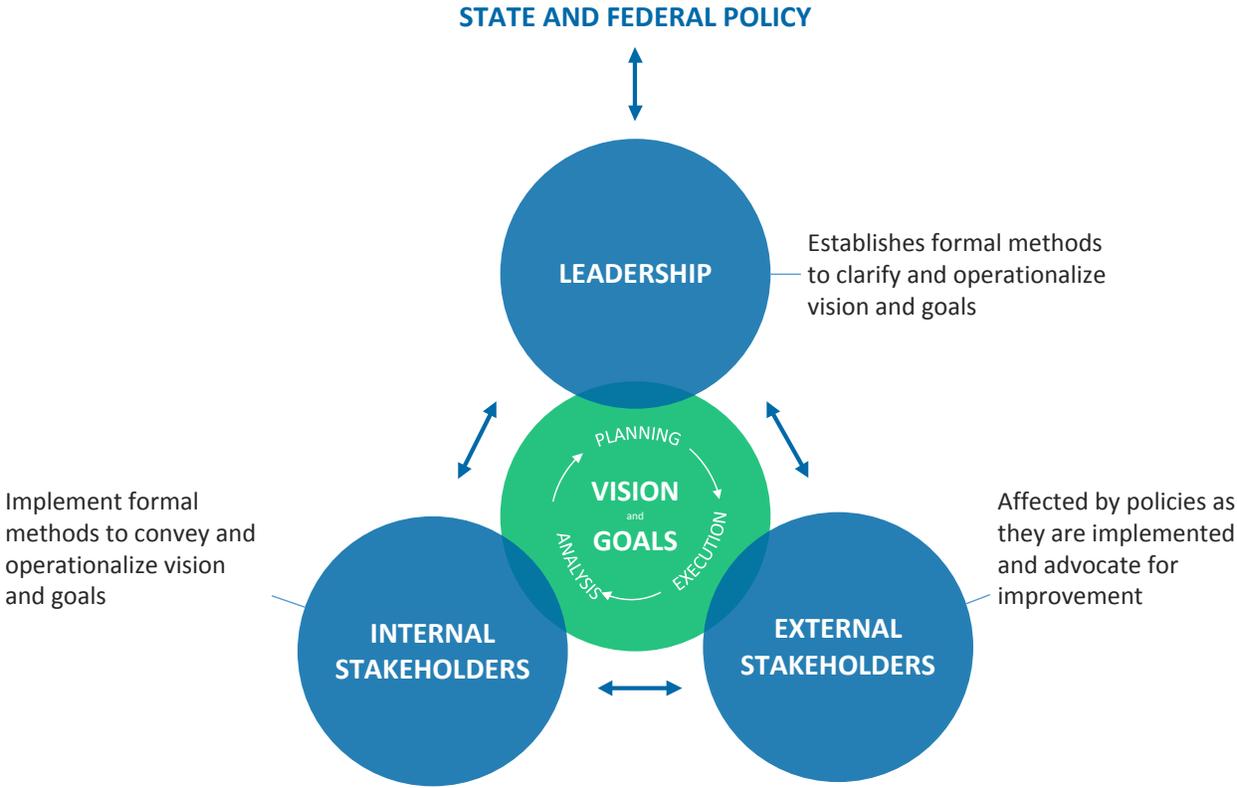
⁶ Gouda, Islam. (n.d.). *To Centralize or Decentralize Your Marketing*. American Marketing Association.

[https://www.ama.org/resources/Best-Practices/Pages/To-Centralize-or-Decentralize-your-Marketing.aspx.](https://www.ama.org/resources/Best-Practices/Pages/To-Centralize-or-Decentralize-your-Marketing.aspx)

⁷ Subrammanian, R. (Nov. 1, 2003). *Align Your Brand from the Inside Out*, p. 1. Interackt Digital Communications Group. [http://www.cmo.com/features/articles/2013/10/18/align_your_brand_fro.html#gs.gkoNIKw.](http://www.cmo.com/features/articles/2013/10/18/align_your_brand_fro.html#gs.gkoNIKw)

⁸ See Asibey Consulting (2008). *Are We There Yet? A Communications Evaluation Guide*. Prepared for The Communications Network. [http://ccmc.org/tips/are-we-there-yet-a-communications-evaluation-guide/.](http://ccmc.org/tips/are-we-there-yet-a-communications-evaluation-guide/)

APPENDIX A. BSCP STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK



APPENDIX B.

SEA COMMUNICATIONS HUMAN RESOURCES



INDIANA – 2016

D. COMMUNICATION RESOURCES

- In the table below, provide description of SEA staff and resources dedicated to communications activities.

SEA Communications Human Resources

Title	Indicate FTE or PT status	Primary Role (i.e., responding to requests for information, meeting with external stakeholders)
<i>SPI</i>	FTE	Executing the strategic mission and vision
<i>DSPI</i>	FTE	Bolstering the SPI's efforts, coordinating program staff in support of mission and vision
<i>Exec Director of Gvt & Political Affrs</i>	FTE	With legislatures, coordinating, informing and advocating for legislation that better enables the department to do its work
<i>Executive Director of Communication</i>	FTE	Managing and directing the content coming from and going into the media and the general public
<i>ASPI (2)</i>	FTE	Bolstering the SPI's efforts, managing program staff in support of mission and vision
<i>Dir of Legis Affrs</i>	FTE	Directing and supervising legal work in support of keeping the department with state and federal law and advising on how new initiatives should be conducted to stay that way.
<i>Press Secretary</i>	FTE	Communicating directly with the media on how DOE work is in keeping with the mission and vision
<i>Dir of Fed Relations</i>	FTE	Taking the lead on DOE interactions with federal government entities and coordinating technical assistance
<i>CIO</i>	FTE	Ensuring the functionality and security of all technologies that internal and external staff use to consume and create data relevant to completing the mission and vision.
<i>Communications Spec</i>	FTE	Focused on creating content for specific communication channels

D. COMMUNICATION RESOURCES

1. In the table below, provide description of SEA staff and resources dedicated to communications activities.

SEA Communications Human Resources

Title	Indicate FTE or PT status	Primary Role (i.e., responding to requests for information, meeting with external stakeholders)
Director of Communications	FTE	Manages Communications Unit (website, video/photos, special projects, etc.); responds to media inquiries; writes and distributes press releases; oversees monthly internal communications sessions
Communications Manager	FTE	Responds to media calls in the director's absence; assists with the production of agency videos; develops brochures and marketing materials
Webmaster	FTE	Posts new information to the agency's website; coordinates with all units to ensure the site is updated regularly; prepares the bi-weekly newsletters; posts messages on social media
Photographer / Videographer	FTE	Films agency promotional videos; takes photos at agency events; oversees editing and posting
Special Projects Manager	FTE	Coordinates special recognition events, including the Milken Educator Award and Arkansas Teacher of the Year Award; develops the agency's emergency operations plan
Administrative Assistant	FTE	Ensures the unit's purchasing and travel requests are processed; logs photo/video release forms; answers calls and e-mails; tracks inventory
Front Desk Administrative Assistant	FTE	Provides friendly customer service at the front desk and administrative assistance to the unit

Title	Indicate FTE or PT status	Primary Role (i.e., responding to requests for information, meeting with external stakeholders)
Communications Specialist Ann Bush	Full Time	<p>Publications</p> <p>Prepares or assists in the preparation of materials for written publications such as news releases and advisories, newsletters, brochures, presentations, fact sheets, reports, website content and speeches for State Board of Education members, the Commissioner of Education and members of the agency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participates in all aspects of preparing, coordinating and monitoring the release of public information to the media, education stakeholders and agency staff; • Prepares and disseminates weekly internal newsletter and monthly external newsletter; • Conducts research and gathers information through interviews and other reference materials related to the project; • Proofreads all written material to ensure accuracy, consistency in message and adherence to Associated Press and other appropriate web guidelines; and • Works closely with the Communications Director on the development of the annual Accountability Report and other projects as assigned. <p>Communication and Marketing Plans</p> <p>Assists agency teams and staff in developing and implementing communication and marketing plans around specific projects or initiatives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researches and clearly articulates objectives of initiative; • Works with project originator to identify target audiences; • Assists in the development of communication and marketing strategies; • Assists in the development of tactics to achieve strategies; and • Assists in the follow-through of tactics and measurement of effectiveness of communication and marketing plans.

Title	Indicate FTE or PT status	Primary Role (i.e., responding to requests for information, meeting with external stakeholders)
		<p>Media Relations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops and tracks all agency media releases and advisories; • Monitors media and legislative activity and notifies Director of critical items affecting the agency; • Serves as backup media liaison in Director’s absence, directing media inquiries to appropriate agency staff; • Maintains agency’s official media lists and researches new outlets; and • Maintains media clip book. <p>Miscellaneous</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serves as backup at State Board meetings, taking notes and developing Board highlights; • Serves as backup photographer for the agency. Completes digital photographic work to be used on the agency website, in publications and to be sent to various schools and individuals; • Attends after-hours work-related events as needed, which may require some overnight stays; and • Attends out-of-state conferences as needed to support the work of the agency.
<p>Administrative Specialist – Recognition Programs Sherry Bukovatz</p>	<p>Full Time</p>	<p>Under general supervision, position coordinates the Kansas Teacher of the Year (KTOY) Program and the Milken National Educator Program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborates with supervisor to develop policies, procedures, and guidelines for all components of the programs. • Reviews policies, procedures, and guidelines for programs to ensure that they are current. • Collects and analyzes data to develop recommendations for program changes. • Prepares grant applications (if available) to fund special projects, conferences, & activities for exemplary educators. • Serves on committees, boards, or councils concerned with program functions and activities. • Assists supervisor in presenting program information and expectations at conferences, meetings, etc.

Title	Indicate FTE or PT status	Primary Role (i.e., responding to requests for information, meeting with external stakeholders)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedules, plans, and facilitates meetings of program committees, boards, and councils. Prepares minutes of meetings and maintains appropriate files. • Develops program budgets and reports for supervisor review. • Initiates and develops letters, forms, written materials, spreadsheets and databases for programs and conferences. • Receives & deposits moneys, prepares contract requests for payment of services, reviews all bills and processes for payment, tracks income and expenses for programs. • Develops/receives program application information and sends out to schools. • Receives completed applications, reviews, and prepares databases of candidates. • Reviews, compiles lists of candidates, and makes recommendation to supervisor concerning eligibility of applicants. • Assists with videotaping of KTOY finalists. • Coordinates regional and state selection process. • Coordinates regional and state recognition events. • Coordinates KTOY Ambassadorship activities (e.g., tracks expenses, coordinates speaking requests, etc.). <p>Under general supervision, position coordinates and implements professional development conferences for Kansas Exemplary Educators.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serves as a member of conference planning teams to determine the conference program, goals, objectives, presenters and facilitators. • Provides program information to participants at conferences. • Develops conference budgets and special reports. • Negotiates contracts and submits to Fiscal Services for review and approval; makes necessary arrangements with facilities and caterers for banquet and meeting rooms, audio-visual equipment, food services, and lodging.

Title	Indicate FTE or PT status	Primary Role (i.e., responding to requests for information, meeting with external stakeholders)
		<p>Serves as clerical support staff for Director</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiates and develops letters as needed by Director. • Prepares vouchers, out-of-state travel requests, purchase authorizations, contract request forms as needed by Director. • Prepares Employee Performance Outcomes for all team members based on draft outcomes agreed upon by Director and each employee. • Prepares confidential Employee Performance Outcomes for all team members based on information provided by Director. • Maintains electronic mailing lists of media contacts. • Distributes media alerts and news releases prepared by Director and/or Communications Team. • Provides assistance at media events, SBOE forums, etc. as directed by supervisor. • Serves as timekeeper for the team. • Completes other duties as assigned.
Administrative Specialist – Recognition Programs Tammy Miller	Full Time	<p>Under general supervision, position coordinates the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching Program, U.S. Senate Youth Program, Kansas Horizon Program and assists with the NCLB-Blue Ribbon Schools Program, Challenge Awards, Governor’s Scholars Awards, and Governor’s Achievement Awards.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborates with supervisor to develop policies, procedures, and guidelines for all components of the programs. • Reviews policies, procedures, and guidelines for programs to ensure that they are current. • Collects and analyzes data to develop recommendations for program changes. • Prepares grant applications (if available) to fund special projects, conferences, & activities for exemplary educators. • Serves on committees, boards, or councils concerned with program functions and activities. • Assists supervisor in presenting program information and expectations at conferences, meetings, etc.

Title	Indicate FTE or PT status	Primary Role (i.e., responding to requests for information, meeting with external stakeholders)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepares materials, schedules, and presents application information to applicants at workshops for the Presidential Awards program. • Develops program budgets and reports for supervisor review. • Initiates and develops letters, forms, written materials, spreadsheets and for programs and conferences. • Receives & deposits moneys, prepares contract requests for payment of services, reviews all bills and processes for payment, tracks income and expenses for programs. • With assistance of Fiscal Services prepares report for Robert C. Byrd expenditures for national program. • Prepares reports for U.S. Senate Youth national program for review by supervisor. • Submits state applications for national review to Presidential Awards program. • Develops/receives program application information and sends out to schools. • Receives completed applications, reviews such, and prepares databases of candidates. • Reviews, compiles lists of candidates, and makes recommendation to supervisor concerning eligibility of applicants. • Coordinates regional and state selection process. • Develops and maintains databases for Challenge Awards and handles reservations for Challenge Awards dinner. • Develops and maintains databases for Governor’s Achievement Awards. • Mails Governor’s Achievement Awards to recipients. <p>Under general supervision, position coordinates and implements professional development conferences for Kansas Exemplary Educators.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serves as a member of conference planning teams to determine the conference program, goals, objectives, presenters, and facilitators. • Provides program information to participants at conferences. • Collects reservations and processes name badges, etc. for conferences.

Title	Indicate FTE or PT status	Primary Role (i.e., responding to requests for information, meeting with external stakeholders)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops conference budgets and special reports. • Negotiates contracts and submits to Fiscal Services for review and approval; makes necessary arrangements with facilities and caterers for banquet and meeting rooms, audio-visual equipment, food services, and lodging. <p>Serves as content manager for team on the KSDE website.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Posts all media alerts and news releases on KSDE website. • Develops material and maintains team page on KSDE website. <p>Serves as backup clerical support staff for Director.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiates and develops letters as needed by Director. • Prepares vouchers, out-of-state travel requests, purchase authorizations, contract request forms as needed by Director. • Provides assistance at media events as required. • Completes other duties as assigned.
Graphic Designer Cheryl Franklin	Full Time	<p>Design- Involves using several kinds of graphics software programs, including InDesign, Photoshop, Illustrator, Publisher, and PowerPoint. Also included is the use of the digital camera. Designs layouts for agency publications and educational materials and forms used both internally and sent statewide. Examples of work include design of color brochures, mock ups of graphs, charts, and conference registration materials, & posters using the poster printer. Designs and produces certificates for various administrator/teacher/ student recognition programs.</p> <p>Finish Work- Involves putting together PowerPoint presentations to be used at schools, conferences, etc. by agency consultants, doing video filming/editing, web design, and printing the business cards used in the agency. Clients include agency consultants, directors, and other staff members. Once a project is assigned, it is the job of the designer to listen to the needs of the customer</p>

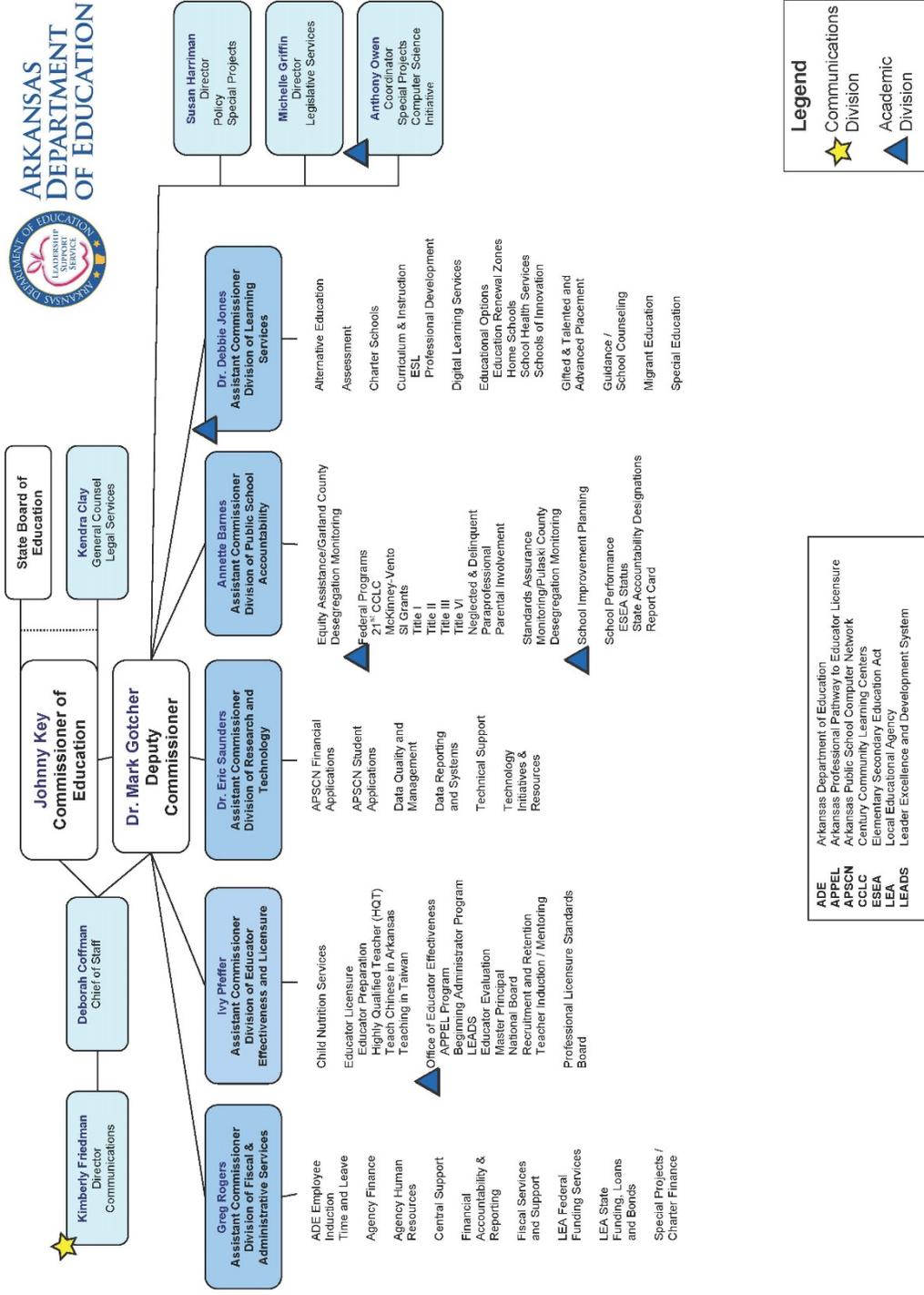
Title	Indicate FTE or PT status	Primary Role (i.e., responding to requests for information, meeting with external stakeholders)
		<p>and offer suggestions for a professional finished product. Designer proofreads copy and uses typography when organizing text into a design.</p> <p>Photography- Involves completing photographic work as assigned. This includes taking digital photos, downloading photos to the computer, and sizing photos for a particular publication & State Board recognitions. Occasionally touch-up work and manipulating of photos is necessary through knowledge of Photoshop capabilities. Designer also creates pod casts for the commissioner and deputy commissioners and other agency consultants as assigned. This involves using the camcorder and teleprompter and posting to the agency website.</p> <p>Research Skills- Expands graphic design skills by researching and learning new software, using it to produce creative and fresh graphic designs.</p> <p>Office Procedures and Miscellaneous Tasks- Occasionally the designer must complete minor repairs to equipment as well as perform routine checks to ensure equipment remains in good, working condition. Other duties as assigned by Director.</p>

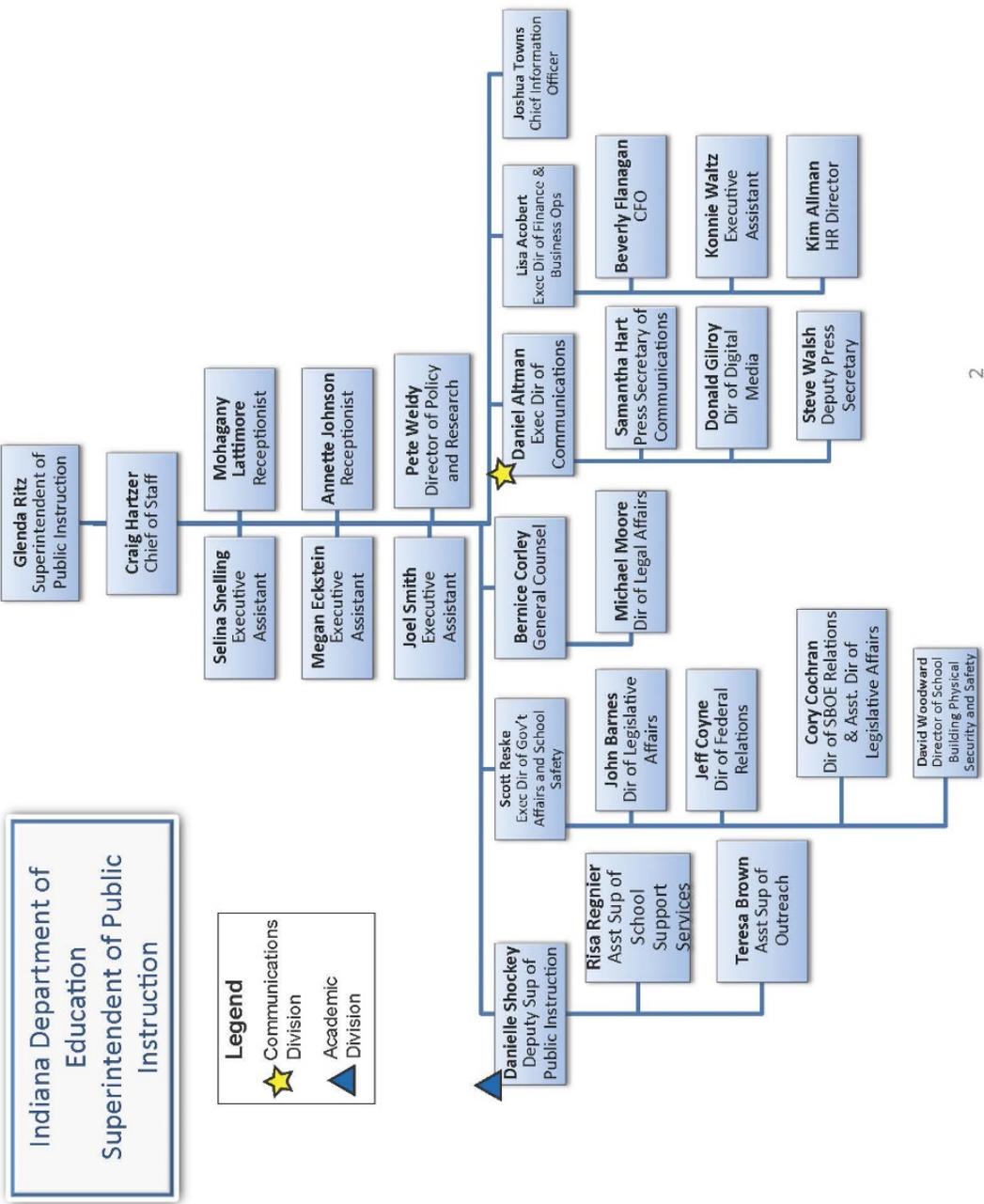
8. Use the table below to briefly describe the third party groups you work with to support communications regarding supporting the implementation of standards.

Intermediaries that Support Communications

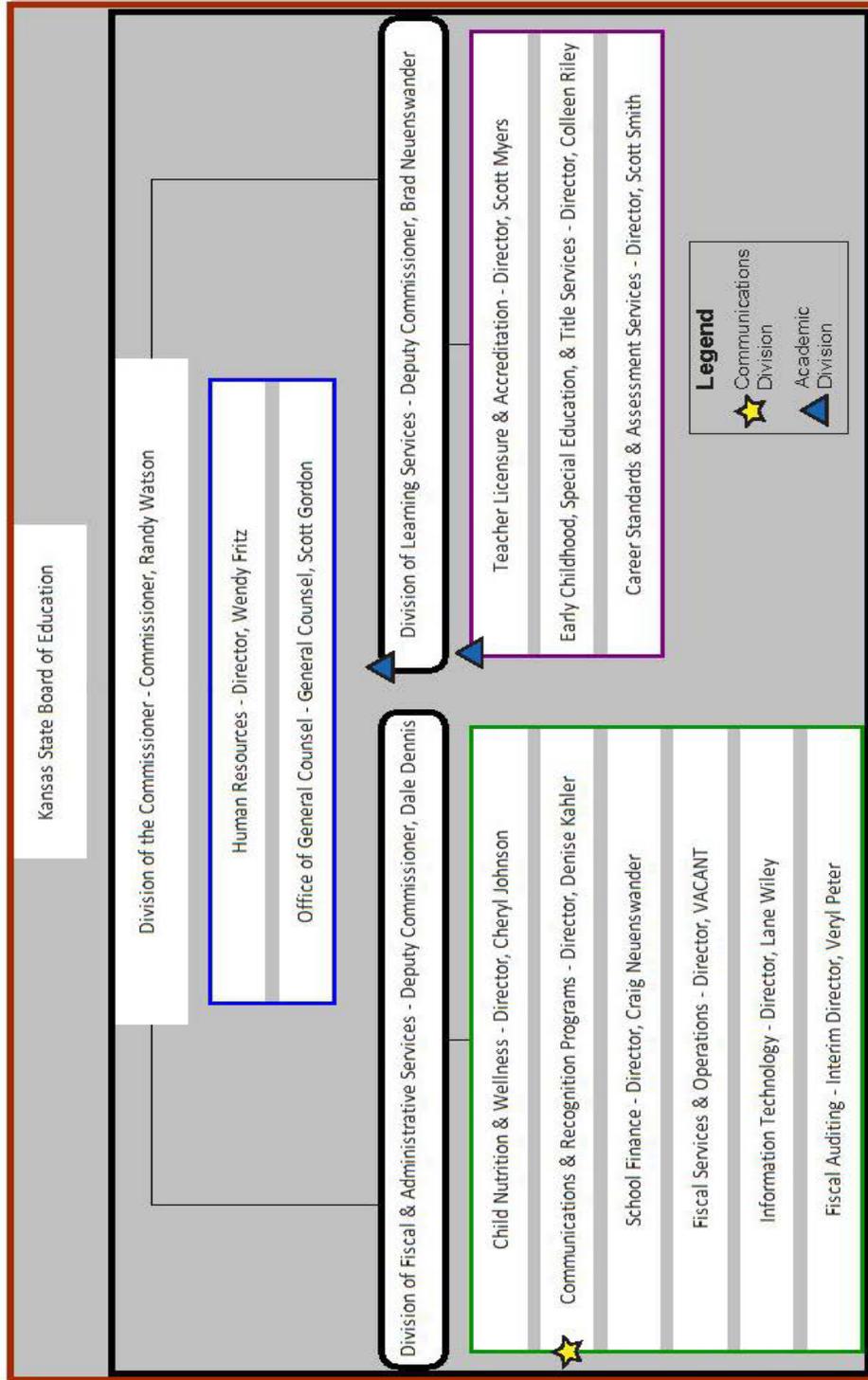
Group Name	Group Type (association, union, parent network, intermediate unit)	Staff Assigned (i.e. who is the SEA liaison to the group)	Description of their Engagement (i.e. type of working relationship with the SEA)	Engagement Frequency (weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc.)	Engagement Method (email, dedicated online channel, face-to-face meetings)
LEA Superintendents/ NC Association of School Administrators	Professional network; public school partners	State Supt/ Communi- cations	We meet quarterly in large group format; constant communication; regular regional small group meetings	Quarterly; weekly outreach	Face-to-face, email news, webinars
NC Association of Educators	Teacher organization; NC is a non-union state.	State Superintendent and her leadership team	Regularly included in stakeholder outreach; participate in their events and activities	Annually and ongoing.	Face-to-face, email news, webinars
NC PTA	Parent organization	State Superintendent and her leadership team	Regularly included in stakeholder outreach; participate in their events and activities	Annually and ongoing.	Face-to-face, email news, webinars
NC Principals and Assistant Principals	Professional role network/ professional organization	Superintendent and her leadership team	Regularly included in stakeholder outreach; participate in their events and activities	Annually and ongoing.	Face-to-face, email news, webinars
Public School Forum	Education advocacy group	State Superintendent and her leadership team	Informal advocate for public education; information support with legislators and others	Annual and ongoing participation in an informal way; NCDPI fiscal agent for state funds	Informal information on sharing and ad hoc support between NCDPI-Forum
Principal/Teacher/ Parent Advisor Groups	Ad hoc advisory groups appointed by State Supt.	State Superintendent and her leadership team	Each group meets quarterly to participate in program and provide advice	Quarterly	Information on sharing; feedback loop; advocacy

APPENDIX C. SEA Organization Charts (2016)





KANSAS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION



Public Schools of North Carolina Organizational Chart

January 2016

