



Strategic Communications Guidance

for Public School Educators in Texas



INTRODUCTION

Public schools in Texas have a powerful, compelling story to tell — but the environment for telling those stories is changing rapidly. After two years of pandemic-related restrictions and safety measures, many in the public believe schools have gone too far in trying to protect students' health and safety. The disruptions that public education has endured since the spring of 2020 have created enough consternation in the air that it is easier for other criticisms of our schools to take hold.

So when and how do we respond?

Regrettably, there is no simple, uniform answer. Many attacks are not worth acknowledging because they wither before gaining any real damage. Others may seem preposterous, but they gain a foothold in the community and can cause lasting damage if left unanswered. The purpose of this toolkit is to put broader context around the debates that have sprung up over the last year, to explain the modern communications landscape, and to offer guidance on how educators can go about claiming, or reclaiming, their own narrative. Hopefully, this toolkit will help those who lead and work in our public schools better understand the importance of telling your story in proactive, savvy ways that take full advantage of existing communications systems and structures.



THE CONVERSATION AROUND PUBLIC EDUCATION IS NATIONALIZED.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR TEXAS?

Throughout the last year, and from one corner of the country to the next, an increasingly aggressive form of politics has spilled into the arena of public education. Organizations and activists across the country are springing up to claim that schools are indoctrinating kids with liberal ideas while exposing them to inappropriate material in libraries. As educators continue to face these attacks, it is important to understand them in their national context — to see what is allowing them to break through in such a cluttered information (and misinformation) ecosystem.

Ever since the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, public schools have faced withering criticism over how they present issues of race, leading to legislation in Texas and other states banning schools from talking about Critical Race Theory, a concept that has been largely absent from public school curriculum to begin with. According to a June 2021 report from NBC News, these conflicts have given rise to at least 165 national and local organizations aiming to disrupt lessons on race and gender.

While public school educators in Texas are well aware of how these controversies have sprung, it's easy to take for granted how much the argument in a local school board room is fueled by national communication structures, from cable television to talk radio to social media. For example, between March 1 and June 30 of 2021, Fox News ran nearly 80 segments on anger over Critical Race Theory in a single Virginia school district, according to [Media Matters for America](#). The organization also found that Fox News mentioned CRT more than 3,900 times in 2021 — on average, more than 10 times per day, every day of the year.



"A new documentary is giving Texas parents a shocking look at what's being taught in their kids' schools: sexually explicit materials 'so heinous that they are illegal everywhere else except the classroom.'"

– Texas Scorecard

That's not to say that efforts to weaken public support for public education are only driven by cable news or social media. *The Mind Polluters* is a new film being shown throughout the country with grave warnings about what students are learning in public schools. This is how the film's producers describe it on their website:

*"For Christian parents, public schools are not a safe or neutral venue for their children's education. **The Mind Polluters** exposes the dark realities of the intentional grooming of children into a worldview at odds with the Christian faith, a worldview of rampant sexuality, homosexuality, and transgenderism normalized through the use of pornographic and pedophilic materials."*

The film is quietly but doggedly spreading throughout Texas. During one week in June, it was screened in at least five North Texas cities.

It is important to understand that these conversations are not playing out on the fringes, but rather among some of our state's most popular and powerful elected officials and political organizations. Plus, they are layered on top of fatigue and frustration that all Texans feel about the struggle to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic and return to a more normal way of life, in public schools and elsewhere.

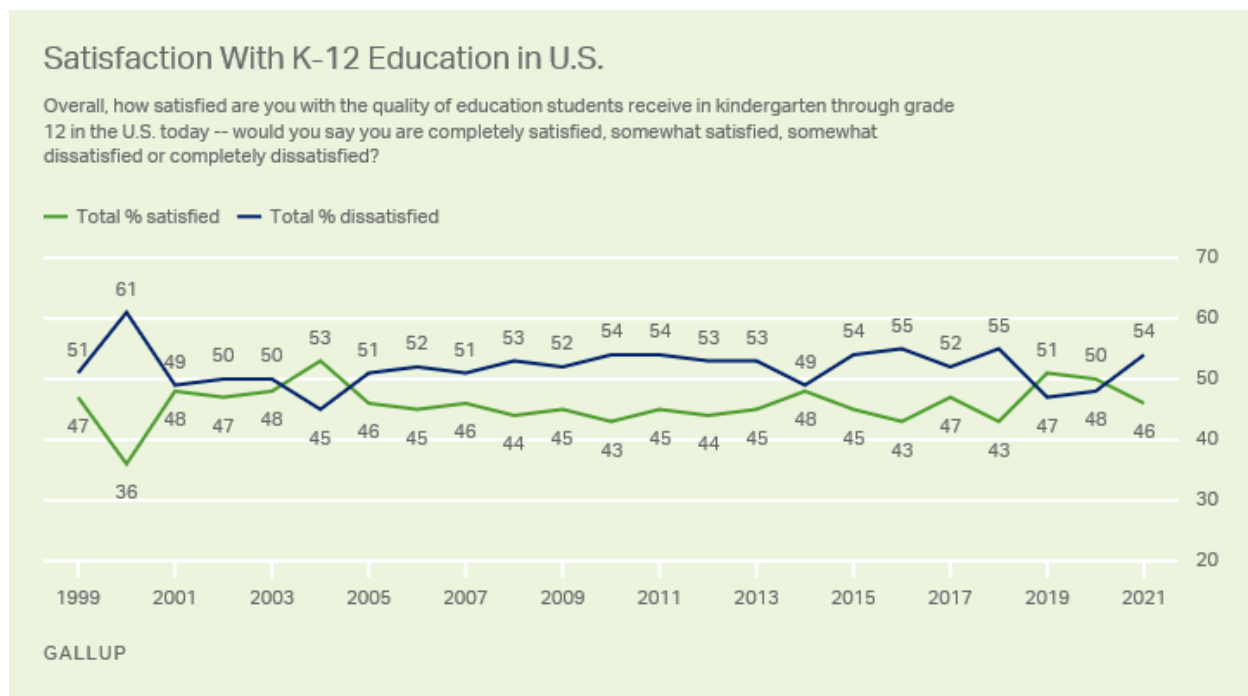
Gov. Greg Abbott, who has frequently voiced a concern that public schools are exposing children to inappropriate materials, recently made this comment while speaking to a group, as recorded by The Texan's Holly Hansen:

"When people see what's happened in our schools during the time of Covid, when kids have not been able to learn the way they need to learn, face-to-face, in a school. When you see schools imposing mandates on kids, on parents, on teachers — that those kids, parents and teachers do not want — let me tell you something, this upcoming session next time, you're going to see a stronger, swifter, more powerful movement advocating school choice than you've ever seen in the history of the State of Texas."

We have seen even more strident language from the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which is a major driver of opinion among legislators. In fact, every major statewide elected official was slated to be a featured speaker at TPPF's annual conference in January 2021. Here is what the organization told its donors in a November 2021 fundraising appeal:

"The time is right to set Texas children free from enforced indoctrination and Big Government cronyism in our public schools. Parents across the state are alarmed and ready to act. They find their children being fed propaganda in class — even as powerful far-left interests push more of it. If we do not seize the moment to set our children free, then freedom itself, along with prosperity and the constitutional rule of law, will be gone within a generation."

So how do we set the record straight?





A MESSAGE STRUCTURE FOR EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING ABOUT PUBLIC EDUCATION IN TEXAS

As a school district or an association of districts thinks about how to communicate most effectively, it is important to identify a core narrative — the overarching story that you want to tell your constituency in your direct communications and through the news media. This core narrative should be the fundamental idea to which your messaging should point back, reinforcing who you are and what your message is.

What follows is an example of a core narrative that can help tell the story of a school district by reinforcing what brings educators to the profession — not politics, but a belief in teaching and learning.

Public schools are about serving kids. Educators enter the profession because we care about all students and want them to have bright futures. Our motivation to do this work comes from our fundamental belief in the promise of education and our commitment to students.



The following talking points can provide guidance to education leaders who are faced with some of the criticisms that have been leveled against schools. It's important that every education leader communicate in his or her authentic voice and these precise words may not resonate in every community. However, this guidance should be helpful as you think about ways to tell your district's story. If nothing else, this should serve as an example of how to organize talking points as you prepare to talk about these issues.

Talking Points in Response to Ongoing Conversations Around Schools

On whether schools are trying to indoctrinate kids

- People go into education because they care about kids and they believe in the promise of learning and knowledge.
- What we are about is pretty straightforward: It's about educating students.
- What makes public schools great is that we educate every child...no matter their background, their academic record, or their family's politics.
- Our teachers aren't just making it up as they go along. The state gives us very specific guidelines about what is taught in each grade, and we have a rigorous accountability system in place to ensure that those guidelines are followed.
- Our teachers work very hard day in and day out. We should be thanking them rather than attacking them.

On whether schools are out of touch with parents/constituents

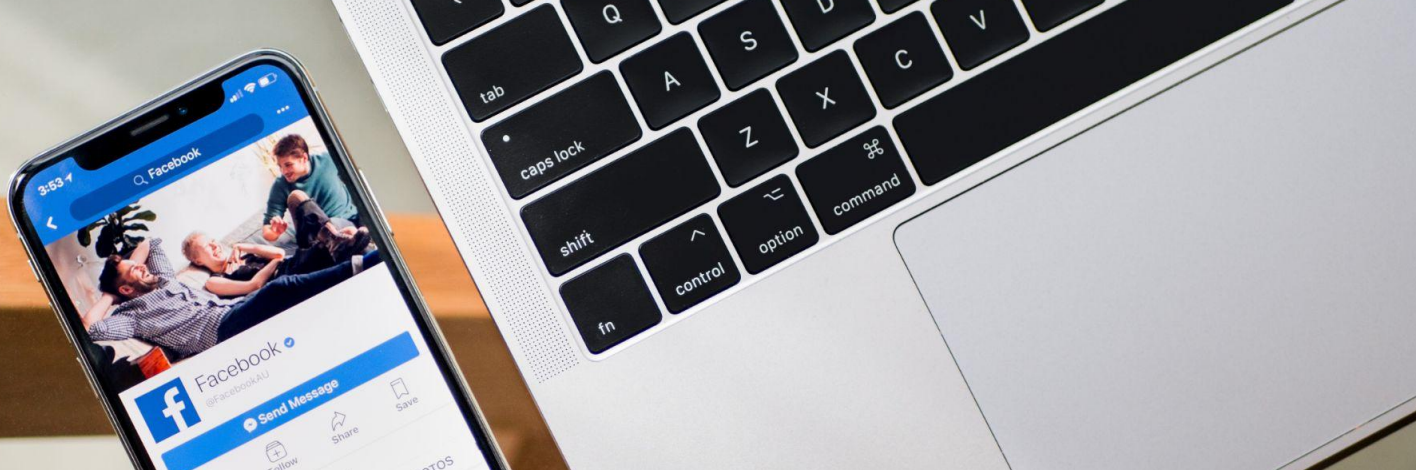
- Parents are our most important partners.
- We welcome the involvement of parents. We want to keep parents involved while maintaining a safe environment for teachers and students.
- Teachers and administrators are accountable to the Board of Trustees and the Board is accountable to the public.

On distance that Covid protocols have put between schools and the public

- There was no playbook for the full shutdown of school but we did what schools always do...we adjusted and made it work.
- This continues to be an unprecedented environment, as evidenced by the constantly changing guidance from the foremost experts in the world at the CDC.
- Some of the decisions may not look perfect with the benefit of hindsight, but we have been in an uncertain world together and have used the best information available to us while following federal, state and local guidance.
- It's very important for parents to be connected to their children's school. We are working continuously to balance the need for student and staff safety with the need to make sure that parents are engaged and involved.

On schools trying to address social-emotional learning

- Each community addresses these issues differently. I can only speak to what we are doing in this school district.
- Students who want to fully succeed need to be problem-solvers and they need to work collaboratively with others. I don't think many business executives will tell you they want workers who are only good at calculus or analyzing poetry. They also want people who can communicate and work with others.
- We would be doing students a disservice by naively assuming that life as a kid is the same today as it was in 1950. We know that students are dealing with so much more, from technology to the media to the isolation of this pandemic.
- What we teach in our schools reflects the guidelines given to us by the State of Texas and our locally elected Board of Trustees.



1. **Have a digital-first strategy.** This is the best way to reach the public quickly and on your own terms — through your own digital assets, from social media to your website to emails. And no platform is more important than Facebook, which attracts far more users than Twitter, LinkedIn, or Instagram.
2. **You have your own communications infrastructure.** Don't hesitate to use it. Be proactive about telling your story the way you want it told on your channels.
3. **Build an infrastructure of allies who are willing and able to be third-party validators to promote good news and respond to attacks.** Feed them information regularly so they can amplify the school district's achievements and help you set the record straight when you face untrue or disingenuous attacks.
4. If there is a problem or some type of controversy in which something has gone wrong in the school district, remember that your closest stakeholders — **employees, parents, other community leaders** — **will appreciate hearing about it from you directly** rather than just hearing about it on the news or on Facebook.
5. **Do not count on the newspaper to set the record straight.** The debate will continue online day after day, while a newspaper story is a one- or two-day account that most people can't access. Also, remember that newspaper reporters are strictly committed to the appearance of objectivity; this is admirable, but it often pushes them toward presenting both sides equally rather than declaring what is fact and what is not true. Getting the facts out through a third-party source like the news media is an effective way to combat misinformation, but it is not a sufficient strategy in and of itself. The onus to tell your story is on you.

6. **Remember that others will define you if you do not define yourself.** The more proactive you are about telling your positive story, the less of a vacuum you leave for others to fill. Be vigilant about telling the many positive stories playing out on your campuses every day. Even when you are responding to an attack, it is always better to sound positive than defensive. Ask yourself, “How do I say this attack is untrue without saying this attack is untrue?”
7. **Recognize that attention spans are limited.** A three-minute video can almost always be a one-minute video. When you communicate in writing, use clear and authentic language. Your audience doesn’t want to read or hear something that sounds like it was drafted by a committee of 12 people over two days. They want more than platitudes. They want clear information and compelling stories that are delivered in authentic voices.

So instead of saying this at the beginning of your press release:

In this school district, we prioritize the safety of our students and we have pledged to keep the community informed as changes in the COVID risk level materialize. We are writing today to let you know that, in accordance with Local Board Procedure 3.74572, we are making changes to our operating procedures to require all visitors to campus to complete a rapid COVID test.

Use language that is clearer and more direct to say this:

To protect the safety of children and staff in our schools at a time when COVID cases are rising rapidly, we will require all campus visitors to take a rapid COVID test. We have made this decision after consulting with local and state health officials.

8. **Know your audience.** With every communication, ask yourself who the target audience is. Maybe it’s the news media, maybe it’s parents, maybe it’s the business community. You will have a better idea of what to say if you know to whom you are speaking.
9. **Lower the temperature.** There are those who want to pick fights with public schools over every issue they can think of, but we don’t have to let them. Acknowledge that we have been in an unprecedented world and some decisions may not have been perfect, but our schools and our teachers have not wavered in working to do what is best for the students we serve.
10. **Always return to your core values.** Education is too important to get compromised by politics. Do not just tell, but show the public what education and educators are about — serving all students, regardless of who they are, where they come from, or what challenges they must overcome.



THE COMMUNICATIONS LANDSCAPE IN 2022

We live in a time when people are consuming plenty of information, but it is coming from an increasingly disparate set of sources. Mainstream media outlets no longer have the power in a community to set the agenda the way they once did. Instead, more and more people are getting information from like-minded sources — something called “confirmation bias” — whether those sources are news sites, commentary on cable news, or just from like-minded friends on Facebook.

That’s not to say that local news outlets are unimportant or that they should be taken lightly. The news media is still an important way to reach constituents — especially those who are not highly engaged activists on one side or the other. In fact, both Republicans and Democrats express significantly higher trust in local news outlets than in national news outlets, although trust in both national and local outlets has decreased some over the last five years, [according to Pew](#).

However, even a story in the news media that sets the record straight is unlikely to deter those who want to lob attacks at their local school districts. The fact is that local media outlets are being hollowed out; there are fewer journalists covering the news and fewer people consuming it. Consider:

- In the 2021 US Media Consumption Report, two-thirds of respondents said they do not have any paid media subscriptions. That means they are not able to read almost any local newspaper, the past majority of which require a print or digital subscription.
- Just 32 percent of Americans say they regularly turn into national or local TV news coverage.
- About 2,200 local newspapers have closed in the United States since 2005, while half of all journalism jobs at newspapers have disappeared since 2008, according to the Washington Post.

[According to the Pew Research Center](#), most people (52 percent) prefer to get their news on a digital platform, followed by television (35 percent), radio (7 percent), and print publications (5 percent). A digital platform can be a newspaper website, but many of those require subscriptions — pushing consumers to free sources as well as social media, where they may consume information from a friend, a traditional media outlet, or a partisan website.

Social Media Use

The conversation on social media is just as likely to drive perception of the local school district as occasional news coverage. Social media allows members of the community to connect with like-minded individuals and is often where misinformation about local schools most easily spreads. It's vital that school districts not only use their own social media channels to convey their narrative, but also empower allies to publicly support and defend the school district to their own networks.

According to the Pew Research Center, some 72 percent of Americans say they use some type of social media platform — up from 50 percent in 2011. And the best way to reach those who tend to be the most highly engaged in local elections is through Facebook. It's been said before that Twitter is for journalists and political operatives while Facebook is for real people. Prioritize the real people with all of your content.

"Social media platforms are not the main cause of rising partisan hatred, but use of these platforms intensifies divisiveness and thus contributes to its corrosive effects."

– NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, Sept. 2021

Percentage of U.S. adults who say they use each social media platform:	
Facebook	69%
Instagram	40%
LinkedIn	28%
Twitter	23%

Americans over 50 are highly engaged on Facebook, but they are far less engaged on other social media platforms.

Percentage of U.S. adults who say they use each social media platform, by age:

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
18-29	70%	42%	71%
30-49	77%	27%	48%
50-64	73%	18%	29%
65+	59%	7%	13%



CONCLUSION

This is an extremely challenging time to be communicating about public education, and that likely will not change anytime soon. However, educators who think strategically about what they are saying, to whom they are speaking, and which platforms they use still have a powerful story to tell. There is a unique, compelling appeal to inspiring stories about children and learning, and that appeal transcends divisive politics.

Proactive, consistent messaging can strengthen the connection between public schools and their communities and build the public support for students and teachers that they unquestionably need and deserve.