



Developing a Title IV, Part A Communications Plan

INFORMATION SHEET

A state education agency's (SEA) social media, Website, and email newsletters (or "channels") can help disseminate information about the state's Title IV, Part A program to a wide range of audiences. This resource shares considerations for State coordinators (SCs) as they plan how to best use these channels to fulfill their dissemination responsibilities. In addition to laying out a process for communications planning, the resource describes different types of conversations and sample questions SCs can use when interacting with SEA communications staff.

Introduction

Disseminating program information is an important part of a Title IV, Part A (Title IV-A) State coordinator's (SC) responsibilities. Regularly engaging in dissemination activities can help improve collaboration and coordination among local education agencies (LEAs) and other community-based organizations and partners. The [Title IV-A statute](#) provides examples of ways State education agencies (SEAs) can use state-level funds, which include disseminating promising practices to stakeholders (Sec. 4104(b)(3)(C)(iv); Sec. 4104(b)(2)).

Many options exist for sharing information about Title IV-A efforts, such as the SEA's social media, Website, electronic newsletters, press releases, events, and proclamations. All these forms of communication are known as channels. In some cases, Title IV-A SCs may be responsible for managing their own communications; however, in many SEAs, a dedicated office or team of communications staff members manages these channels. SCs can leverage the time and expertise of their SEA's communications staff through exploratory, planning, and continuous improvement and reflection conversations.

This resource covers the basics of communications planning. Additionally, it includes information about common communications terms and questions to help SCs plan for and engage in conversations about Title IV-A dissemination efforts.



Elements of a Communications Plan

Developing a communications plan can help support the strategic and effective delivery of information. A **communications plan** is a document that outlines an organization’s approach to disseminating information. Communications plans typically take one of two forms.

1. A **holistic communications plan** is general and covers the communications approach over a broad time period; it can encompass multiple types of releases or information (e.g., an annual or a quarterly communications plan).
2. A **targeted communications plan** is tied to a specific product, initiative, or event (e.g., a communications plan for the release of a report on LEA spending and activities for the year or a plan for an announcement from the superintendent on a Title IV-A-related initiative).

The timescale covered and the amount of content being shared help distinguish between the two types of communication plans, each of which has different goals and messaging. Because a *holistic* communications plan is intended to organize all communications across a longer time frame, it will likely have broader and perhaps unconnected goals and messages. In contrast, *targeted* plans focus on a specific release, so goals and messages should be focused and highly interrelated. While the exact structure of a communications plan varies from organization to organization, both types have some common features. Table 1 contains basic common elements for both holistic and targeted plans.

Table 1. Basic Elements of a Communications Plan

Plan Elements	Questions to Ask	Examples*
Goals	What should the communications accomplish?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LEAs will understand how to submit their annual report of Title IV-A spending and their progress toward goals. • Community partners will be inspired by our Title IV-A success story to try this new strategy to encourage Advanced Placement and/or dual enrollment of students. • Educators will join our state’s training on social emotional learning.
Audiences	Who must the communications reach?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LEA staff • Community partners or LEAs • School administrators, teachers, and staff
Messages	What core ideas need to be shared?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LEAs must submit their annual report by June 30. • An innovative LEA increased participation in Advanced Placement and dual enrollment programs among black, Latino, and Indigenous students by coordinating with after-school programs. • Attendees of the statewide professional development opportunity will learn best practices for social emotional learning strategies used to start and end lessons.
Strategies	What channels will be used and how?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include a short description of the Title IV-A requirement in a newsletter to LEAs. • Share an innovative practice success story on the SEA’s social media. • Add a feature box to the homepage of the SEA Website for upcoming Title IV-A trainings.

* The examples in the table are for illustrative purposes only and reflect the range of goals, audiences, messages, and strategies that a Title IV-A SC may have. They are not intended to be read as a single communications plan.

Other elements are also important to communications planning (see Table 2), but they may not be included in the communications plan document because the SEA might have a different strategy for tracking them (e.g., a timeline may be put into a project management tool). Where this information is housed depends on the practices and preferences of the SC and any communications team support staff.

Table 2. Additional Elements for Communications Planning

Plan Elements	Questions to Ask	Examples
Indicators of Success	What metrics will be reviewed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web page impressions, clicks, pageviews • Open rate on the LEA newsletter related to a new requirement • Number of likes on posts sharing a Title IV-A innovation • Number of registrants for statewide professional development
Timeline and Frequency	When will materials be ready for dissemination, and how often will the communication be released?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly newsletter content must be ready by noon on the Monday before the newsletter is released. • Social media posts will go out from September 4 to September 15. • Feature box for the statewide training will be added to the Website during the March update.
Dissemination Partners	Who can help share information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network of local superintendents • Local news in target communities • SCs of other Title programs • Community-based partners

Developing a Communications Plan

Even if SCs work with their SEA’s communications staff on dissemination, those staff members will need guidance from the SCs about what Title IV-A-specific information needs to be shared, who needs to receive the information, and what the SC hopes to accomplish with the communications (i.e., the messages, audiences, and goals). SCs can provide the foundational understanding for these areas. From there, communications staff can help refine SCs’ initial ideas to maximize the impact of communications efforts. The following four steps lay a foundation for SCs so they can make the most of their conversations with SEA communications staff about communications plans.

Steps to Develop a Communication Plan



A Note About This Section

While this section assumes a separate communications staff is managing different channels, SCs who manage their own social media accounts, newsletters, and messages can still use the steps and questions to guide their own planning by treating them as a guide for individual reflection.

Step 1

Determine the type of plan.

Does sharing Title IV-A information require a holistic or targeted approach?

The contents of a holistic plan and a targeted plan are not mutually exclusive and share many common features. To determine which type of plan will best meet an SEA's needs, it is important to consider the amount of information the SC wants to share, the number of projects the plan will focus on, and the timeline to meet expected communications outcomes. Holistic plans are most helpful when the SC expects a high volume of products and communications activities and needs to coordinate communications for each to ensure that information is shared on time and receives the appropriate amount of attention. They are typically developed at the beginning of a year or quarter. Alternatively, targeted plans can be developed on an ad hoc basis because they are focused on single products or initiatives. If the SC does not anticipate a lot of different types of products or has a loose timeline, a targeted approach will be more appropriate. For a combined approach, SCs may opt to create a holistic communications plan to map out their year and then develop targeted plans for the most important releases.

Step 2

Establish communication goals.

What should the communication activities accomplish?

Communications directly impact audiences' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs, which can then in turn influence recipients' behavior. Understanding an audience's experiences with a topic can help SCs determine which characteristics (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, or beliefs) may be most important to address. For example, the messaging will be different if an audience is simply unaware of a program versus if the SC sees that misinformation about the program has led to mistrust.

Communication goals can range from "School administrators will be *aware* (knowledge) of the availability of funds to reimburse teachers to participate in professional development" to "School staff *will use* (behavior) evidence-based social emotional learning practices." Simple behaviors (e.g., requesting LEA staff register for a training) are more likely to be achieved with communications alone. More complicated behavior changes, such as adopting a new program model and implementing it with fidelity, may require multiple communications and additional support to achieve.



Resource: Communicating for Action

Strategies for Communicating Title IV-A Program Information to LEAs shares how building relationships and providing additional supports can supplement communications activities to encourage the adoption of Title IV-A requirements.

Step 3

Decide who should receive the communication.

What stakeholders need the information the SC wishes to share?

While information may be available to everyone, it is not necessarily intended for everyone. To identify the appropriate audience, SCs can determine who will be most interested in or affected by the communication. It is best to limit a primary audience to no more than three separate groups, especially in a targeted plan. Focusing on a small, highly defined set of audiences will help SCs tailor messaging and communications activities to best fit their needs. SCs may also consider potential secondary recipients of the message, such as support staff members who are more likely to carry out the day-to-day action requested in the communication. For example, a set of communication activities on submitting Title IV-A annual reports may be primarily targeted toward LEA staff members who oversee Title IV-A programs. Still, the SC may consider ways to also reach data personnel at LEAs and school administrators so that they can support LEA staff in having the best quality data available.

Step 4

Develop the communication.

What specific information should be included in the message(s)?

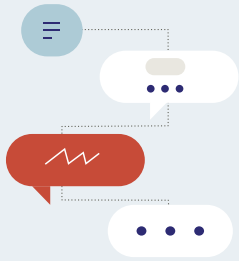
In this step, it is important to think about both the format and the key points the SC will convey in the communication. SCs can prepare by developing a summary, in bullet-point format, of the main ideas (e.g., program requirements, training dates and times, drawdown amounts). It is best to stick with one to three main ideas to avoid overcomplicated communications.

Holistic plans tend to have more general messaging. For example, a main idea included in a holistic plan might be “Title IV-A is an important program for our state because it helps increase educational equity across program areas.” In contrast, targeted plans tend to have more granular messaging. For example, a main idea for a targeted plan might be “Evaluation data from the recent state survey indicated teachers need more support in best practices for social emotional learning. As a result, the SEA is offering a training.”



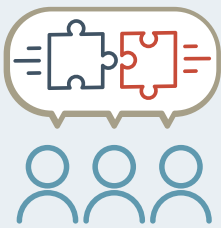
Talking With SEA Communications Staff

Once SCs have determined the type of plan needed and the goals, audiences, and messages, they can start strategizing the best communications activities to use. As noted at the beginning, many SEAs have dedicated staff members who oversee the SEA's communications activities and have expertise that will be helpful to SCs. An SC may have multiple kinds of conversations with communications staff that can inform communications efforts; these conversations may or may not be tied to a specific event, information, or a product release.



Exploratory conversations can help SCs understand what channels are available and how their SEA's communications staff like to operate. These may occur in conjunction with a conversation on planning for a specific set of communications activities, but they can also be done at other times. Questions SCs might ask during an exploratory conversation include

- What SEA or organizational policies dictate external communications?
- What communication channels are available to share Title IV-A work?
- Are there times in the year when SEA communications staff are actively looking for things to share?



Planning conversations build on SCs' answers to the reflection questions throughout this document and leverage SEA communications staff's expertise to help SCs understand how best to maximize channels to reach their goals. Sample questions for a planning conversation include

- How much time and resources are available to dedicate to dissemination?
- What channels are most appropriate to incorporate as part of the Title IV-A communications strategy?
- How should materials be designed or crafted to make the most of the channels being used? And who is best suited to do this work?



Continuous improvement and reflection conversations usually focus on debriefing efforts and looking at engagement metrics. This type of conversation helps SCs reflect on whether information successfully reached target audiences and how to improve future efforts — either by adjusting strategies (e.g., not using a newsletter if few people read it) or smoothing processes (e.g., providing a longer timeline to create materials). Questions that promote continuous improvement and reflection include

- Based on available metrics, how many people did we likely reach? Were those the people we meant to reach?
- How well was the information received?
- Which strategies worked better than others?
- How smooth was the collaboration process? What could improve it?

By regularly engaging in these conversations with SEA communications staff, SCs who do not manage their own channels can foster a collaborative relationship that enables them to disseminate information about Title IV-A efficiently and effectively.

Conclusion

Disseminating information about Title IV-A is an essential component of SCs' jobs. SCs set the foundation of their Title IV-A communications plans by reflecting on and articulating their goals, audiences, and messages. From there, SCs can work with SEA communications staff on selecting and refining specific communications activities through exploratory, planning, and continuous improvement and reflection conversations. Effective planning and cooperation with SEA communications staff will help SCs reach target audiences with important and useful information about the Title IV-A requirements, programming, and success stories.



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