South Carolina Organization of Rural Schools (SCORS):
Strategic Communications Plan

The purpose of this document is to outline the goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics for the lobbying efforts on behalf of rural schools in South Carolina as well as establish an internal communications structure to streamline and facilitate vertical and horizontal communication within the organization.

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Background & Situation

The purpose of this section is to establish the historical background of the education finance system in South Carolina. It also serves to contextualize the *Abbeville v. South Carolina* court case and outline the lack of effective changes following the decision.

Introduction

"On a steamy August day in 1993, the Pee Dee Education Center held its monthly meeting in the long, narrow board room on the second floor of the building located on Dargan Street in downtown Florence. On that day, eighteen of the nineteen member superintendents voted to sue the state of South Carolina. As they took this action, the superintendents were not aware they were becoming a part of a state-by-state national movement, a movement that would challenge state governments to provide a higher level of education for each state's poorest students. [This national movement was largely precipitated by the *Serrano v. Priest* court case in California – the first lawsuit of its kind to reach the State Supreme Court. In 1968, school districts in California sued the state for the unequal tax burdens placed on their districts compared to wealthy districts in order to provide the funding necessary to operate their schools. The case eventually reached the California Supreme Court, where the plaintiffs contended that the state had violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. The State Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiff districts.] The South Carolinians only knew they were struggling to offer students in their districts the kind of education the students needed to break out of the cycle of poverty in which most of them were trapped."[1]

The *Abbeville v. South Carolina* court case (referred to hereinafter as *Abbeville)* lasted for 21 years, with a seminal SC Supreme Court decision rendered in favor of the plaintiff districts in 2014. However, the Supreme Court did not establish a timeline by which the General Assembly should amend the current funding system. Therefore, despite the ruling being handed down nearly three years ago, the funding system remains largely unchanged, and the poor, rural districts of South Carolina continue to struggle.

Situation

Although education has been envisioned as the great equalizer, this promise has been more myth than reality for the communities of rural South Carolina. Today, the achievement gap between the poor and the economically advantaged in South Carolina is almost twice as large as the achievement gap between Black and White students. These differences undoubtedly contribute to the increasing stratification of who attends and graduates from college, limitations on economic and social mobility, and the growing gap between rich and poor.

Given the strong correlation between educational success and economic disadvantage, one might expect education policy and funding to focus on ways to overcome the effects of poverty on children. However, the South Carolina General Assembly – despite pressure from the court following the *Abbeville* decision – has largely ignored the problems that exist in our poorest school districts. These districts face deteriorating and dilapidated buildings, deficient resources,

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[1] Truitt, T. (2009). *Going up the river of shame*. Authorhouse: Bloomington, IN. (p. xi)

difficulty in recruiting/retaining teachers, and budgets stretched so thin that the slightest hindrance could result in school closings. Therefore, the school districts must come together once again to apply pressure to the elected representatives of South Carolina to remediate the shortcomings of a broken education finance system. **The South Carolina Organization of Rural Schools (SCORS) was created in response to this need.**

Mission

It is the mission of the South Carolina Organization of Rural Schools (SCORS) to promote equal opportunity for quality education for all students in every school and community in South Carolina.

In addition to its mission, SCORS believes the following:
- Young people are South Carolina's greatest natural resource.
- All students have potential, and all students can learn.
- All students are entitled to a quality education no matter their socioeconomic status or zip code.
- A strong commitment by South Carolina is necessary to ensure excellence in rural schools.
- Cooperation between private and public sectors is essential in addressing the needs of rural schools.
- Rural schools are unique and will produce many of our future leaders – as they have in the past.
- Preserving the inherent strengths of rural and the small-town way of life is critical to the well-being of our country.

SCORS is the major organization representing and promoting the interests of rural schools in South Carolina.

Strategic Plan

The purpose of this section is to outline the goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics that SCORS will use to accomplish its mission as an organization: "…to promote equal opportunity for quality education for all students in every school and community in South Carolina."

Goals

The overarching goal of SCORS is to help rural school districts in South Carolina is to provide their students with a 21st century educational experience. To accomplish this goal, SCORS intends to:

- Inform the legislature, administration, and other groups or agencies at the state level of the concerns, needs and conditions in the rural schools in South Carolina.
- Effectuate a change in the education funding system that provides more funding for schools with higher percentages of students in poverty.
- Decrease the achievement gap between poor and economically advantaged students and school districts in South Carolina.

Objectives

The objectives associated with the overarching goals of SCORS address two different types of communication – internal and external.

Internal Objectives

The internal objectives for SCORS are as follows:

- Streamline internal communication (i.e. create efficient ways to disseminate information to SCORS members)
- Facilitate effective horizontal and vertical communication
- Establish uniformity in the 'marketing pitch' for SCORS (i.e. telling other people, organizations why SCORS exists, what it plans to accomplish, and how)

External Objectives

The external objectives address various target audiences according to their awareness of the plight of the poor, rural school districts in the state. This variance in awareness of school funding issues in SC creates a number of subgroups within our target audience:

- **Latent Public:** This group is aware of the challenges of school funding but is not aware of the *Abbeville* case, nor the situation in which the rural schools in SC find themselves:
  - This public requires an *awareness objective,* whereby we provide them with information regarding the *Abbeville* case and how they can actively participate in becoming part of the change to the SC education system.

- **Aware Public:** This group is aware of the plight of rural schools in SC and the *Abbeville* case but does not actively participate in helping facilitate the needed change:
    - This public requires an *acceptance objective,* whereby SCORS convinces them that this issue directly or indirectly affects them.
- **Active Public:** This group is aware of the *Abbeville* case and actively participates in helping create the changes that SCORS believes are necessary:
    - This public requires an *action objective,* whereby we ask for their support and collaboration.

Strategies

To accomplish our internal communications objectives, engage the various subgroups within our external target audience, and accomplish each associated objective, SCORS will utilize the following strategies:

Internal Strategies

- Create and maintain platforms to facilitate communication among SCORS members
- Provide consistent communication and updates regarding the relevant activities of member districts and SCORS' staff
- Outline and distribute a clear strategy for accomplishing the goals of SCORS
- Conduct research and publish findings that demonstrate the struggles of rural school districts
    - Use the research as the basis for constructing the arguments to present before lawmakers as well as disseminating information to the general public

External Strategies

- Provide the target audience with information about education funding in South Carolina and how rural schools are affected by the current funding system.
- Encourage and create ways in which the target audience can become active participants in changing the education funding system in SC.
- Generate media attention and coverage of SCORS activities as well as the legislative agenda of the General Assembly.
- Garner and demonstrate public support/awareness of SCORS through an online engagement campaign, including social media, email, and an online survey.
- Apply pressure to the SC House to start talking about changing the education funding mechanisms.
- Propose and finalize collaborative partnerships with other state, regional, and local organizations whose missions align with that of SCORS.

Tactics

The tactics we will implement derive directly from our strategies. They are the means by which we accomplish each strategy:

Internal Tactics

1. Create a public blog on the SCORS website that provides updates on relevant happenings in member districts as well as the activities of SCORS administrators
2. Generate an online message board accessible by SCORS members only where information, ideas, and questions can be posted.
3. Create a section for academic research on the SCORS website
    a. Populate the research section with information from peer-reviewed, academic research on subjects relevant to SCORS
4. Draft and distribute a document containing external communication strategies, messaging, and best practices to SCORS members

External Tactics

1. Create online surveys to gauge and quantify public support of the need to amend the education funding system in South Carolina:
    a. Use change.org as a vehicle for creating and disseminating the survey
2. Distribute digital literature to various special interest groups, non-profits, and education-related organizations using a mass-email marketing service (e.g. mailchimp, constantcontact, etc.) to solicit their public endorsement and/or collaborative partnership:
    a. Basic information about SCORS (for **latent** publics)
    b. Research findings (for all publics)
    c. Link to SCORS website (for all publics)
    d. Contact information
3. Rally local and regional press around the activities of SCORS using one-pagers, press releases, and direct emails.
    1. Send out a press release prior to meetings with SC House/Senate members
4. Promote the activities of SCORS using social media
5. Schedule meetings with SC lawmakers and relevant House/Senate committees to present the following information:
    a. Problems/challenges of rural school districts, including:
        - Summative data conveying the challenges the districts face holistically
        - Anecdotal evidence of the need for additional funding
    b. Remedial actions to address those problems/challenges
   c. Proposal(s) for changes to the education funding system

Needs Assessment

This purpose of this section is to outline what is needed in order to accomplish the aforementioned tactics; it includes the deliverable, resources needed, and responsible party for each tactic:

Tactics	Needs		Responsible Party
Internal	Deliverables	1. Public blog on the SCORS website 2. Online message board accessible by SCORS members 3. Academic research section on the SCORS website 4. Communication strategies document	TBD
	Resources	TBD	TBD
External	Deliverables	1. Digital literature (one-pagers) 2. Communication with local, and regional press 3. Social media presence 4. Meetings with SC lawmakers and relevant House/Senate committees 5. Summative data conveying the challenges the districts face holistically 6. Anecdotal evidence of the need for additional funding 7. Proposal(s) for changes to the education funding system	TBD
	Resources	TBD	TBD

Strategic Communication

The most vital component of this communications plan exists not in our networking capabilities or our ideas, but in our messaging. How we pitch our ideas to the people and organizations that would help carry them out is more important than the ideas themselves. In crafting our message, we must always focus on communicating our **WHY** first, then follow that with WHAT and HOW we do it. The following idea and diagram was proposed by Simon Sinek and explains why certain organizations/people are more successful at communicating their message than others. Sinek calls it the 'Golden Circle'[2].
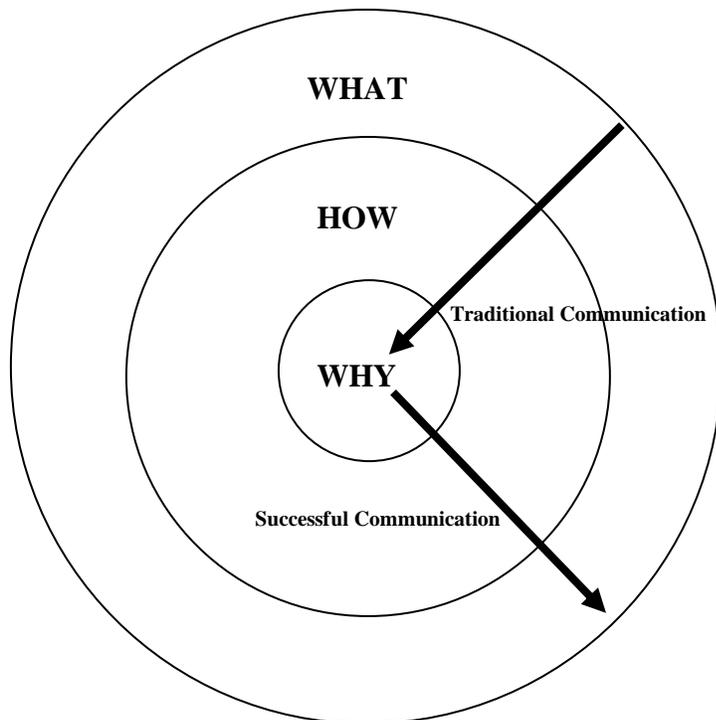
Sinek proposes that traditional marketing and communication strategy is backwards; most marketing and communication about an organization starts with what they do; sometimes, they explain why they do it; but organizations rarely address why they do it. He explains that every person and organization in the world knows what they do, so they naturally move from the information that is most clear – the "WHAT" – to the information that is the fuzziest – the "WHY".

However, Sinek claims this strategy is backwards and actually contradicts everything that we know about human psychology and decision-making. Leaders in industry and social movements have learned to communicate in the opposite direction. These leaders all "think, act, and communicate in the same way" (Sinek). He uses Apple as an example of a company that communicates from the inside-out; they start with WHY and move towards WHAT.

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[2] Sinek, S. [TedX Puget Sound]. (2009, September). *How great leaders inspire action.* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action

Sinek says that if Apple were to craft a traditional marketing message, it would sound like this:

> "We make great computers. They're beautifully designed, simple to use, and user-friendly. Want to buy one?"

This is how Apple actually markets their products:

> "Everything we do – we believe in challenging the status quo. We believe in thinking differently. The way we challenge the status quo is by making our products beautifully designed, simple to use, and user-friendly. We just happen to make great computers. Want to buy one?"

By simply changing the order in which we present information, we can drastically change the impact of our messaging. "People don't buy what you do; they buy why you do it" (Sinek). Sinek explains that this style of communication – telling people what you BELIEVE first and what you DO later – is what drives organizations and people to be leaders in their respective fields. He concludes *You don't want to market your organization to people who need what you have; you market your organization to people who believe what you believe."*

This style of communication is the exact model by which SCORS needs to craft its messaging. If we can get organizations involved that believe in the same things we do, the possibilities to spread our mission grow exponentially. We must pay attention to the "why" as we communicate with potential partner organizations in our efforts to change the education system in South Carolina.