All Together Now: A Regional Approach to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

2022 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award Entry

CATEGORY: SPECIAL COMMUNICATION PROJECTS/CAMPAIGNS

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Where possible, please credit this entry to the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service.

Type of School/Organization:
Education Service Agency/BOCES

Number of Communications Staff:
Nine

Please consider this entry for a Golden Achievement Award.
Project Synopsis

Since 2020, when the Black Lives Matter movement sparked national conversations about race and equity, the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service has grappled with the need to bring a diversity, equity and inclusion lens to its work. The Service convened a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Committee in 2020, which began working to bring more inclusive communications practices to the schools we support.

School leaders within the Capital Region BOCES service region had been discussing DEI work within their districts for years prior and recognized the fact that large-scale change doesn't happen in a vacuum. These leaders understood that change was only possible through partnerships and joined together in a regional equity committee of their own.

These two committees had no official relationship to one another and easily could have remained siloed, each working on its own efforts and initiatives. But thanks to the leadership of the Communications Service, these two groups were connected in 2021. As a result, their priorities were elevated to the highest levels of leadership, enabling them to operationalize work that had been done in bits and pieces for years.

While this work is ongoing, one important product of this collaboration was the creation of the Style Guide for Inclusive Language — a concise but rich document whose power lies in the coalition that was built around it through our communications campaign. The Communications Service capitalized on its reach and relationships to ensure broad distribution of the guide, including hosting live virtual orientation sessions for school district staff from across the state. The campaign to bring more inclusive communications practices to schools demonstrates the potential that can be realized when communications is prioritized by organizational leadership. Through high-level relationships, we have helped put communications at the forefront of DEI work throughout and beyond New York's Capital Region.
Research

With more than 90 clients, the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service is one of the largest providers of school communications services in New York state. The service employs about 80 people and is part of Capital Region BOCES (CRB), an organization that employs more than 900 people. The service's Research and Policy (RePo) team provides communications leadership and guidance through a variety of initiatives, including the School Communications Portfolio, a subscription service that delivers communications strategies and tactics to school leaders and school communications professionals. In addition, the RePo team facilitates the work of groups that bring together school leaders from across the region and state for advocacy and collaboration.

One such group is the Superintendents' Equity Committee. While school leaders in the region had been working together for several years, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the group realized the true power of operating together. In 2021, the committee grew to comprise all the school district superintendents who serve the 24 public school districts of the Capital Region, as well as other district staff (such as assistant superintendents and equity coordinators) who supported DEI work. The result was a broad base of knowledge and experience that spoke to the true diversity of the region, and the different ways that the work could be advanced in each district.

Collectively, equity committee members serve more than 80,000 students and thousands of employees across 24 school districts. The demographics of the districts vary widely, according to data reported to the New York State Education Department (NYSED). At one end of the spectrum, urban districts such as Schenectady City School District serve more than 9,000 students, a majority of whom are students of color and economically disadvantaged. On the other hand, the region also includes smaller rural school districts, such as the Middleburgh Central School District, which serves just 600 students, nearly all of whom are white. In between are a range of suburban and small-town districts of varying sizes, serving students across a range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. As such, the concepts of “diversity,” “equity” and “inclusion” look and feel very different in each of the region's 24 districts.

The Communications Service supports the equity committee materially, helping to coordinate the group's meetings, facilitating communication, and drafting materials that support the group's efforts. More importantly, though, our engagement with the Superintendents' Equity Committee has allowed the Communications Service to develop and deepen relationships with district leaders.

1 Enrollment data reported by the Schenectady City School District in October 2020 indicated that the student body was 29% Black, 22% Hispanic or Latino, 20% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 20% white, and 9% multiracial. The same data indicated that 77% of students are classified as economically disadvantaged.

2 Enrollment data reported by the Middleburgh Central School District in October 2020 indicated that 96% of students were white.
around the issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Through the equity committee, Communications leaders have been able to directly demonstrate and articulate the role that communications can play in advancing DEI. The strength of these relationships has made it possible to challenge one another and have conversations that could not otherwise have taken place.

In its strategic plan developed in 2019, the CRB Communications Service identified professional development on the topics of diversity, inclusion and equity as a 2020-21 goal for the team. A committee was established to ensure that communications team members will have access to resources that support a diverse, equitable and inclusive approach to communications work for our clients. Throughout a series of professional development sessions with a DEI consultant between March and August 2021, the team came to understand that developing specific DEI communications guidelines to “address communications specific to day-to-day actions inside and outside of the communications department” would further support these efforts. As the work progressed, it became clear that, to truly implement more inclusive communications practices, buy-in from top leadership was going to be critical.

Opportunity statement: The Capital Region BOCES Communications Service can advance inclusive communications through its relationships with decision-makers across the state.

Planning
The campaign goal was to bring a greater sense of belonging to all school stakeholders in the districts we serve as a Communications Service through more inclusive communications practices. The communications goal was to support communications team members and school district staff in adopting these more inclusive communications practices. The aspirational goal was to strengthen the CRB Communications Services’ position as a statewide leader in strategic DEI communications.

Audiences
The following key audiences were identified for this campaign:

Superintendents’ Equity Committee members represented a primary audience for the campaign. As key stakeholders, this audience had the ability to “make or break” the inclusive communications initiative, and their buy-in was critical to the development and implementation of an inclusive style guide. Communication with this audience included conversations during meetings, and individual and group emails.
Capital Region BOCES Communications team members represented another key audience for the campaign. While some members of the Communications team were directly involved in creating the style guide, others were not very familiar with the initiative until the style guide document was rolled out. Communication with this audience included multiple communications channels, including the organization’s intranet, direct and group emails and informal communication from managers to their direct reports. In addition, many team members were directly involved in the creation and implementation of inclusive communications materials.

District administrators outside the Capital Region were another audience the campaign aimed to reach. The Communications Service is in contact with dozens of school districts across New York state who could benefit from more inclusive communication practices. Communication with this audience relied upon information and resources sent to them from the Communications service, and informal communications between team members and the clients they serve.

BOCES communications professionals outside the Communications Service were an additional audience targeted in the campaign. The Capital Region BOCES Communications Service maintains communications with peers across the state who serve the other 36 BOCES. Communication with this audience includes direct and group emails and messages posted to a closed Facebook group.

Communications Objectives

➔ **Objective 1:** A supermajority of members of the Superintendents’ Equity Committee will support adoption of inclusive communications guidelines by Q4 2021.

➔ **Objective 2:** At least 20% of those exposed to campaign materials will be educators from outside the Communications Service’s client base.

➔ **Objective 3:** In a survey conducted during Q1 2022, participants in orientation sessions will express an interest in furthering their learning around this topic.

➔ **Objective 4:** By July 1, 2022, a majority of communications team members will report that they have incorporated more inclusive communication practices into their work.

Communications Strategies

➔ Enlist members of the Superintendents’ Equity Committee to build consent around adopting more inclusive communications practices in schools in the region.

➔ Leverage the strength and size of the Communications service to bring more inclusive communications practices to school districts and BOCES throughout New York.

➔ Solicit feedback and engagement from school leaders and staff to bring greater awareness to inclusive communications practices.

➔ Commit to ongoing professional learning around the topic of inclusive communications for communications and other school district/BOCES staff.
Resources

Communications tactics were created using existing internal resources, committing about 45 hours of staff time to the initiative during 2021. Materials were distributed electronically via Mailchimp to Communications service client districts and BOCES. There was no additional cost to the service to distribute the materials. Orientation sessions were hosted via the organization’s Zoom account.

Implementation

Creating a guiding document

In April 2021, the CRB Superintendents’ Equity Committee was getting ready to reconvene. With communications as a focus for the group, the Communications Service director brought forward the idea of bringing more inclusive communications practices to our schools.

In an attempt to operationalize greater inclusive communications practices, the Communications Service had previously drafted an inclusive style guide, meant to be a resource for communications staff and school leaders. Bringing the draft guide to the superintendents committee created an opportunity for greater vetting and deeper understanding, as well as depthful conversations around how to use communications as an important element in district and BOCES DEI work. The result was a shared commitment to moving forward with a resource that defines a foundation for inclusive communication in schools.

The resulting “Style Guide for Inclusive Communications” combines communications best practices with known industry standards for honoring diversity and developing inclusive communications. The document is divided into five sections: Ability; Identity; Family Formation and Socioeconomics; Sexuality and Gender and Youth and Aging. In addition, the guide contains links to additional resources that provide more detailed information in each topic area.

The concise, eight-page guide was developed as a starting point, to provide a foundation upon which any audience could build. The guide was developed as a Google Doc, made public to anyone with the link, to ensure ease of use and accessibility for a wide range of audiences. Using the public link, audiences are able to view, print or download the document. In addition, Google account holders had the option of saving a copy of the guide to their own Google Drive.

While it was anticipated that communications professionals would be the primary audience for the guide, it was written in such a way that any education professional — from front-line office staff to administrators — could understand and implement its recommendations.

The CRB Communications Service has made a commitment to maintain the guide as a living document, reviewing and revising it at least annually. The document is date-stamped, and any significant additions or revisions will be called out directly in the document, to support audiences in incorporating new practices into their communications. The next review of the guide is expected to take place in June 2022.
Distribution of the guide

The release of the Style Guide to the field relied upon multiple communications channels. First, the guide was shared directly with the members of the Superintendents’ Equity Committee, including all 24 school superintendents from the region, in December 2021 with the understanding that they were committed to incorporating the guide into their districts’ equity work.

Next, the guide was released via a targeted email campaign to communications professionals and school leaders who subscribe to the Capital Region BOCES School Communications Portfolio service. This service reaches 167 subscribers (96 communications professionals and 71 school superintendents). Portfolio releases are also housed on a password-protected website, where subscribers can log in to view past and present materials.

Orientation sessions

The Communications Service prepared a one-hour virtual orientation to familiarize audiences with the guide. Three orientation sessions were offered via Zoom during January and February 2022, with a total of about 100 participants attending. Orientation sessions were scheduled at different times of day so that educators with different schedules could participate, including a session that started at 3 p.m. to accommodate classroom teachers or other staff whose commitments during the school day did not permit them to attend other sessions.

The orientation sessions were publicized on the Capital Region BOCES intranet; in the Portfolio release; and in a Facebook group for communications specialists serving the BOCES organizations throughout New York state. Orientation information was also shared with Superintendents’ Equity Committee members and the statewide BOCES of New York State District Superintendents’ network.

During the orientation sessions, participants were prompted to engage with prompts for self-reflection and discussion around each of the five major topic areas in the guide. Individuals were encouraged to type responses into the chat, or to unmute and speak aloud. Small-group breakout sessions were built into the end of the session for discussion on two questions:

- What’s one thing you might do differently based on what you heard today?
- What’s one area you identified where you want to deepen your learning?

Each session concluded with a breakout session for further reflection. Participants were also invited to complete a Thoughtexchange that asked the question, “What additional supports do you need in order to successfully integrate this new initiative into your workflow?” The Thoughtexchange platform allows people to share thoughts on important issues, rate the thoughts of others using a star-based rating system and learn more about various perspectives of a given community or group of people. Exchanges feature one single open-ended question and participants confidentially share their answers and rate each others’ answers.

One hour of Continuing Teacher and Leader Education (CTLE) credit was made available to all participants who took part in the orientations. Participants were asked to complete an “exit ticket” to certify completion.
Evaluation

The campaign has achieved Objectives 1-3.

The Equity Committee unanimously agreed to adopt the Style Guide and support its implementation in December 2021. About one-third of orientation session attendees were educators from outside of the service area (exceeding the campaign objective of 20%). In a survey offered to orientation session attendees, 88% of respondents answered “yes” to the question, “Would you be interested in attending future orientation/training sessions on this topic?”

Regarding Objective 4, the Communications Service plans to poll team members in June 2022 to solicit feedback on the campaign.

Anecdotally, the impact of this campaign can be seen in the informal discussions Communications team members have been having, such as whether to capitalize “brown” when referring to “Black and brown students”; how to write effective alt text for a collage of photographs; and when it is appropriate to use “they” as a singular pronoun. Without a Style Guide to frame these conversations, they might never have taken place.

Superintendents’ Equity Committee members also continue to reference the guide in their DEI work as they aim to bring greater awareness to more inclusive communications practices. In March 2022, it was discussed at a statewide conference of the New York State Council of School Superintendents. It is also being reviewed by the Superintendents’ Equity Committee at the St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES in Canton, NY, as they look for ways to bring a greater sense of belonging and inclusivity to their school communities.
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Supplemental Materials

Style Guide for Inclusive Communications

View the style guide online:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1CAyHSxVe8bD1YM1GUILWqQpspGVNPQdT-uOpEQRZ-SU/edit?usp=sharing

Ability

Avoid language that ascribes a negative association to disability, mental illness or addiction

These include “blind spot,” “a deaf ear,” “a blind eye,” “fama,” “spaz,” and other words or expressions that stigmatize physical disability, as well as phrases like “I’m so OCD about my schedule” or “This cake is like crack to me.” Avoid negative or demeaning language for people with disabilities or mental illness, or who are dealing with addiction.

Use neutral or active language when referring to someone’s disability, injury, illness or addiction. Avoid language that suggests suffering, affliction or struggle unless that information is known and relevant to the information being shared.

→ Example: “Mr. Mahsood uses a wheelchair” (not “Mr. Mahsood is wheelchair-bound”).
→ Example: “Andrea Navarro has anxiety” (not “Andrea Navarro suffers from anxiety”).
→ Example: “They are in recovery from addiction” (not “They struggle with addiction”).

For more guidance: National Center on Disability and Journalism, Disability Language Style Guide; Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, General Guidelines for Reducing Bias.

Speak to audiences of all abilities

Use language that is accessible to audiences of all abilities and cognitive levels. Avoid the use of jargon. Write in the active voice, using clear and direct language. Explain acronyms or other terms of the profession in plain language.

For more guidance: The Hemingway Editor, provides a readability index and word count for any text.

Structure information clearly

Provide “sign posts” in your writing, such as subheadings, bullet points and other structural cues that allow readers to clearly follow the information being presented. Use these “sign posts” consistently throughout your content so that their significance can clearly be understood.

Avoid complex presentations of information (such as tables or complicated flow charts) if a plain text version would suffice. If a visual diagram is necessary, provide a written description of the information.

For digital content, use descriptive link text that clearly indicates where the user will be taken when they click the link.

→ Example: If linking to a document titled “Health History Form,” use the words “Health History Form” as your link text, rather than “click here” or simply “Form”).
Marketing and Publicity Materials

Mailchimp campaign

Crafting inclusive communications:
A guide for school districts

As the call for culturally responsive and equitable systems of support becomes louder, the need for districts’ communications to honor the diversity of their school community is critical.

To support districts in creating environments that respect individuals’ identities, the Capital Region BOCES Communication Service has created a Style Guide for Inclusive Communications and a free virtual orientation for school leaders and staff.

The guide, which builds upon the work of many other leading organizations, highlights how school districts can communicate in a way that welcomes and affirms all people.

REGISTER TODAY FOR AN ORIENTATION ON THE STYLE GUIDE
All Together Now: A Regional Approach to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Portfolio release

View the Portfolio web page at https://portfolio.capitalregionboces.org/2021/12/15/inclusive-communications-a-guide-for-school-districts/ (see entry materials for password)
Intranet news post

Upcoming Orientation: Style Guide for Inclusive Communications

The Style Guide for Inclusive Communications was designed to support our team and districts in creating environments that respect individuals’ dignity and identities. This month and next, we will be offering a virtual orientation to the guide.

View the December 2021 Portfolio release and learn more about the Style Guide.

Register Now for the Style Guide Orientation

The virtual orientation will highlight the strategies outlined in the guide, and describe how it can be used. Three sessions of the one-hour orientation have been planned.

These no-cost sessions are open to all of you, and any interested staff in districts in or beyond the Capital Region BOCES. Please join us for one of these sessions (not required, but encouraged) and feel free to share about the guide and these offerings with those in your school communities:

- Jan. 19: 10-11 a.m. | Register with MLP for the Jan. 19 orientation, join the Jan. 19 session without registering through MLP: [https://zoom.us/j/93262768490?pwd=I5YXVH32Zw6P7yFNViUH5B3R7pR66o9](https://zoom.us/j/93262768490?pwd=I5YXVH32Zw6P7yFNViUH5B3R7pR66o9)
  Meeting ID: 932 6276 8490
- Jan. 27: 2-3 p.m. | Register with MLP for the Jan. 27 orientation, join the Jan. 27 session without registering through MLP: [https://zoom.us/j/9156452857](https://zoom.us/j/9156452857)
  Meeting ID: 915 6452 857
- Feb. 3: 2-3 p.m. | Register with MLP for the Feb. 3 orientation, join the Feb. 3 session without registering through MLP: [https://zoom.us/j/9952295458](https://zoom.us/j/9952295458)
  Meeting ID: 995 7298 5458

Questions about the guide or upcoming orientations? Please reach out to @Emily Pepek, @Christine Carpenter or another member of our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee.
Orientation Materials

Orientation presentation slides

View the full slide deck at
https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1UGnq17peW6DeTeNwh7_z5XAIK6ZPooSLoXhsaVtZLA/edit?usp=sharing
Orientation Thoughtexchange

View the full exchange at https://my.thoughtexchange.com/scroll/528814160/results

Exit ticket survey

View the full survey results at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ifsgEr2alpmMwEaOkhOjX6_KWWk9tXKZZ5UOkR55kPc/edit?usp=sharing