



Advancing Competency-Based Pathways to College and Career Readiness

Communications Toolkit

Communicating Success Stories

“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”
– Rudyard Kipling, *The Collected Works*

1. Stories Matter

Stories, whether true or fictitious, are designed to interest and amuse, but they also instruct the hearer or reader. Throughout human history, stories have been the primary vehicle people have used to teach and communicate messages.

Stories about the success of competency-based pathways are a powerful messaging tool to have in your organization’s advocacy toolbox. This document outlines how to utilize storytelling as part of your overall communications plan to build support for competency-based pathways.

2. Elements of Storytelling

There are five basic elements of stories; each plays an important role.

- *Characters*
The audience must care about the story’s key players, and your story should have as few as necessary. The essence of the characters should be painted with a minimal amount of words, using only essential details.
- *Setting*
This is the background and environment in which the story takes place. Use strong descriptions so that your audience is able to place him or herself in that setting.
- *Plot*
This is the course of events that make up a story. The events should change the characters or alter the setting in some fundamental way.
- *Conflict*
Conflict is essential to captivating the hearer or reader and moving along the plot. Audience members must have forces to root for and against – this is hardwired in all of us.
- *Resolution*
Every good story resolves its tension clearly. The resolution in this case, motivates the audience to learn more about the topic.

3. Finding the Best Stories

If you are working in the education field, stories are all around you. All you need to do is turn on your curiosity. Find stories in the success of your own efforts, as well as in the success of your colleagues and organization as a whole. Ask, what has worked for your organization so far? Pay attention to the conversations around you, speak with your colleagues and visit schools and classrooms. Meet and observe thriving students and teachers.

Not every story is shareable; not every success is noteworthy; and not every challenge is teachable. Remember the elements of storytelling when you are selecting which stories to tell and crafting those stories you will share. The best stories should focus on people and the challenges they have faced and overcome, thanks to competency-based pathways.

4. Structuring Your Story

Once you have a story, you must figure out how best to tell it. An effective narrative does the following:

- Opens with a hook (a device for getting the attention of the audience)
- Compels your audience to care about the characters
- Makes the conflict feel real and important
- Creates a sense of drama
- Resolves the drama
- Ends on a high note

The following methods can help you figure out how best to develop your story:

- *Workshop*
If you have a group of people who are invested in this project, you can get together in a room and share your stories with each other. By practicing them a few times and teaching other people to tell them, you can figure out through trial-and-error how to develop the narrative in a way that works best.
- *Play cub reporter*
Pretend that you are reporter writing a short newspaper account of the story. Think about what draws you into news articles and makes them worth reading to the end. Take that same approach with the story, being mindful of the elements of an effective narrative listed above. Send the story to a colleague – ideally a communications staffer if there is such a person on your team – and ask for their review and feedback. Together, you can tighten up and edit the story as needed to arrive at a strong draft.
- *Videotape*
If you have the resources, you can use technology to capture stories first hand. This can range from simply telling your story to the camera to more elaborate approaches such as interviewing the characters or capturing the story as recounted by a teacher, parent or student who knows the story best. At this point, you are using the video to help capture the story; later in the process your communications staff may be able to use the footage to edit the story into a compelling, short video.

As you get ready to implement storytelling, remember to show, not just tell. This means describing events instead of telling the audience what they should think or conclude. Always be on the lookout for new stories, and as efforts get underway, be sure to constantly refresh and update your menu of stories.

Here is an example of a story that a member of the Achieve staff uses in her advocacy efforts, which highlights the personalization that competency-based pathways encourage. The story elements outlined above are noted to show you how they work to structure the narrative:

“In March 2013, I was part of a group that visited competency-based schools in Maine. At Hall-Dale Middle/High School [SETTING], which was one of the first schools in Maine to move to competency, the

Superintendent and Principal gave us a full hour in the auditorium to talk with students about their experiences. I spoke with a seventh grade student [MAIN CHARACTER] who had reached proficiency in all the 7th grade math standards by the beginning of December! [PLOT] She was then given the choice to start working with the 8th grade math teacher on the 8th grade standards, or go back and work through the 7th grade standards again to learn them more deeply. [CONFLICT] She wanted to stay with her friends, [RESOLUTION] so she decided to go back and work to really master the 7th grade standards, to the point that she was able to help some other students who were struggling to reach proficiency.”

5. Putting Stories to Work

Once you have assembled your stories and figured out how best to tell them, it is time to integrate them into your overall advocacy communications plan (see “STEP THREE: PLAN FROM THE INSIDE OUT” in the Communications Planning Guide). This requires flexibility and planning. The key to successful advocacy efforts is to use the right tool to persuade the target audience.

This might mean finding the best medium to use (video, presentation, written, etc.) and how to package it. Sometimes, budget resources will determine what you can and can’t do; other times, you might find that a video would be better because you want to use the story at a conference and you can play it for a room full of attendees.

If you have chosen to have a story personally delivered, the selection of a spokesperson for a given audience may be key to your success. Based on the audience, the storyteller may need to change to fit the circumstance. An administrator may relate a story about a student who benefited from competency, which you adopt. But that administrator may not be the best person to present to a group of parents, so a teacher may need to learn the story and “own” it as part of his or her presentation.

By developing your stories and integrating them into your communications plan, you are well on your way to overall success. They are a great mechanism to leverage in your advocacy efforts. Stories resonate with audiences and are far more powerful than mere facts and figures. By using them effectively, you will recruit new supporters and deepen the support of those who are already with you.