Guiding Questions for Using Data in Communications with Stakeholders

Including data points in your communications with various stakeholders can be powerful in illustrating the rational for specific school/district decision(s) or justifying a certain course of action. However, great care should be taken with the use of data in communications, as lack of transparency involving the source or use of data can backfire and create mistrust and opposition to your plan. In order to ensure appropriate use of data in communications with stakeholders, education leaders should attend to the areas outlined below. The following five guiding questions can drive the process of developing powerful key messages supported by data. For example, increasing support for your re-entry plan may require that you clear up any misunderstandings or myths that may be circulating in your community. In that case it may be useful to share with stakeholders any important health data, assessment data, survey data, or e-learning access data, that you used as part of your planning process. Sharing data can boost stakeholder trust and clarify a rationale for school/district actions, but it may also be confusing if not placed in context.

1. *What is the source of the data you are including in your message?*

   - It is important that the source of the data be fully transparent and communicated to all stakeholders. The data source has implications for data quality, reliability, and can help put the information into context.

   - Stakeholders may have misgivings about the theme or story that the data reflect and may not understand where they come from, who has ownership over the data collection process, or potential bias that resulted from that. If the source of the data is perceived to be biased in any way, these perceived biases should be acknowledged and should include any mitigation strategies that were employed to ensure data reliability and validity. In addition, stakeholder concerns about sources of data should be addressed whenever possible.

   - Concerns about biases can be addressed by the following: Outlining the data collection process to demonstrate that the data were collected in good faith, giving an overview of the rules and regulations in place to ensure data quality, and inviting those with concerns to submit questions to you or those responsible for collecting data.

   > *Sample Key Message:* Data included were provided by the County Health Department using data from [enter source]. The purpose of this data is to help us better understand what COVID-19 looks like in our community.

2. *Why were these data produced, and how will they be used?*

   - Creating a compelling message about the significance of the data can engage stakeholders constructively in supporting school/district action plans.

   - If sharing locally collected aggregate student performance data (e.g. assessment scores, etc.), efforts should be made to anticipate stakeholders' greatest concerns about how the data will be used, who share these concerns, and what would address their concerns.

   - Efforts should also be made to clarify the ideal outcome/goals after the data are used in your district. Clarify and gauge consensus regarding what it will take for your district to achieve those outcome/goals? Determine the extent of opposition to the proposed outcomes/goals and action plans? If there is opposition, determine who opposes them, why, and determine the extent to which revisions should be made?

   > *Sample Key Message:* The data are based upon X and are useful for informing Y.

3. *What story (or stories) are the data telling?*

   - With so much information available, sometimes interpreting and communicating meaning can be challenging. It is especially important that the meaning of the data be developed into a story that illustrates the importance of the data point and that the story be accessible to stakeholders.

- Begin by asking the following guiding questions:
  - Does data allow us to discern whether we have been moving in the right direction – or have we fallen further behind? What is our speculation as to what is driving this trend? What are two or three main takeaways from these data and how will you continue to monitor this over time?
  - How do our data compare to those of our neighboring schools/districts? Are we doing better or worse than them? If the latter, are there contextual differences contributing to the outcome? What data would we need to collect to determine difference in results? If we are not doing as well as similar schools/district, what can we learn from them and how are we going to access that information?
  - Are there certain focus areas or practices in our school, district, region, state, or found nationally that are demonstrating positive impact? If so, what specific steps have they taken to achieve those results? Are those strategies appropriate to scale in our school/district, and if so how do we go about that?

Sample Key Message: The data are showing X, which leads us to believe Y. Therefore, we will be doing Z.

4. *Are there any conflicting stories or contradicting trends present in the data?*

- Given the changing nature of COVID-19 and the related impacts on district data collection, it is entirely possible that the data present contradictory implications. The story may seem clear when only a subset of the observed trends is considered but becomes muddled when all data are included. The process of disentangling these contradictory trends and determine a clear story is perhaps the most challenging aspect of communicating data. In fact, to accurately interpret the data and get the story right is a process of both bias mitigation and continuous improvement.

- Therefore, the story you communicate to stakeholders should be transparent about what is known, what is not known, and any inherent contradictions found in the data. The perspectives of stakeholders will provide the context underlying the data and may even contribute to resolving the conflicting stories and producing a more accurate interpretation. These perspectives can "breathe life" into the quantitative data analysis.

- The goal of authentic engagement is to capitalize on the knowledge and perspectives of a wide variety of stakeholder groups to assess and identify solutions that are equitable and feasible. With this goal in mind, be sure to pose these contradictions with open-ended questions and encourage stakeholders to provide feedback to inform the selection of responsive strategies.

Sample Key Message: Although the unprecedented situation presents a significant challenge for our district, we know XYZ. We are looking into A... In the meantime, our planned course of action is B.

5. *Are there any missing data that are needed to tell the whole story?*
- Missing data make it more challenging to get the data's story right.
- It is important to communicate what your school/district is doing to fill the gaps in the data. What additional sources of data already are available, and how can you access it? What, if any, new data will the school/district begin collecting, when, and how?
- Any assumptions resulting from unavailable data must be made transparent to stakeholders and limitations of your analysis must be made clear. By communicating your process, stakeholders may identify other data sources you had not considered. The combined knowledge of stakeholder groups can go a long way toward producing more accurate and comprehensive understandings that inform the improvement purposes.

Sample Key Message: We recognize that data on X would provide greater clarity on issue Y. As such, we will be gathering that data in the coming weeks and will share that data with you and use it to inform any necessary modifications to our current plan.