Guide for Communicating the Strategic Plan for a Comprehensive, Statewide ECCE System

March 2022

Kathi Gillaspy and Missy Coffey, PDG B-5 TA Center

One of the initial activities of the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) initiative has been the development of a state strategic plan using information gathered through extensive needs assessment and stakeholder engagement. Designed to guide and direct PDG B-5 grant activities for each state, the strategic plan is also an essential collaboration and communication tool. State teams can use the plan to support the development and refinement of a comprehensive, statewide early childhood care and education (ECCE) system; promote coordination with other state strategic efforts; and sustain system changes created through the PDG B-5 grant activities.

Communicating the content, activities, and progress of a strategic plan is complex. The purpose of this guide is to provide information and ideas for ECCE state leads and teams to consider when communicating to external audiences about the strategic plan. This guide also provides information to consider when coordinating the strategic plan with other early childhood or community plans to create one comprehensive plan for the entire ECCE system. State leads and teams can use this guide to plan internal and external communications about the strategic plan for various audiences, including policymakers, agency leads, providers, families, and community members.

Strategic Plans for Comprehensive ECCE System-Building

The PDG B-5 grant initiative has provided an opportunity for 46 states to develop strategic plans, not for any one program or service but for the state’s comprehensive ECCE system. According to the funding announcement, PDG B-5 “fund[s] States to develop, update, or implement a strategic plan to facilitate collaboration and coordination among ECCE programs in a mixed delivery system to prepare low-income and disadvantaged children to transition into the local educational agency or elementary school” (Office of Child Care, 2019). Although some states had previously developed statewide plans, many did not have the resources to engage in strategic planning at this scale. For these states, PDG B-5 has offered an opportunity to update and include new partnerships where relevant and needed. For other states that had not engaged in strategic planning, PDG B-5 has provided the resources to create the comprehensive, statewide strategic plan for early childhood.

Ultimately, the goal of developing a comprehensive ECCE strategic plan using PDG B-5 funding was to help states create an ongoing planning process for the continued building of a comprehensive, statewide ECCE system. To that end, PDG B-5 has offered a chance for states to analyze the current landscape and identify ways to:
• more efficiently use federal, state, local, and non-governmental resources to align and strengthen the delivery of existing programs;

• coordinate the delivery models and funding streams existing in the State’s mixed delivery system; and;

• develop recommendations to better use existing resources in order to improve the overall participation of children in a mixed delivery system of Federal, State, and local early childhood care and education programs, improving program quality while maintaining availability of services, expanding parental choice and knowledge about existing programs, and enhancing school readiness for children from low-income and disadvantaged families, including during such children’s transition into elementary school. (Office of Child Care, 2018)

Key Components for Communication

This guide supports state teams in making meaningful communication decisions using the strategic plan, including determining the purposes of communication and outreach, identifying key audiences that need information, and deciding the content of the messages. This guide also helps state teams determine how to communicate and when to maximize the benefit for the identified audiences.

This guide contains considerations and guiding questions for state teams to consider when developing an approach to communication. The appendices include additional resources to facilitate planning and discussions.

Getting Started

Tip:
State teams can use this guide in any iteration of strategic plan development and use. If a state team is just beginning, this guide can help them create comprehensive approaches for communication from the start.

A robust communication approach is rooted in commitment and accountability (Khalid, 2020). One way to ensure commitment and accountability is to set aside resources, such as time and personnel, specifically for this purpose (Everse, 2011). Setting aside resources helps avoid the drift in communication when grant activities end and creates a structure for consistent stakeholder feedback over time (Knights, 2019). Ideally, this resource allocation includes a team of individuals within the ECCE system who develop and implement the communication approach together. This team should be a diverse group of individuals who can actively commit to implementing the communication approach and be responsible for providing quality, accurate, and responsive information to audiences. While the team may include some typical individuals and roles (agency leads, state team members, other agency staff), it is essential to also include families, providers, or even others outside of early childhood to create the most comprehensive communication approach possible.

To ensure effective functioning, the team should establish a set of norms to characterize their work. These norms might include guaranteeing a free flow of ideas, showing integrity, having mutual respect,
and monitoring individual participation in discussions. All team members should agree on norms before starting the work.

The team should also decide on procedures for developing the communication approach (Khalid, 2020) and determine what internal agency processes to follow to implement the communication approach. Such procedures may include identifying specific language and usage requirements as well as identifying staff within the agency who need to review messaging before it goes out. Other processes may require that information be translated into other languages or that some information is kept confidential (Khalid, 2020). The team may want to consult with lead communications staff at the agency to determine any other necessary considerations for the communication approach.

**Determining Why to Communicate**

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Why communicate about the strategic plan?
- Does the team need to consider more than one purpose before moving on to planning the communication approach?

Understanding the “why” of any activity is a critical first step to planning how to meet that purpose (Sinek, 2009). Much like creating the mission and vision for the strategic plan, developing the purpose of the communication approach helps drive its direction and helps provide a framework for the communication work (Everse, 2011). For the strategic plan, ongoing communication is critical to ensure the plan is implemented as intended and challenges and barriers are illuminated and eliminated as a community. The plan is a living document that promotes change (Richards, 2017). In other words, regular communication is needed to ensure the plan’s success.

When developing the purpose, a state team should consider four main benefits to communicating about the strategic plan. First, sharing the plan’s content, its specific activities, and progress toward its goals builds community awareness of the comprehensive ECCE system, including within the mixed delivery system of early childhood supports and services. Community awareness is crucial for creating lasting partnerships and sustaining the system over time.

Second, consistent communication across the field encourages coordinating the strategic plan with previously developed plans. Some states use their PDG B-5 strategic plan to focus only on activities identified in the states PDG B-5 application, while others may use this play to address needs across the entire ECCE sector (for example, bringing multiple plans into one plan). When planning a purpose for communication, the team may want to consider how to coordinate communications with others to promote consistent communication about all early childhood work within a state.

Additionally, the strategic plan and its activities are crucial for informing and educating audiences outside of the state’s ECCE system about the future of the system. Including external audiences, such as businesses, workforce development organizations, and institutions of higher education in the planning and communication, enhances the work of the ECCE system. Each of these audiences has
something important to contribute to the ECCE system and is a necessary partner for the system’s success.

Finally, communicating about the strategic plan is a form of advocacy for the early childhood field, informing the public and policymakers of the importance and future direction of the plan. In reviewing these and other purposes, the team may determine that they have multiple goals for communicating the strategic plan.

**Determining With Whom to Communicate**

Guiding question: What are the key audiences that need to be regularly updated?

The next consideration in communicating about a strategic plan is to consider with whom to share the plan’s content, activities, and progress (Dillon, n.d.). The audiences should include a wide variety of groups and individuals, perhaps a broader set than usual. A state team should carefully connect the groups and individuals to the identified purpose.

It is tempting to develop a communication approach that includes only typical audiences for early childhood work, such as families and ECCE professionals. However, other groups could benefit from the strategic plan or have resources to support the plan. To determine what these groups might be, the team can create an audience map to identify the relevant audiences for particular communications (see Appendix A for an audience map template). This map provides a framework for thinking about ECCE audiences serving different roles by organizing them into the following groups:

- **Decision-makers** have the authority to make decisions during planning, implementation, or collaboration.
- **Resource providers** provide material, logistical, or financial support.
- **Beneficiaries** will benefit from the activities of the strategic plan or the communication about the plan.
- **Supporters** will use the information about the ECCE work to support ongoing implementation or collaboration, or they have a specific role in the successful implementation of the activities of the plan.
- **Opponents** may have concerns, objections, or critical feedback about the communication that is important for the state to hear, or they do not support the strategic plan in particular, or the ECCE system in general.
- **Vulnerable groups** may be negatively impacted by the communication or by some aspect of the strategic plan (AnLar, 2020). Vulnerable groups may include families in programs that may no longer accept subsidies due to policy changes, or friend and family care providers that may lose children to enrollment in public preschool programs. Essentially, vulnerable groups are those whose situations may change significantly as a result of the information to be communicated.
Categorizing audiences in this way helps the team develop a comprehensive list of audiences for communication. The team can also use the map to identify gaps in audiences not currently receiving communication, as well as audiences that fall into more than one category (e.g., resource providers that may also be supporters or opponents). The audience map also allows the team to identify others that may be impacted in a way not listed above, or to temporarily place groups in a “support or opposition to be determined” category for further discussion (AnLar, 2020).

**Determining What to Communicate**

After identifying the key audiences, a state team should determine what information to share and then prioritize that information. Each audience has its own set of experiences and perspectives and its own level of influence on implementing the strategic plan, or it may not have any knowledge or experience with the plan. The content of communications should be differentiated by audience and based on the needs of each group. For example, individuals or groups that know little about the ECCE system or the strategic plan will need more background and foundational information. Other groups within the ECCE system may need more specific information about activities in which they have a role and about progress toward outcomes. The purpose of communication may also be different across audiences. Some audiences may need only occasional information and updates, whereas others may require regular updates to provide feedback or make decisions.

When considering the knowledge and needs of various audiences, the team should be careful not to make any assumptions about the audiences. They can contact representatives from each audience group to learn more about its specific informational needs. When developing the content of the communication for the identified audiences, the team can then consider how each contact does the following:

- Reinforces the story of early childhood in the state.
- Articulates the team’s vision of the work.
- Creates meaningful connections to other early childhood efforts in the state.
- Shares successes and outcomes for children, families, and professionals.
- Informs others about community partnerships, funding, connections to other initiatives, and sustainability.

The team should also communicate challenges, keeping in mind the decision-makers and resource providers that may assist with easing challenges. Clear communication that balances messaging about successes and challenges promotes better buy-in for the strategic plan and can generate support from

---

**Guiding questions:**

- What messages about progress made and challenges to the strategic plan need to be communicated?
- How will successes be communicated as leverage points for future work?
- How will challenges be communicated as learning opportunities?
different groups when challenges arise. Challenges may be within the overall ECCE system (such as the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on parts of and the entire ECCE system) or in any of the following categories:

- Politics (such as changes in leadership or administrations or shifts in political priorities that impact buy-in or support)
- Funding
- Timing of activities (including any delays)
- Systems or infrastructure (for example, to support ongoing activities of the strategic plan)

The team should tie communication efforts to the future direction of the strategic plan, including collaboration or consolidation with other state early childhood work. The team should also include “next steps” when communicating information to audiences (Knights, 2019).

More information about crafting messages for various audiences is in the “Guiding Principles for Communicating” section.

**Determining How and How Often to Communicate**

| Guiding questions: | Determining how and how often to communicate each message is the crux of the communication approach. This takes careful planning and should be revisited frequently—a communication approach is rarely developed and then never touched again. As a state team considers the various aspects of communicating the content, activities, and progress of the strategic plan, they should have a process for revisiting the communication approach and revising it as needed. Revisions may be required if a new audience is added, information needs shift, or a new purpose emerges as the work evolves. |
| How often should different audiences receive information? | The “how” of communication includes the medium of communication and the “how often” refers to the frequency of communication. The team should outline each of these in the communication approach. A template in Appendix B has all the components needed to ensure effective and efficient communication that is differentiated by audience. Like the messages themselves, the medium and frequency used to distribute messages must be molded to the audience. |
| What mediums will be used to communicate (e.g., dashboards, blogs, reports, websites, social media, meetings)? | **Medium** The team should broadly consider all the communication mediums available to communicate the strategic plan's content, activities, and progress. Typical mediums include stakeholder meetings, email, newsletters, website announcements, and social media posts. Press releases and outreach to news or public access outlets may also be appropriate mediums. Although the team needs to own or lead all
communication efforts about the strategic plan, there may be other mediums within the lead agency, other human services or education agencies, or community organizations to disseminate information. The team should explore these options as leverage points for a broader communication reach.

**Frequency**

The communication approach should detail the frequency of outreach to each audience based on their needs (Dillon, n.d.). Leveraging existing communication mediums may determine some timelines, but the team needs to determine how often to conduct state-led communication. The team may want to consider natural touchpoints during implementation and possible communication opportunities that already exist. For example, the team may opt to release information or share the Annual Performance Plan Report after submission and acceptance by their federal project officer. Or the team may decide to communicate the accomplishment of an outcome measured through the Program Performance Evaluation Plan, or the result of an activity of the strategic plan. The timing of releasing information between significant milestones is important to consider; some audiences will be interested in incremental progress and accomplishments; others will prefer less frequent updates or only significant outcome updates that are tied to specific strategic plan objectives.

The timing of communication may be impacted by whether feedback from an audience is needed to act or decide. If the team needs decisions from specific audiences, they should plan more time for two-way communication and discussion than groups that only need information about the status of strategic plan activities and outcomes. The team needs to plan more time to close the feedback loop with these specific audiences, sharing information about how their feedback was used (or not used). If feedback loops are left open, audiences can become reluctant to share feedback because they never learn how the team uses their input. The team should have a process for summarizing decisions and communicating the next steps with audiences based on the information provided.

**Planning for Ongoing Communication**

The final key component of the communication approach is sustaining the communication over the long term. Continuous communication builds relationships and credibility with relevant audiences. Sustained efforts show that a state team is dedicated to consistently engaging audiences to keep them informed. When planning for sustainability, the team should think about the different mediums for communicating strategic plan content and updates continuously and consistently over time. Determining how information communicated through static methods such as websites or informational documents will be continuously updated is critical (Khalid, 2020). The team may want to consider delegating responsibility or assigning task leads for maintaining and keeping information up to date. It may also be possible to leverage communications staff in lead agencies to take over the communication approach and its activities, using their expertise to sustain it over time.

**Guiding questions:**

- What mediums are available over time to communicate information?
- How will information be kept up to date?
- What is the long-term approach for communication?
Those assigned may also be responsible for gathering input about ongoing informational needs and keeping the momentum of communication moving ahead. These communication activities that will continue beyond the PDG B-5 grant funding include those supported with other funds or those institutionalized because of the grant.

**Guiding Principles for Communicating**

Once a state team has finalized an approach to communication, the next step is to communicate with audiences about the strategic plan. While all communication activities must be tailored to each audience, the following guiding principles will improve overall communications.

- **Value two-way communication:** In some cases, the team will want audiences to respond to communications with feedback. When appropriate, two-way communication can contribute to enhancing the ECCE work or addressing challenges. When asking for feedback, the team should actively listen to the responses and an audience’s needs for additional information. The team should avoid communicating only as a communication push (intended for every audience) or listening only for the sake of checking off a box (Knights, 2019). Even opponents have opinions that are important to consider as the work moves forward.

- **Keep the message simple:** Whenever possible, the team should simplify the message so that the strategic plan is clearly understood across audiences (Everse, 2011). Most communications can be limited to one or two key messages focusing on the most critical information. Simplicity does not mean lack of detail. The team should continue to tailor messages to each audience, focusing on clarity and conciseness.

- **Mold the message to the audience:** The team should answer the question “What’s in it for us?” on behalf of each audience. Answering this question ahead of time will help the team keep the message relevant to the needs of each audience. It will also help the team articulate the expected response from the audience.

- **Think broadly about the message:** When molding messages to specific audiences, the team should focus on the whole ECCE system, of which PDG B-5 is a part. The team should communicate about all aspects of the ECCE system while coordinating with others across the early childhood field and other sectors to frame messages.

- **Whenever possible, use a communication framework:** Using a framework to develop messages is helpful to strategically lay out the communication approach (Everse, 2011). The team can choose from among many frameworks, such as “Eight Ways to Communicate Your Strategy More Effectively” (Everse, 2011). Frameworks for communication development may also be helpful to determine which messages are focused on information about the ECCE work; the connection between the strategic plan and the outcomes for children, families, and providers; and inspiration to participate in or support the activities of the ECCE system (Everse, 2011).
• **Use data, stories, and examples:** Data, stories, and examples can be powerful tools to make the work tangible and real (Everse, 2011). When using each of these, the team should focus on the children, families, and providers and convey the most meaningful takeaways.

• **Evaluate the effectiveness of the communication approach:** While developing and revising the communication approach, the team should consider how to determine if the approach is achieving its intended purpose. Evaluation activities should occur at least annually and may include meeting with the team, discussing what is working and what is not, and collecting feedback from audiences about the effectiveness of the communication activities and necessary improvements. The team should gather this information at regular intervals and use it to revise the communication approach as needed.
References


Appendix A

Audience Map

Purpose

The audience map is designed to present a state team with a snapshot of crucial audiences that are interested in or need regular communication about the strategic plan’s content, activities, and progress. The audience map also allows the team to identify others that may be impacted in a way not listed above, or to temporarily place groups in a “support or opposition to be determined” category for further discussion. This map will help the team begin to differentiate communication approaches based on the specific needs of each audience group.

Instructions

Place each audience in one or more of the six defined groups in the table. (There are two additional spaces in the table below that will be discussed in more detail momentarily.) If an audience is in more than one group, identify the best group for that audience by adding an asterisk after the name in the relevant group section. For this map, the six groups are defined as follows:

- **Decision-makers** have the authority to make decisions during planning, implementation, or collaboration.
- **Resource providers** provide material, logistical, or financial support.
- **Beneficiaries** will benefit from the activities of the strategic plan or the communication about the plan.
- **Supporters** will use the information about the ECCE work to support ongoing implementation or collaboration, or they have a specific role in the successful implementation of the activities of the plan.
- **Opponents** may have concerns, objections, or critical feedback about the communication, or they do not support the strategic plan or the ECCE system in general.
- **Vulnerable groups** may be negatively impacted by the communication or by some aspect of the strategic plan (AnLar, 2020). Vulnerable groups may include families in programs that may no longer accept subsidies due to policy changes or friend and family care providers that may lose children to enrollment in public preschool programs. Essentially, vulnerable groups are those whose situations may change significantly because of the information to be communicated.

The map also includes space to indicate any audiences for whom it may not be clear if they support or oppose the work, and another box to capture audiences that may not fall in any of the six main categories.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision-makers</th>
<th>Resource providers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beneficiaries</td>
<td>Supporters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opponents</td>
<td>Vulnerable groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support or opposition to be determined</td>
<td>Other groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes, questions, and action steps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Communication Plan Template

Purpose
While developing the communication approach, a state team can use this template to capture the details of the approach. This template contains ideas for what may be a part of the approach, but teams should feel free to adjust the template based on their unique state needs.

Instructions
After completing the audience map, determine the details needed for each group for the communication approach. Add extra columns or rows to capture relevant information.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Group lead</th>
<th>Group purpose or role</th>
<th>Medium of communication (consider existing mediums and stakeholder meetings, as well as partner activities and possible new strategies)</th>
<th>Frequency of communication</th>
<th>Type of communication (one-way or two-way)</th>
<th>Response or action needed</th>
<th>Person responsible</th>
<th>Start date</th>
<th>Completion date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Suggested APA Citation:
