THE STARKVILLE OKTIBBEHA CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT is one of the largest countywide school districts in the state. The district is a merger of Starkville School District and the Oktibbeha County School District as a result of state legislation which went into effect in 2015. The consolidated school district is located in the same county as Mississippi State University (MSU). This allows the district to benefit from a number of unique learning experiences created by university partnerships.

The district is made up of 1 preschool, 4 elementary schools, 1 partnership middle school, 1 junior high school, 1 alternative school, 1 high school, and a career and technical center. SOCSD holds a “C” accountability grade and serves approximately 5,200 students pre-kindergarten-12th grade in typical years. As shown in Figure 1, 65.2% of students identify as African American, 29.9% as white, and 3.6% as Hispanic.

*Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District typically serves around 5,100 students; however, due to COVID-19 their enrollment for the 2020-2021 school year was 4,906.
The Starkville-Oktibbeha community enjoys several unique features that aid its communications. First, Starkville is home to Mississippi State University, the state’s largest university. This means the county enjoys higher levels of adult education than many others in Mississippi, and the school district benefits from unique partnerships with the university. Although a small town, Starkville has two daily newspapers and is in the coverage area for two television stations, although neither is based in Starkville. Because of the large size of the consolidated district, SOCSD also employs a full-time communications director, a post currently filled by Nicole Thomas.

After many years of controversy, the 2015 successful consolidation of Starkville School District and Oktibbeha County School District turned out to be a blessing in disguise when it came to communications during the pandemic. In order to rebrand the district as a single entity, SOCSD had to create a plan of action similar to a reopening plan, complete an analysis of audiences and the best ways to reach them, and develop clear talking points and messages. After the consolidation, SOCSD continued to develop and expand its communications program into one of the best in the state, placing Starkville one step ahead of the challenges presented by the pandemic.

Although its communications program was well established prior to 2020, the district primarily engaged in routine communications about achievement and events. Its emergency communications processes were reserved for occasional crises, such as severe weather or gas leaks. Primary channels were email, the district’s user-friendly website, and social media. With strong branding, Starkville used consistent and clear messaging across all channels. More than any other district we profiled, SOCSD had a solid communications foundation and strong and unified community support going into the pandemic.
The Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District executive leadership team, including the superintendent, his assistant, the chief financial officer, and communications liaison Nicole Thomas, began ongoing discussions immediately following the 2020 spring break to address the rapid changes for their students and stakeholders. SOCSD began by constructing a dedicated page on its district website at the close of the 2019–2020 school year to provide a central location for updated information. The district then developed a three-pronged approach to its communications strategy based on the available data. This approach involved sending emails directly to stakeholders, posting important information and updates on the district website, and creating short, concise visuals for social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook. The district picked this approach because their experience suggested these channels were the most visible to stakeholders and reached as many students and families as possible.

As the school year concluded, the superintendent also created an advisory council of principals, parents, community members, public health officials, epidemiologists, nurse practitioners, and mental and emotional health counselors to decide how the district would operate in 2020–2021. This advisory council helped the district develop its return-to-school guide, which was published on July 21, 2020. As the district learned new information, the guide was revised and the cover of the document was updated to the latest date of publication each time.

On July 31, 2020, the school district released a revised reopening plan via email, its website, and social media in alignment with its communication strategy. The revised plan offered three instruction model options: hybrid, traditional, and virtual. The district allowed parents to choose a model until August 7, 2020. Teachers returned to the classroom on August 17, 2020, while the start date for students was delayed until August 24, 2020, to provide teachers time to prepare the virtual space and allow staff to implement reopening precautions such as personal protective equipment (PPE), social distancing, and facility management.

The district requested that the Mississippi Department of Education reduce the 180-day calendar requirement, which was not granted prior to the reopening plan’s release. As a result, the delayed start date extended the school year into June 2021. On August 14, 2020, however, MDE released a waiver to allow districts to move to 170 days, enabling SOCSD to set the final day for student attendance on May 27, 2021.

After the first four weeks of the school year, SOCSD found that offering three models of instruction (hybrid, traditional, and virtual) was overwhelming educators who had to prepare for and instruct three different classes of students. In its July 31, 2020, reopening plan announcement, SOCSD foreshadowed this problem by stating,

“...[W]e were prepared to accommodate up to 25% of our families through virtual learning. Since mid-July, the number of students...choosing the virtual or hybrid learning model has increased from around 30 percent to more than 40 percent...We do not have the capacity to offer live or recorded virtual instruction to 40-plus percent of our students.”
Additionally, there were very few students in the hybrid model of instruction and those that were participating were not experiencing success. In response, the district eliminated the hybrid instructional option and began offering either 100% virtual or 100% in-person instruction. This improved students’ academic performance and attendance. The district also advised virtual students who were “not progressing at a rate of mastery of content” by the end of the first nine weeks to switch to the traditional model.

As cases rose in fall 2020, the school district questioned whether it should dismiss all students to virtual instruction, but it ultimately chose to keep its doors open and continue to track the spread due to a lack of student connectivity. The district noted that cases in the district mirrored community trends, so it felt that the district was not contributing to spread above and beyond what was happening community-wide. SOCSD also noted that during previous weather-related incidents, such as tornadoes and snow storms, reaching students was more difficult due to power outages and other stressful circumstances. The only way to ensure children had equal opportunity to learn was to keep the district open for families who wanted to come to school.
STATE OF REOPENING, SPRING 2021
Through the end of the 2020-2021 school year, SOCSD offered traditional and virtual instruction models. Throughout the course of the year, more and more students who started as virtual students returned to school.

LESSONS LEARNED
Communications
Like all districts across the state, Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District experienced many challenges and growing pains this year. In terms of their communications strategy, though, they were one of the most successful districts in the state. A few factors were key to their success. First, SOCSD was able to lean into their past communication efforts, and their investments in a communications strategy and team pre-pandemic paid dividends during this catastrophic year.

Despite having well-defined communications protocols, though, the district had no experience leading a communications strategy for a catastrophe as large as the COVID-19 pandemic. The ongoing disruption required far more updating, planning, and adaptability than other natural disasters. Fortunately for the district, Superintendent Eddie Peasant had experienced the public relations crisis of Hurricane Katrina and was able to advise the communications team that COVID would require a multistep, multi-week, multiple-component response, rather than simply an email update or two explaining and resolving the situation at hand. The district prepared its communications strategy to encompass the longevity the superintendent foresaw in order to support its students throughout the duration of the pandemic.
Finally, Starkville looked at the pandemic as an opportunity to continue to improve its practices. Although the district found that the three-pronged approach it chose in spring 2020 was very effective in engaging stakeholders, the district noted that this strategy was not as personable as those employed by other districts which leaned more on audiovisuals such as Zoom meetings, Facebook Live Q&A, and other communal conversations. The district is exploring these tools moving forward.

Having a team and a plan made it easier for SOCSD to produce clear messages quickly and often. We have included some of their strategies below to help districts across the state learn from SOCSD’s best practices.

**HAVE DEDICATED COMMUNICATIONS STAFF.**
SOCSD had employees dedicated to communication efforts prior to the pandemic. This was a team of individuals specifically dedicated to developing and sharing messages from the district to community members. To that end, SOCSD had already done strategic thinking around audiences, tactics, channels, and messages to lay the groundwork that would allow them to developing clear, cohesive messages and materials during the crisis. Making an investment in human capital now can help school districts to pivot when disaster strikes, and being intentional in recruiting human capital can have a profound impact on the relationship between the school district and stakeholders. It pays to be prepared.

**KNOW THE DISTRICT’S BRAND.**
Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District has a strong understanding of their brand. This becomes very clear after seeing just a handful of their materials. Remember, branding is more than just a logo or color palette; it represents the essence of the district. It helps bring a district’s goals and priorities to life visually. SOCSD invested time in developing their brand prior to the pandemic. The best way to keep your brand organized is by creating a style guide. A style guide helps districts maintain their brand in all the documents they develop for their audiences. SOCSD’s dedication to their brand makes it easier to produce high-quality collateral with a short turnaround time.

**CLEAR MESSAGES AND FREQUENCY ARE IMPORTANT.**
SOCSD does an excellent job of defining the priorities of the district and then amplifying them through clear, frequent messages to all stakeholder groups. Here are some important questions to ask as you prepare to share information, according to SOCSD:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>Where</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Why</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is your target audience?</td>
<td>What is your message?</td>
<td>When will you communicate your message?</td>
<td>Where will you deliver your message?</td>
<td>How do you choose to deliver/communicate your message?</td>
<td>Why are you sharing this information? Why is it relevant to your audience?</td>
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Writing/Drafting Your Message

- Determine your key points
- Use common language; skip the education jargon
- Use short sentences
- Be authentic
- Lean on your beliefs and values
- Write a good email subject line
- Proof it
- Read it out loud