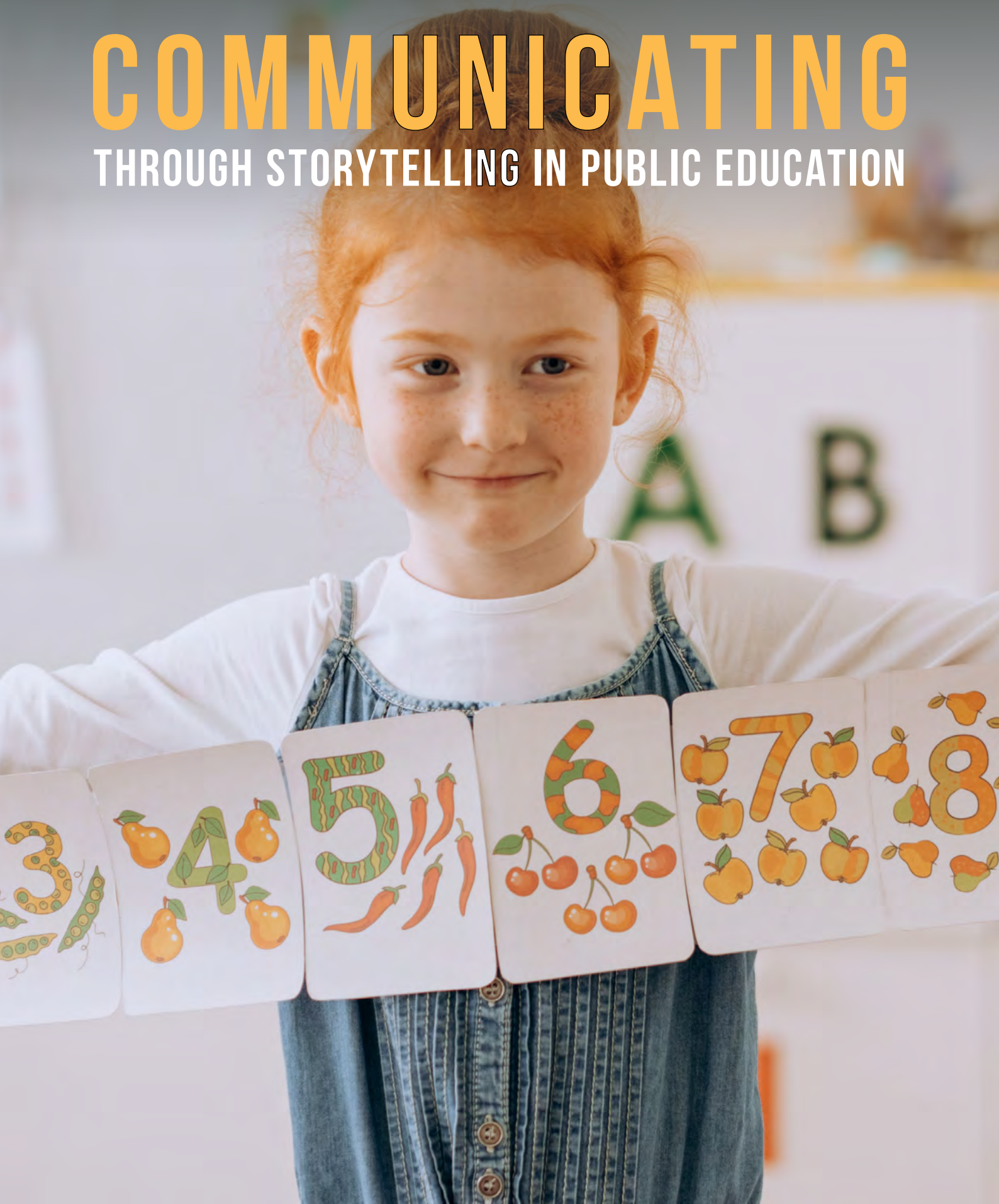


# COMMUNICATING

## THROUGH STORYTELLING IN PUBLIC EDUCATION



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# SUMMARY

## **Tell a new story about your school and why it matters.**

Effective communication is key to maintaining and strengthening our rural public schools in Ohio. We know that strategic communication can be challenging – especially given resource limitations, competing visions about schools, competing priorities, and more.

We want to offer free professional help! These materials provide a vision and strategies for telling a new and powerful story about your school/district and its value in your community. This story can help you attend to concerns in your community, such as tax levies, while asserting how your school fulfills the values of your residents and the needs of our country.

We begin by offering a guiding framework before sharing specific examples and resources. All of these materials are free resources, thanks to a generous grant from the [Center for Research Use in Education/CREATED](#). A team of professionals – including professors/teachers, superintendent, researcher, chief deputy auditor, state superintendent organization representative, Ohio high school graduate, and designers – came together to co-create these resources in January-June 2026. We only seek to support your efforts to emphasize the value of public education and we ask nothing in return.



**STRATEGIC  
COMMUNICATION  
CAN BE  
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**WE WANT TO  
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# WHAT WE BELIEVE

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES



**Public schools anchor rural communities.** Schools do far more than educate children. They hold together local identity, economic stability, and civic life. When a rural community loses its school, it loses so much more than a building. It loses a gathering place, an employer, a source of pride, and a foundation for its future.

**Public schools teach fundamentals.** Reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. Although this may seem evident, we think it is critically important to continuously remind community members of this key function of our schools. Schools are committed to teaching the fundamentals, while fostering creativity and preparation for the workforce needs of today and the future.

**Every school/district carries a powerful story.** We reject spin and embrace telling the truth. Every school builds genuine strengths, forges meaningful relationships, and delivers real impact to the people it serves. We want to help you uncover these strengths and put them front and center.

**Context drives everything.** No two districts can tell the same story. The most effective approach involves digging into your school's and community's specific strengths, confronting real local concerns head-on, and letting the people you are trying to reach shape the message.

**Effective communication is a two-way commitment.** Strong communication requires listening! Leaders who create genuine opportunities to hear from their communities will sharpen their message while building mutual respect and trust and a shared investment to sustain schools when times are tough.

**Rural schools offer unique strengths.** Rural districts make up the majority of Ohio's school systems and educate most of the state's students. They represent something distinct and valuable. Personalized attention, deep community bonds, place-based learning, and innovation born of necessity are not consolation prizes — they drive real advantage.

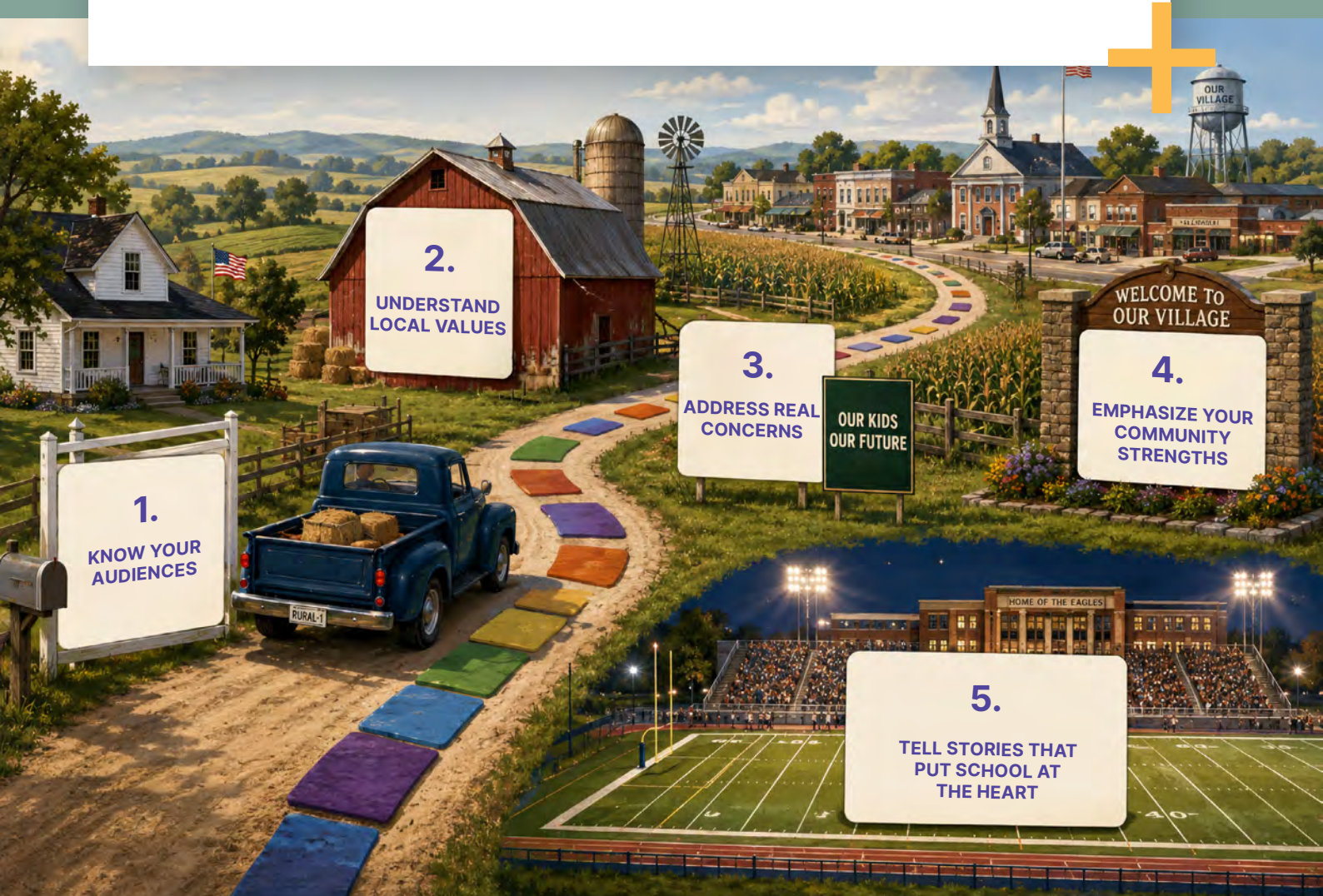
**Rural Ohio schools have real strengths worth communicating.** While every district's story is its own, some common strengths across many rural Ohio schools include: personalized learning and small class sizes; deep community bonds, higher graduation rates, career-connected learning, and place-based learning/curriculum.

**Strong schools benefit everyone in the community!** Public safety, local economies, workforce pipelines, and community viability all depend on strong schools. Reaching beyond the parent community — to seniors, business owners, and longtime residents — is not optional. It is essential.

## RURAL SCHOOLS HOLD COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

## STRONG STORIES BEGIN WITH LISTENING

# THE ROAD TO STRONGER COMMUNICATION



# 01 KNOW YOUR AUDIENCES

We identify four primary audiences in rural school communities, each with somewhat distinct concerns, values, and goals, and each likely being most interested in somewhat different messages: voters without school-age children; voters with school-age children; senior citizens; and local businesses/businesspeople.

We also see a few things that cut across all audiences. These include values of independence, self-sufficiency, and hard work, connection to the land, local identity, and pride in the community and nation. We also know there is some distrust of Columbus, a desire for accountability in the political process and for politicians, and some fears of rural communities being ignored or left behind. Regarding schools, there is likely to be more trust in local teachers and administrators (local public schools) than in public schools more broadly. Your job, in large part, is to help constituents to see their rural schools as **community anchors**, as the **heart** of rural communities. And all will be likely to appreciate knowing the schools are teaching the **basic skills, dispositions, and knowledge** necessary to succeed and contribute to the community and nation. These schools (“our schools”) have major strengths and distinct qualities, which should be highlighted. For example: “Our school is the heart of the community, where our neighbors teach our kids our values.”

# 02 UNDERSTAND LOCAL VALUES

Different audiences in your community are likely to have somewhat distinct values and concerns. For example, rural voters:

- **without school-age kids** are likely to be more focused on survival, autonomy, and asset protection: Ensuring the town (including through strong schools) remains a viable, self-sufficient place to live without outside interference.
- **with school-age kids** will have these immediate concerns: ensuring schools provide meaningful opportunity for students, robust community ties and connections for adults, and strong community outcomes.
- who are **senior citizens** will be focused on stability and vitality: keeping families intact and close, leaving communities in healthy positions going forward, protecting against the loss of important supports (e.g., hospitals, living communities).
- who are **businesspeople** will view schools as real or potential economic engines and partners, producing graduates who are employable and who possess valuable people skills. They will also be concerned about avoiding a tipping point where taxes present too large of a burden.

Certain key messages and success stories, which speak to specific values and concerns, will be most likely to resonate.

## 03 ADDRESS REAL CONCERNS

These decisions matter! We also know many Ohio schools are struggling with declining resources and other challenges (e.g., declining birth rates, staff recruitment, geographic barriers), and constituents are also struggling with property tax burdens and other cost-of-living issues. Your main goal should be to put your best foot forward in your communications, portraying the schools in an accurate, compelling and positive way while responding to the values and concerns of community members. The audience info we provided previously should be helpful in getting you started, but we also highly recommend that you work hard to tailor your communication to your specific community. This will require being an active and constant listener, engaging in community listening sessions and always seeking to communicate with your constituents, whenever possible. While you do this, you can be thinking about how to tell stories about your schools that powerfully and tangibly show their central place within your community, in the past, present, and future.

## 04 EMPHASIZE YOUR COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

Alongside the constant scanning and listening, we strongly suggest taking an inventory of what your schools are doing well right now. Build on the many strengths in your schools! Working with a team, inventory all the different ways you are bringing value to the community and to these different audiences. This is a key step to our strengths-focused approach to communication. Also, as you are doing this, you may identify areas where more should be done, to respond to specific concerns or needs and to be able to show how the school is doing this. Being transparent about areas of improvement will also serve to build trust with the public. Strong communication and strong programming are inextricably linked!

## 05 TELL STORIES THAT PUT SCHOOL AT THE HEART

Based on this analysis, you will be positioned to make key decisions and to strategize! You will be set up to **tell stories that place your school at the heart of your community**, where it belongs. Next, in component #2 of this toolkit, we will share specific examples of powerful ways to communicate.

Acknowledgments: This work is the result of a collaborative endeavor involving interest holders from across multiple sectors. The team included Miami University faculty members Michael Evans and Joel Malin, who served as co-facilitators for the project. Dr. Dana Mitra, Professor of Education Policy Studies at Penn State, served as a research consultant, and the team drew inspiration from her work, [“Pennsylvania’s Best Investment: The Social and Economic Benefits of Public Education.”](#) Dr. Paul Imhoff, Director of Governmental Relations for the Buckeye Association of School Administrators, and Dr. Guy Parmigian, former superintendent at Benton-Carroll-Salem School District and current Miami University faculty member, offered perspectives based on their experiences as district administrators. Jennifer Sudhoff, Director for Shared Services Alliance (ESCNEO) and current OASBO board member, brought extensive experience working in public school finance as a Treasurer and Business Manager. Chris Kline, Chief Deputy Auditor in Lawrence County, generously shared county- and state-level insights on property tax law and pending legislative reforms in Columbus. Dr. Sarah Stitzlein, a University of Cincinnati faculty member and public education advocate, shared insights as a philosopher of education and lifelong Ohio resident. Amaya Lipps, a graduate of Tipp City Schools and current undergraduate at Miami University, brought the perspective of a recent public school student and aspiring teacher. Professional designers Reed Novak and Annemarie Hylton collaborated with the team during all aspects of the Co-Design process and created the layout of the Communication Toolkit.

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