



Community Voice

Getting your message out

Key Messages

*Conversations about education often mention the three Rs—reading, writing and arithmetic. Conversations about communications need to be focused by the three Cs: clarity, consistency, and conciseness. Taken together, these traits provide a solid foundation for your **key messages**. And when you couple the three Cs with a fourth R—repetition—you give yourself the best chance of having your story not only heard, but also understood.*

A lot of time and thought goes into school boards' planning and decision-making. You collect and analyze data, review various options, assess the pros and cons of each, and ultimately, decide on a course of action. Most of your constituents won't be paying nearly as much attention to these details as you are, and some of those details may be confidential in nature. Your challenge is to communicate your final decision to your community in a compelling and logical fashion. To do that, you need to focus on a **key message**. When you get that right, your message will stick with your audience.

Key messages need to be clear. Avoid jargon and technical language. Keep sentence structures simple. Repetition—to a point—enhances clarity, so if the format of the communication permits, structure it with an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. In other words, tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them!

Consistency is also critical to strong key messaging. Good media spokespeople are consistent. They stay on point with the pre-determined key messages, whether they are speaking with the media, at a town hall, or to someone in the grocery store. And if the conversation is about an important board decision, the key message should be the same no matter who's doing the talking, because key messages relate to the why and what of a board decision, not personal viewpoints.

Finally, key messages must be concise. One way to keep them concise is to make sure they are relevant. Remember all those options you considered before making your final decision? Those aren't nearly as relevant as the option you **did** choose. If asked to explain a board decision, be prepared to do so at some depth, but focus your key messages on what you are doing, not what you decided not to do. And if you have multiple key messages, prioritize them, because you may have only a very short time to get any message out.

Developing a great key message takes planning and forethought. You don't start planning your career on the day you finish your education, and you don't start planning your retirement on your last day of work. It takes effort, but planning your key messages is vital to **getting your message out**.

