



MAKE THE CASE  
**EMPOWERING,  
RIGOROUS CONTENT**

# Curriculum and instructional materials that are culturally responsive and aligned with grade-level standards are crucial to students' learning and academic trajectory.

Students are more engaged when they see people like themselves in school materials.<sup>1</sup>

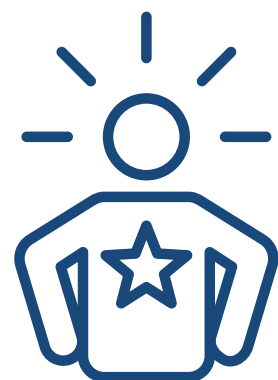
Access to rigorous, advanced coursework is essential to equip students with 21st-century skills like creativity, critical thinking, and technological literacy.<sup>5</sup>



Increased engagement from representation leads to improved academic outcomes like **sharper critical thinking skills and increases in test scores**,<sup>2</sup> as well as **higher rates of course completion, graduation, and school attendance**.<sup>3</sup>



A **curriculum that is comprehensive, aligned to high standards, and appropriately rigorous can improve learning**, especially for students with less-effective teachers, who are often concentrated in high-need schools and assigned to students of color.



Students reap **many benefits from a representative curriculum**, such as improved self-esteem, stronger sense of belonging, socioemotional well-being, empathy, and a greater appreciation for cultural differences.<sup>4</sup>



**Enrollment in advanced coursework**—such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs in high school—can **improve test scores, as well as higher-education readiness and success**.<sup>8</sup>

Curriculum and instructional materials are not representative of all students' lives and community experiences. Students — especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds — are also not given the opportunities to succeed in rigorous educational environments.

Most curricular materials do not allow students of color to see themselves represented in the books they read in school. In a study of 300 books:

**30%**

of the books feature diverse characters that are Black, Asian, Latino, Native American, Middle Eastern, or mixed race.<sup>9</sup>



of these 30% of books:



**1 in 2**

includes a complex central character of color<sup>10</sup>



**1 in 3**

represents groups and cultures in a complex way<sup>11</sup>



**1 in 6**

discuss historical/social topics in complex way<sup>12</sup>

Many of the books that honestly represent people, cultures, and topics are at risk of being banned. From July 2021 to June 2022, PEN America's Index of School Book Bans listed **2,532** instances of individual books being banned.<sup>13</sup>

## Students of color and students in high-poverty schools are underrepresented in advanced courses.

**225,000**

Black and Latino students are under-identified for AP courses they should otherwise have access to while in high school.<sup>14</sup>

**43,000** Black students  
**60,000** Latino students

Number of additional students who would be enrolled in 8th grade algebra courses if Black and Latino students had a fair opportunity to participate in these courses in the U.S.<sup>15</sup>

Making the case for improving access to **Empowering, Rigorous Content** hinges on effectively communicating its importance, urgency, and connection to your community.

## 3 Key Elements of Effective Messaging



Keep it simple.



Know your audience.



Make an emotional connection.

# 3 Key Elements of Effective Messaging

## Know your audience.

### Who is your audience?

- District leaders and policymakers?
- School board members?
- Other advocates?
- Parents, students, families?

### What publications do they read? What media do they consume?

- Education Week?
- Boston Herald?
- Dallas Morning News?
- TikTok? Twitter/X?

### What does your audience care about?

- Start with what they value.
- Connect their values with your advocacy message.

## Make an emotional connection.

### Don't rely on statistics to make your point.

"Show, don't tell" how this current issue (or your proposed policy solution) impacts students.

- Create an emotional response — make it clear why we all need to care!
- Use real stories about students, and highlight the urgency of addressing inequities.

### Tell your personal story.

- Why do you care about this issue? Did you have a similar experience in school?
- How does this impact you as a parent, advocate, or community member?
- Ultimately, who are the people on the ground being affected, and how can you lift up those voices and stories and move people to act?

## Keep it simple.

### Your messages need to be short.

- Describe your advocacy points in 10 words or less.
- Make your messages quotable and easy to remember.
- Think of what you would say in a tweet.

### Avoid jargon and education speak.

# Message Triangle Fast Facts

- Based on the principle that it is easier to visualize an image than it is to memorize a lot of words.
- Structured specifically for **social change and advocacy messages**: provides a structure to frame issues in a way that resonates with people's core values, makes the message personal, and can be tailored to a specific audience.
- Helps identify and home in on **1 core message and 3 supporting, key messages** that are compelling, credible, and concise.
- Offers structural focus but is not intended as a script.

**Your core message is the North Star message you are trying to get across.**

**Your 3 key messages should move your audience toward your objective.**



# Creating a Message Triangle to Tell Your District's Story



## Review Key Questions

Review the Alliance for Resource Equity's Key Questions on Empowering, Rigorous Content:

- **Key Question 4.1:** Does each student have access to a high-quality and culturally relevant curriculum and instructional materials?
- **Key Question 4.2:** Is each student enrolled in courses that will set them up for success in college and a meaningful career, and do they have equal access to advanced courses?
- **Key Question 4.3:** Does each student have access to arts and enrichment opportunities beyond core content?

## Identify your "North Star" or Core Message

Determine what you want to communicate. What is the underlying vision?

- Consider reiterating the Alliance for Resource Equity's vision:

Each student has access to a high-quality and culturally relevant curriculum, materials, coursework, and class offerings to meet their needs, so all students can reach high standards and thrive.

## Support Messages With Data

Use available data to form 2 messages that outline the problem and its impact or relevance.

- See Appendix A for list of data metrics.
- Prepare a powerful data metric, soundbite, and narrative for your key messages.

## Create a Call to Action

The last key message should prompt people to act.

- What action are you requesting from your district?
- What is the most immediate next step?
- What do you want your audience to do?



# Forming Key Messages 101

1

**Start by analyzing metrics (Appendix A) to help answer the key question in the dimension.**

For instance, looking at the % of students enrolled/passing Algebra I in 8th grade by school poverty, by % students of color (or by individual racial/ethnic subgroup) could help determine the answer to Key Question 4.2: “Is each student enrolled in courses that will set them up for success in college and a meaningful career, and do they have equal access to advanced courses?”

2

**Consider the available data points:**

What story do they tell? How directly do they speak to the issue?

Let’s suppose we learn that 21% of students of color in the district are enrolled in Algebra I, versus 46% of White students. Suppose we also learn that Algebra I isn’t offered at every middle school in the district. **We can use these data points to inform our key messages.**

3

**Solidify the message.**

- **Key Message 1 identifies the issue:** “Despite being academically ready, many students of color do not have the same access to rigorous STEM classes as their White peers.”
- **Key Message 2 explains why this matters:** “Enrollment in advanced coursework improves academic success and equips students with 21st-century skills.”
- **Key Message 3 advances a call to action:** “Our district must examine why access to advanced courses is limited for students of color, instead of assuming that the main driver is prior academic performance.”

4

**Use additional elements to support your key messages. For Key Message 1, this could look like:**

- **An illustrative data metric:** “More than twice as many White 8th-graders as 8th grade students of color are enrolled in Algebra I (46% vs. 21%), and prior student performance does not fully explain this disparity in enrollment.”
- **A punchy soundbite to use for an interview:** “It’s harmful and inaccurate to say that 8th-grade students of color are not enrolled in Algebra I because they are not academically ready.”
- **A powerful narrative element:** Highlight other factors that limit access to advanced coursework in your district, such as the course not being offered at all schools, or course assignment practices that deter students who have met the requirements from enrolling.

# District X Example

## Key Message 1

Despite being academically ready, many students of color lack the same access to rigorous STEM classes as their White peers.



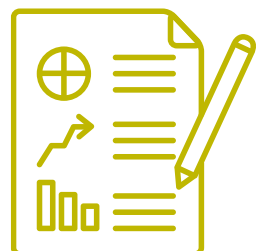
**DATA METRIC:** More than twice the proportion of White 8th-graders as 8th grade students of color is enrolled in Algebra I (46% vs. 21%), and prior student performance does not fully explain this disparity.



**SOUNDBITE:** “It’s harmful and inaccurate to say that 8th-grade students of color are not enrolled in Algebra I because they are not academically ready.”



**NARRATIVE:** Share other factors that limit access to advanced coursework in your district, such as the course not being offered at all schools, or course assignment practices that deter students who have met the requirements from enrolling.



**DATA METRIC:** Research suggests that up to three times the number of students are ready for advanced coursework as are actually enrolled in advanced classes.



**SOUNDBITE:** “When enrollment opportunities are equitable, students and families have information about the benefits of advanced coursework, and students feel like they belong in advanced classes and can thrive.”



**NARRATIVE:** Ask the district to analyze additional barriers that may be at play.

## Key Message 2

Enrollment in advanced coursework improves academic success and equips students with 21st-century skills.

**DATA METRIC:** Studies indicate that enrollment in advanced coursework — such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs in high school — can improve test scores, as well as support higher-education readiness and success. Algebra I is often a prerequisite for many of these higher-level STEM courses.



**SOUNDBITE:** “Math and science are for everyone. But unfortunately, many students, especially Black and Latino students, don’t receive that message or the resources needed to make it a reality.”



**NARRATIVE:** Share how having access to Algebra I and/or other middle school STEM classes has impacted your student’s “STEM identity.”



## Core Message (“North Star”)

Each student has access to a high-quality and culturally relevant curriculum, materials, coursework, and class offerings designed to meet their needs, so all students can reach high standards and thrive.

## Key Message 3

Our district must examine why access to advanced courses is limited for students of color, instead of assuming that the main driver is prior academic performance.

# Message Triangle Checklist

Does your message triangle do ALL of the following?



## **Align with the shared values of your audience?**

- Shared values allow the conversation to start from a place of agreement.
- This requires knowing your audience first!



## **Define the impact?**

- Do your supporting facts (data metrics, narratives, soundbites) explain how those shared values are being undermined? Clearly outlining the consequences and inequities helps convey a sense of urgency without exaggerating the problem.



## **Asset-frame the issue?**

- Define the scope of the issue in terms of systems and structures, not students, and avoid defining marginalized communities in deficit-based language.



## **Highlight the benefits?**

- After establishing the issue/problem, explain how your solution SUPPORTS your shared values. Explicitly stating the value helps reaffirm tangible outputs your stakeholder cares about.



## **Include a call to action?**

- A positive vision helps your audience realize what's possible and recognize the role they play in sparking the change.

# Dismantling Opposition and Avoiding Traps

- **Bad information:** Don't repeat negative, incorrect, or inflammatory language. Instead, find a positive spin in your response and/or calmly correct misinformation before moving to your positive response.
- **Speculation:** Instead of trying to predict the future, reiterate your key message and the information you know.
- **Irrelevant Question:** Use a bridging statement to connect back to your key message.



Question/concern that ...

- Distracts from key issue
- Introduces dangerous line of opposition
- Expresses different mission/goal

## BRIDGING STATEMENT

Your response hits on your key messages in service of core "North Star" message

- “I find the more important issue to be...”
- “Let me emphasize again...”
- “What matters most in this situation is this: ...”
- “What I’ve said comes down to this...”
- “And that reminds me...”
- “Here’s the real problem...”
- “I think it would be more accurate (or correct) to say...”
- “It all boils down to this...”
- “While \_\_\_ is important, it’s also important to remember that...”
- “Before we leave this subject, I need to add...”



Question/concern that ...

- Distracts from key issue
- Introduces dangerous line of opposition
- Expresses different mission/goal

## BRIDGING STATEMENT

Your response hits on your key messages in service of core  
"North Star" message

Not all students are ready for advanced coursework. We can't just throw a bunch of students who aren't ready in an advanced class — that is a disservice to them.

I want to clarify that that is seldom actually the case because...

Many more students are ready for advanced coursework than most schools think! Research suggests that up to three times as many students are ready for advanced coursework as are actually enrolled in advanced classes. When enrollment opportunities are equitable, students and families have information about the benefits of advanced coursework, and students feel like they belong in advanced classes and they can thrive.

Even if exam fees and textbooks act as a barrier to get more students taking things like the AP test, or expanding access to more students, we don't want to allocate new strains of money.

When determining how to allocate limited resources, we need to remember that...

Currently, students are not equitably prepared for their postsecondary futures and, in many states, most are not meeting grade-level expectations. To prepare more students for more postsecondary pathways and jobs of the future, states and districts must ensure that more students are connected to rigorous and advanced coursework opportunities.

Curricular materials shouldn't be an avenue to introduce controversial topics in society. If we continue down this road any further, it becomes (or already is) propaganda.

If we take a broader perspective, it becomes clear that...

Teaching truthful, nuanced history is paramount to ensure that our students have a complete picture of our country's complicated history, including the things, past and present, that we have not gotten right. Additionally, students need to be taught to recognize racism, interact with people who are different from them, and learn empathy. By not teaching students the imperfect history of our country, we are failing to prepare them to be problem-solvers and effective citizens in a multicultural society.

# FAQ's

## Why does this sample message triangle work?

- All key messages connect to one another.
- Each key message includes a data metric, soundbite, and narrative element.
- Each element is concise and uses asset-framing.
- Each key message speaks directly to the core message in center of triangle.

## What if we don't have access to the information we need for the data metrics?

- Ask your district to provide the data to you.
- Use this message triangle to push for better data transparency.
- In the meantime, rely on national data trends instead.

## What makes for an effective narrative element?

- The best story to share is your own!
- But don't get bogged down by the details. Ask yourself what you are trying to communicate, what emotions you want to evoke, and why this specific issue matters to you.

## What makes for a compelling soundbite?

- Define your objectives — what do you want others to remember?
- Be concise (aim for 10 seconds or less), clear (avoid jargon, acronyms, technical terms), and catchy (consider using a quick story, anecdote, metaphor, etc., to help illustrate your point.)
- Practice! The best soundbites are authentic but not off the cuff.

## What do you mean by asset framing? How do I do that?

- Data doesn't frame itself...and is susceptible to misinterpretation.
- This misinterpretation is especially harmful to historically marginalized communities.
- Key messages should highlight the systems and structures within your district that act as barriers to equitable opportunities and outcomes. This "structure-not-student" approach is known as asset-framing.
- Asset-framing places the responsibility on leaders and systems, emphasizing system-level action and does not blame or fault students.

## How do I use this message triangle?

- Make it the backbone of your messaging efforts.
- Use it to practice, practice, practice articulating the issue.
- Use it to stay focused on key points, especially when the opposition tries to throw you off course.
- Use it alongside the Alliance for Resource Equity diagnostic tool to more thoroughly assess the state of empowering, rigorous content in your district, as well as in combination with the guidebooks to dig deeper into root causes and potential actions.

## What is the Alliance for Resource Equity? How do I learn more?

- The Alliance for Resource Equity is a partnership between EdTrust and Education Resource Strategies.
- We focus on 10 key dimensions of resource equity — providing tools and resources to help advocates and districts work together to consider how resources (people, time, and money) are spent and distributed.
- Learn more at [www.educationresourceequity.org](http://www.educationresourceequity.org)

# Endnotes

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Key Question	Data Metric	Data Notes	Data Source
<p><b>Key Question 4.1</b> Does each student have access to a high-quality and culturally relevant curriculum and instructional materials?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School-level scatterplot that compares % of curricula that meets EdReports' standards (x-axis) by % students from low-income backgrounds (y-axis)</li> <li>School-level scatterplot that compares % of curricula that meets EdReports' standards (x-axis) by % of students of color (y-axis)</li> <li>Stacked barchart of % of curricula that meets EdReports' standards by school type.</li> </ul>	<p>Use district website and general knowledge to determine school curricula. Then look up review by EdReports, an external review site that evaluates the most used ELA, math and science curricula. Use Urban Institute/NCES to get student demographic data.</p>	<p><a href="#">EdReports</a></p>
<p><b>Key Question 4.2</b> Is each student enrolled in courses that will set them up for success in college and a meaningful career, and do they have equal access to advanced courses?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>% of students enrolled/passing Algebra I in 8th grade, disaggregated by school poverty status.</li> <li>% of students enrolled/passing Algebra I in 8th grade, disaggregated by student racial/ethnic demographics.</li> </ul>	<p>Urban Institute/NCES provides advanced coursework enrollment by race/ethnicity only. Check state DOE report cards to see if your state reports these metrics by Title I status or % of students from low-income backgrounds.</p>	<p><a href="#">Urban Institute/NCES</a> and State DOE District Report Card</p>
	<p>% of students enrolled in 1 or more AP classes or passed 1 or more AP exams by school poverty level, by % students of color (or by individual racial/ethnic subgroups)</p>		
	<p>% of students in dual enrollment or IB classes by school poverty level, by % students of color (or by individual racial/ethnic subgroup)</p>		
	<p>Number of AP courses and advanced math courses offered by school (HS-level only)</p>		
<p><b>Key Question 4.3</b> Does each student have access to arts and enrichment opportunities beyond core content?</p>	<p>% of students enrolled in art courses by school poverty level and by % students of color (or by individual racial/ethnic subgroup)</p>	<p>For most states, this source provides district- and school-level data on art courses offered and students enrolled. Click on your state to access the data.</p>	<p><a href="#">Arts Education Data Project</a></p>



YOUR DISTRICT:

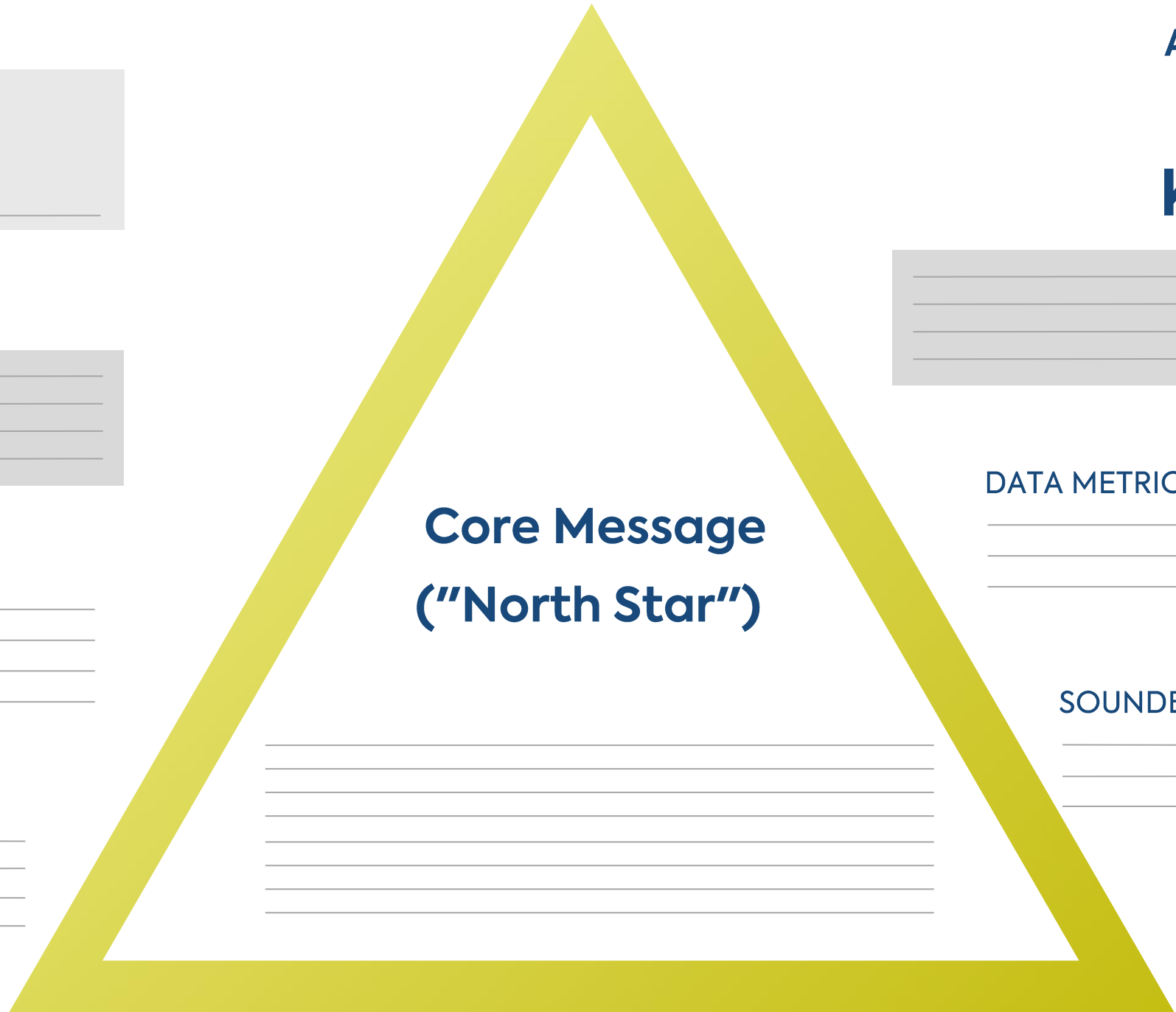
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### Key Message 1

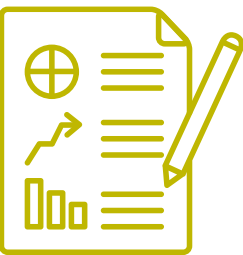
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### Key Message 2

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Core Message  
("North Star")

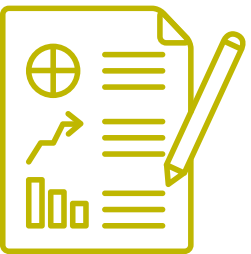


DATA METRIC: \_\_\_\_\_

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DATA METRIC: \_\_\_\_\_

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SOUNDBITE: \_\_\_\_\_

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SOUNDBITE: \_\_\_\_\_

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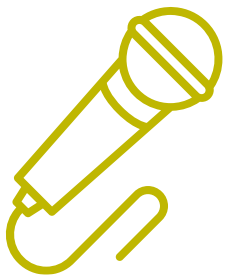


NARRATIVE: \_\_\_\_\_

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NARRATIVE: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Key Message 3

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DATA METRIC: \_\_\_\_\_

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SOUNDBITE: \_\_\_\_\_

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NARRATIVE: \_\_\_\_\_

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