

# Communicating with staff, students and parents

Academies Communications Toolkit



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## Introduction

**This guide has been created to give ideas and suggestions about communicating with your 'internal' audiences – even if they will be working for, or studying in another organisation when your dialogue starts.**

**It also suggests how to keep your staff, students and parents tuned into your values and on board once the Academy has opened.**

Consistent, regular and sensitive communication is vital when change happens. It's what galvanises new teams of people and unites them behind new ideas and visions.

The task of communicating and persuading can be no mean feat if people feel strongly about their current school – and can be particularly challenging when two or more schools are merging into one new Academy.

Even if the new Academy is not the result of a merger of two predecessor schools, you will need to dedicate a huge amount of work to understanding the communication needs of your future staff, students and parents.

Before a team is in place, before even senior leaders are in place, communications with the most important stakeholders – staff, students and parents – have to start in earnest. All new schools need their future staff, students and parents on board and supportive. To achieve this, you need to start talking to them, listening to them and building relationships well before they become 'yours'.

## Resourcing communications

**Managing communications with the potential future teachers, staff, students and parents of the Academy is hugely important and time consuming.**

Staff, students and parents are the most important groups for an Academy team to communicate with and get on board. So a conscious approach to win hearts and minds is needed from as early as possible – right from brokerage stage.

Until a principal designate is appointed, the project management company or Academy sponsor will have to nominate someone to be responsible for communicating with staff, students and parents. It is important that this person's activities and planning are aligned with any other communications about the Academy – for example, with the press or wider community.

When the principal is appointed, communications frequently become their responsibility.

You may find it practical to appoint an external communications and/or human resources agency to help you with this process if you do not have adequate resources internally.

Whatever happens, you need to become the primary source of information on the new Academy for staff, students and parents. They should not find out news that you haven't shared with them in the media or by any other source.

## Early days – communicating with sensitivity

**It is natural that staff, students and parents might feel worried and anxious if a) their school may close, and b) they have to face a future of working and mixing with people they don't know (or maybe do know, but have strong perceptions of). People want and expect honest information from very early on about how they will be affected by the changes.**

In the early days of an Academy project, school staff may feel demoralised or anxious about change. Students from different schools may not want to mix if they are coming together.

When Academy plans are given the go-ahead, there may be a sense of 'mourning' for the old school. In these circumstances, active listening and sensitive communications are the only ways forward.

## Getting to know your audiences

"I would suggest using research to find out what parents want to know. Then you can tailor your communications messages accordingly. Academies can come with preconceptions, but it's not so hard to sell the idea of an improved school." Project manager

To get staff, students and parents on board you need to know who they are. Families, even from one area, rarely fall into one single category. So you need to get out into your community and find out all the different groups you are talking to.

Are parents split into distinct social groups? Will you be serving an area with ethnic populations? Who are they? What languages do they speak? What are the moral codes, cultures and traditions?

The feeder primary schools and the predecessor school may be able to help you with this too. They will hold addresses for parents and records of which parents regularly attend meetings about their children. The latter could give you a good steer on which parents are actively involved in their children's education.

It's also a good idea to make early contact with the admissions team at the local authority because they have contact with parents.

Beware of data protection laws though, you may not be able to use other people's addresses and contact details automatically. Always check first.

Knowing the demographic make-up of your catchment area won't just help you to create a school that's appropriate for the community it serves – it will also enable you to communicate in the most appropriate way to different groups.

Research will also help you to identify how and when each of these groups like to be communicated with.

"Kids can be powerful champions. If you get them on board they can help to convince their parents and carers." Project manager

## Face-to-face communications

### Don't just tell. Discuss.

Nothing beats face-to-face communications for establishing positive relationships. When the principal designate has been appointed, the 'face' should be theirs, but well before then the Academy sponsor and partners should be actively promoting and encouraging dialogue with staff, students and parents.

Emails, leaflets, DVDs and many other forms of communication can be used to help keep everyone in the loop and involved in the project team's thinking. But without face-to-face meetings and opportunities for people to be heard, they are virtually meaningless.

### Ideas for two-way communications

Oasis Community Learning puts 'Ask Steve' boxes in schools earmarked for closure so that children can post questions. Answers are then published online.

[www.oasisacademylordshill.org/ask\\_steve](http://www.oasisacademylordshill.org/ask_steve)

A number of Academies have set up drop-in surgeries, and even pizza evenings so that parents and students can visit the new principal, ask questions and share concerns.

At the time of writing, one yet to open Academy was considering setting up a town centre shop so that parents, students and neighbours could drop in, meet the principal, ask questions and share concerns.

The huge advantage of face-to-face meetings is that they give people a chance to tell you what they think. And listening will be valuable to you in many ways:

- It will allow you to keep your finger on the pulse of concerns and anxieties.
- You could learn valuable information about the needs and daily lives of your future staff, students and parents.
- You could learn useful information about the area and the community you'll be serving.
- You will be showing that you are making efforts to be part of the community, that you are approachable and that you care about people's concerns.

## Building relationships

### Relationships with the predecessor school headteacher and governors

A golden rule of new Academy project teams is 'never talk badly about the predecessor school'. It's a bad idea for a number of reasons.

The headteacher and governors of the predecessor school could be of great help to you at the start of a new Academy, both in winning hearts and minds, and more practically with things like curriculum alignment for Year 11s. Also, it doesn't energise and motivate people if they feel their work and school is being rubbished by their new employers or teachers.

It is extremely important for Academy project teams to identify the strengths and weaknesses of predecessor schools. But in all communications, it helps to focus on the positives the predecessor school ethos will bring to the new Academy.

One-to-one interviews should be arranged with staff at predecessor schools wherever possible. These interviews are not about the TUPE process (which is undertaken as a private matter between teaching staff and the local authority), rather they are early opportunities for future staff to get to know you and to be able to give feedback and ask questions. Staff should also have the ability to get in touch with you if they need to.

Visits to the predecessor school should be planned and carried out sensitively. It is important that the face of the Academy is seen at predecessor schools, but it should ideally be with the support and agreement of the predecessor school management.

### Relationships with feeder primary schools

It is also important that feeder primary school students and their parents and teachers are given an opportunity to talk to you about the Academy. When the principal is appointed, he or she should visit all feeder primary schools.

### After the principal designate is appointed – building the vision together

Involving and including are great ways to get staff, students and parents to share your enthusiasm and optimism for the Academy project from a very early stage.

Staff should be given the opportunity to contribute to the vision of the Academy, via focus groups, one-to-one interviews, questionnaires and online forums. Getting staff to contribute to the ethos of the future school will make it easier to get people to stand together behind the vision.

Students in both predecessor schools and feeder primary schools should also be given the chance to contribute to this process. Care should be taken, however, not to interrupt their schooling or to annoy their schools by asking for them to be taken out of class too frequently.

## Building relationships (cont.)



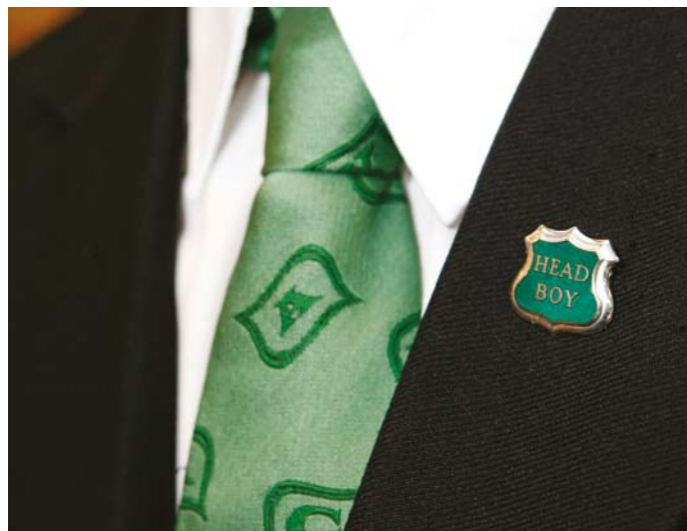
### Branding and uniform

Creating the visual identity and uniform for the new Academy can be a brilliant opportunity to involve staff, students and parents. It helps to instil pride and a sense of ownership in the new school, and makes sure everyone understands the aims of the Academy.

Many Academies have brought designers in to work with groups of children and staff to create a distinctive look and feel for their new school. Developing your brand together will help to make sure that students are keen to wear the uniform, and staff are proud of what the school looks like and stands for.

Consult the branding guide in this pack for further guidance.

“You’d be surprised what uniform choices children go for, given the choice. They tend to be very conservative.” Academy principal



## Overcoming tribalism

**One of the things that can happen when different groups of people are brought together to work is a phenomenon called ‘tribalism’. This is when each group sees the other as a threat or competitor. When you bring two or more schools together, the potential for tribalism is quite high.**

Children and young people are at a stage in their development where peer pressure is high, and tribalism is likely in any setting. Being in someone’s gang or the in-crowd can be very important – and that’s without having to mix with the kids from what might be a rival school.

Adults are can be pretty tribal in the workplace too. Especially when people feel threatened or unsettled, they can seek refuge in familiar groups.

### So how do you get from ‘them and us’ to ‘us’?

The irony is that tribal behaviour stems from a very human quality – the ability to identify closely with others and to form strong bonds of trust and loyalty. Academies that have negotiated mergers successfully have given staff and students channels to allow them to identify with one another, bringing them together at the earliest possible opportunity.

### Teachers

It can be valuable to get future colleagues away together on residential planning sessions for the new school. These can be opportunities to really share the big picture, and to get everyone to understand what the Academy is *for*, rather than what it is *against*.

Merger stress can also be caused because roles can be replicated, and people can be unsure of new organisational structures and reporting lines. Some Academy sponsors have produced handbooks which show clearly how the new structure will work, and how everyone might, or will, fit into it.

It can also help to spell out the benefits to staff of their new terms of employment. These might include opportunities for development and training, ability to innovate, or things like subsidised gym membership and access to music practice rooms.

## Overcoming tribalism (cont.)

### Non-teaching staff

It's important to include non-teaching staff in all communications too. Support staff are an important part of every school's community.

If and when they transfer to the new Academy, you will need them to be as fully engaged with your vision as everyone else – living and demonstrating your values in the way they work and deal with others. It is particularly important that your reception staff understand and completely get behind the image of your Academy you want them to portray.

### Students

A number of successful Academies have employed specialist development and events agencies to work to bring groups of students together. Programmes and events can get students to stop and think about their lives, futures and motivations – and indeed the way they behave around and communicate with others.

Events and get-togethers can be planned in the run-up to the opening of the new Academy to bring students together. And special events can be held for primary school leavers to get them used to the Academy and what it stands for.



## Communicating from the top

**The senior leadership team and Academy sponsors really need to lead by example. Everything they say and the way they behave needs to express the brand and vision of the Academy. The task of articulating a strong vision simply can't be delegated. It has to be lived and breathed by the principal, the Academy sponsor and their team.**

The content and style of communication need to embody everything the Academy will come to stand for, demonstrating unrelenting passion and commitment.

Senior leaders can set the tone from the earliest stage by demonstrating what kind of behaviours and standards will be expected in the new Academy. This could include the way you dress and speak. It could also be in the way that you are willing to hold drop-in sessions to answer questions, and by going door to door to meet prospective new parents.

You could also set the tone in the kind of language you choose to use. Will you have a principal or a CEO? Staff or colleagues? Students or pupils? Every choice signifies what the Academy will be.

### Case study

During its implementation phase, Corby Business Academy held all its meetings in executive conference suites, to give staff a clear indication of the modern, professional tone of the new school.

## Clear and consistent messages

**All communications to staff, students and parents need to focus on getting buy-in and understanding for the reasons for the creation of the Academy.**

As you create the Academy's brand, you will list the vision and values that drive everything it will do. You will also highlight the things that are going to make the Academy special and different. This is the foundation of your Academy's story, and you need to keep telling this story in a positive, optimistic, upbeat and understandable way.

A repeatable story or stories can be extremely valuable in helping people to understand what the Academy is about – and it will go a long way to prevent there being 'different camps' of stories.

Different parts of your story will matter more to different people, but you need to get the story out there, and keep getting the story out there.

You want cab drivers to be able to tell visitors to your area: "That new Academy, it's going to have a swimming pool and six tennis courts, and it's going to give all the kids free uniforms. It's going to be all about the environment so they're putting triple glazing in..."

And most importantly, you want to create a buzz among your prospective students, parents and teachers. Social networking sites should be full of: "OMG! Have you read the website? It's going to have two dance studios AND a fully equipped theatre!!!!"

You want your future teaching staff to think: "I'm looking forward to this change. I'm going to get a chance to teach in the ways I think will work best. I think it could be the best thing to happen to my career. I'm really excited."

## Managing resistance

**People feel very emotionally attached to schools, so it's natural that some parents won't understand the need to close down a school that they perhaps attended and have fond memories of. It's also understandable that children may not want to move from a school and teachers that they and their friends are comfortable and happy in.**

There are also parents and teachers who are ideologically opposed to Academies and will resist them very strongly.

The key to managing resistance is to know what people's arguments and fears are, and to have firm but understanding responses to them.

Wherever possible, you should address people or groups individually, rather than meeting them en masse and risk being heckled with a wide range of objections.



## Managing resistance (cont.)

### Meeting parent and student resistance with passion, professionalism and vision

Type of resistance	The argument	Your response
<b>Emotional resistance</b>	I went to that school and I loved it! Why shouldn't my children have that experience too?	There are some valuable things we can learn from the predecessor school, and we will be delighted to work with the team there to make sure they are not lost. What we want to do now is look to the future and open up many, many more opportunities for our young people.
	But I don't want to go to school with the kids from that school!	Moving schools is a big deal, we completely understand that. But we want you to be able to use state-of-the-art sport, science and computing facilities, and we want you to be able to take part in some amazing activities and trips so that you can have a real go at doing whatever you want to do in life.  <b>Rationale</b> Acknowledge that their emotion is valid, and then spell out the benefits of the new Academy in clear, everyday language.
<b>Pragmatic resistance</b>	But there aren't any buses to that part of town...	Thank you for highlighting this, we're in talks with the bus company at the moment, and if the Academy goes ahead, they are likely to schedule a new service. We'll keep you informed of how those talks go.
	But we can't afford to buy three new sets of uniforms...	Uniforms for all students will be free in the first year, and after that they're subsidised by the sponsor. We'll be involving the students in the design of the uniform, and we'll be making sure that it's smart and practical.

### Meeting parent and student resistance with passion, professionalism and vision

Type of resistance	The argument	Your response
<b>Pragmatic resistance (continued)</b>	How can we back this when we don't even know who the principal and teachers will be?	You're right to point out that we can't appoint anyone until we know that the Academy will definitely go ahead. However, if it does, we expect that most of the teachers from the predecessor school will transfer to the Academy. And we will be looking to appoint senior leaders who have huge amounts of experience and enthusiasm, and who are committed to improving the lives of young people.  <b>Rationale</b> This kind of resistance can actually be quite helpful in allowing you to identify reasons why planning permission, for example, may not be granted. Listen to it carefully and make sure that
<b>Ideological resistance</b>	Academies are undemocratic and wrong.	the people involved know you are taking action.  I understand that your views stem from a commitment to fairness and a desire for great education. In that respect we are united. I'm unlikely to be able to change your views, but what I will say is that Academies are fair, free of charge, open to children of all abilities, and are designed to give children the very best chances in life, regardless of their background. If you really don't agree with them, you don't have to send your child to one, but please don't spoil this chance for other families.  <b>Rationale</b> You are unlikely to be able to change this person's mind or win them over. What you can do, however,

## Managing resistance (cont.)

### Meeting parent and student resistance with passion, professionalism and vision

Type of resistance	The argument	Your response
<b>Inarticulate resistance</b>	Shouting, picketing, yelling and heckling.	<p>is show that you're listening.</p> <p>Issue a statement on your website and in the local press. Send letters, hand out fliers. You understand that parents/students feel very strongly about the future of their education, and you would urge all groups to come and speak to you individually because you are more than happy to listen to their objections and to give them any information they'd like.</p> <p>Never shout and scream back. For advice on how to manage public meetings, read the <i>Getting your community on board</i> guide.</p> <p><b>Rationale</b> You cannot be seen to be anything but reasonable and listening. If you offer to speak to people, and then hold open surgeries or small meetings with them, you may actually win some people over – but more importantly, you will project an image of fairness and professionalism to the parents and students who aren't shouting.</p>

### Meeting staff resistance with passion, professionalism and vision

Possible concerns	When to address them	Who addresses them
<b>What does this mean for me?</b>	<p>Teachers are going to start to have concerns about this as soon as they hear about any proposals for an Academy. Don't wait for TUPE to address their fears or anger. From brokerage stage onwards, make contact and keep contact levels high.</p> <p>It is important that teaching staff and senior leaders at the predecessor school(s) are given a 'heads up' over what is about to happen, and given regular updates about what is happening with the project.</p> <p>Otherwise, their only source of information will be their union and the press – a situation which could lead to anger, frustration and campaigning against the proposals.</p>	<p>At the expression of interest phase, there will not be a principal designate. There may only be project managers, the Academy sponsor and the local authority.</p> <p>However, by starting to communicate at this point, you will be doing everything you can to offset problems with resistant staff.</p> <p>Therefore, in the period before a principal designate is appointed, a member of the project management team or the Academy sponsor should take responsibility for starting a continuous dialogue with staff.</p>
<b>I don't want things to change.</b>	As above	As above

## Managing resistance (cont.)

How to address them – suggestions	Channels
<p>Make sure that teachers have an opportunity to speak to you and ask questions, and that they are given all available literature – including the DCSF’s leaflet on <i>Working in Academies</i>, and the leaflet and DVD explaining what Academies are.</p> <p>Meet with teaching staff of the predecessor school(s) regularly.</p> <p>Spell out the benefits of working at the Academy – for example, that they’ll be able to work in different ways and push their own careers further.</p> <p>Have a crib sheet prepared to answer all questions. The <i>Working with the media</i> guide in this pack gives information on how to prepare this.</p> <p>Keep as positive, calm and level-headed as possible. It’s normal that people should get angry and defensive if they fear for their jobs. You should remain calm and professional.</p> <p>At the same time as making expectations really clear, also spell out the benefits that working at the Academy will bring – increased opportunities to train and teach differently, improve children’s lives, any financial incentives the role might offer, cheap/free membership of on-site gym or swimming pool, etc.</p>	<p>Face-to-face/leaflets and brochures/website and/or blog.</p> <p>Contract and induction pack – use this opportunity to further spell out what your Academy stands for, and what working there will be like.</p> <p><b>Meetings and workshops</b> DVDs – words aren’t always enough, sometimes you need to show staff how things are going to be. You can of course use the DVD included in this pack, but you may also want to make your own – either with computer generated images of how the new Academy will look, or showing how you want teaching to be.</p> <p><b>Meetings with Academy sponsor</b> YOU – face-to-face contact is hugely important, and in the early days of an Academy’s life, you are probably the only visible facet of the Academy’s brand – which means you need to live and breathe the brand in the frequency and manner that you communicate.</p> <p>As above.</p>

### Meeting staff resistance with passion, professionalism and vision (cont.)

Possible concerns	When to address them	Who addresses them
<b>I fundamentally disagree with Academies.</b>	As above	As above
<b>I don’t want to work until 8pm running clubs and out of school activities...</b>	As above	As above
<b>I’m worried about working in a different structure with staff from a different school</b>	This should be addressed on an on-going basis. You need to make it crystal clear what roles and responsibilities in the Academy are going to be, and how individuals fit into the overall structure.	This should initially be handled by the Academy sponsor, and then by the principal.

## Managing resistance (cont.)

How to address them – suggestions	Channels
<p>There will be some people who will be unshakeable in their belief that Academies are wrong. Give these people as much information as you can.</p> <p>At the end of the day, they do not have to transfer over to the Academy.</p> <p>Let them know that you'd prefer that they did, because you think the students will benefit from their expertise and experience – but if it's a matter of conscience, then it's entirely up to them.</p>	<p>It's important to deal face-to-face with teachers who may stridently oppose the Academy.</p> <p>Try to meet individuals singly, rather than in a group (when you may be intimidated or shouted down) – and get them to engage in dialogue that leaves you with a clear understanding of how the teacher feels, and the teacher with factual information about the proposed Academy.</p> <p>Share your optimism, as well as case studies and the standard description of what an Academy is with them.</p>
<p>Share any information you have on financial incentives that will be offered to teachers who run clubs. For example, some Academies award extra pay for teachers who do this.</p>	
<p>In the early days you may not have a lot of information to share, but as soon as implementation kicks in, you need to keep your potential teaching staff up to speed with the new structure.</p>	<p>Regular face-to-face briefings</p> <p>Website/blog</p>

## Preparing for the first day

**The opening of the Academy is cause for celebration. After you and your community have gone through the rigours of consultation and implementation, the day of opening finally arrives. It will present huge opportunities for communicating with the press. But your most important audiences – your staff, students and parents – will finally get to experience what it has all been about.**

The opening of your Academy is a great opportunity to communicate the brand vision and values you have been talking about and involving people in for so long. Most Academies don't open in their new buildings, so it's really important that you set the tone for how school is now going to be – even if for the time being, it's happening on the premises of the predecessor school.

**You may want to consider:**

- Commissioning temporary banners and signage, so that the new Academy's fresh branding is present and obvious.
- Redesigning or reconfiguring the reception area so that it is branded, and everyone who enters the building is immediately given the impression that things have changed.
- A fashion show of the new school uniform – to celebrate and have fun, but also to demonstrate the standards of dress and presentation you expect.
- A party for staff, students and parents in the run-up to the opening.
- Welcome packs for students and parents.
- Briefing staff on new dress codes – encourage staff to meet children on the first day in appropriate clean, smart clothing, clean shaven, with clean, tidy hair.
- Planning your first assembly. Is there one message you want everyone present to take away with them? What is it? What is your "Yes we can!"?

## Preparing for the first day (cont.)

These suggestions all potentially contain stories that would be interesting to the media and the wider community. But your most important audiences are your parents, students and staff, and their communication needs should always be considered first.

And when your new buildings finally open, you will have another opportunity to celebrate, reinforcing your brand and messaging.

### Case study

Q3 Academy held a 'party in the park' before they opened their doors for the first time. Staff, parents and students – as well as the wider community – had the opportunity to come together and have fun before the school even opened.

## After the Academy has opened

Communication with your internal audiences should become a way of life, part of regular patterns and routines.

You need to establish an interlinked network of briefings, meetings, assemblies and messaging to ensure that everyone knows what is happening in the school, when, how and why.

Every member of the Academy's internal community should know where they can go to get information, and how they can contribute ideas and suggestions.

Your website will be an important channel, as will meetings, newsletters and message boards. Some Academies have even set up computerised SMS systems so that they can quickly text important messages to all of their parents.

Communications will also be key to your Academy celebrating and recognising success. For example, something as small as a sticker for a job well done can be used to communicate achievement and effort, sending out signals that reinforce the values and vision that drive your school.

And when your internal audience is well informed, and buzzing with feel-good news about achievement and interesting activities, they will spread that positivity into the wider community.

# Sample communications schedule for staff, students and parents

This example is necessarily generic and top line. It gives an idea of the channels and activities you may find helpful along the timeline of the opening of an Academy. Your own schedule will almost certainly need to contain much more specific detail.

## Sample communications schedule

Phase on timeline	Who is responsible?	Channels and activities	Notes	
<b>Brokerage</b>	Project manager, Academy sponsor, or external agency	<p>Read this pack thoroughly.</p> <p>Make contact with staff at predecessor school. Conduct one-to-one interviews.</p>	<p>Make contact with feeder primary schools and parents in the community.</p> <p>Make your face known. Start dialogues, listen to people.</p>	<p>Make sure you are using language that is appropriate to your audience.</p>
<b>Feasibility, including consultation</b>	As above	<p>Set up a website, or establish web presence, to explain the vision and values of the school, and to give more information about the Academy sponsor. As time goes on, this website should be regularly updated.</p> <p>Send the leaflets contained in this pack to all parents, feeder primary schools, youth groups, social services, etc.</p> <p>Open a drop-in clinic so that people can talk to you about their concerns.</p> <p>Further engage with students and staff in the predecessor school.</p>	<p>Prepare for meetings. Use the DVD contained in this pack to set the scene.</p> <p>Consider using social network sites such as YouTube, Twitter, Bebo or Facebook to spread your message. Monitor these sites to see what your internal audience is saying.</p>	<p>Let your enthusiasm and positivity shine through your communications – but be honest. No-one likes spin.</p> <p>Don't be afraid to use your imagination.</p> <p>John Major style 'soap box' communications could be more sensitive than expensive, slick 'product launch' style communications.</p>
<b>Implementation</b>	The principal	<p>The campaign of engaging students, staff and parents fully takes off.</p> <p>Prepare DVDs/presentations about the teaching standards you want to instil.</p> <p>Engage with the predecessor school, its staff and headteacher.</p> <p>Canvas the opinions of students and staff; create forums for them to communicate with you.</p>	<p>Involve students and staff in creating the visual identity and uniform of their new school.</p> <p>Stage workshops, meetings and bonding activities.</p> <p>Keep your website/blog updated.</p> <p>Work with the architect to incorporate targeted messaging into the fabric of the new school.</p> <p>Respond to parents who write to you or email you. Make yourself available to them.</p>	
<b>Opening</b>	The principal	<p>Set up launch activities.</p> <p>Set up internal mechanisms of communication.</p>	<p>Set up forums where ideas and suggestions can be made.</p> <p>Celebrate successes and achievements with your entire internal community.</p>	<p>All of your communications should grow out of and build understanding of your brand.</p>



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