

# HOW TO TELL YOUR CHARTER SCHOOL

STORY



MISSOURI CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

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# YOUR CHARTER SCHOOL HAS A STORY — A GREAT STORY.

Your charter school has a story — a great story.

Inside your school are real administrators, real teachers, real parents and real students who together are changing the landscape of your community.

Your school culture is equal parts passion and persistence, growth and grit, research and renewal, community need and collective agency.

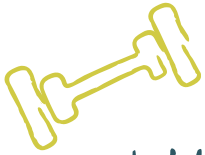
**Your school matters, and the work you do is transforming communities.**

But do you know that moment when you're trying to tell someone about the life-changing work happening inside your school, and you can tell it's not connecting?

Blank stares. Distracted eye movement. No action.

Why does that happen? And what can you do about it? We wrote this guide to help. **We want to help you tell people about your school in a way that works** – that effectively compels your audience to greater involvement in your school.

Why? Because let's be honest – that's what it takes to be successful. You need students, you need donors and you need teachers. We're going to help you get them and make them passionate advocates for the work you do each day.



## WHY IS A STRONG STORY IMPORTANT?

**COMPETITION.** Parents have increasing options about where to send their children to school, funders receive hundreds of asks per year and community members have many places they can choose to volunteer. So, why should they choose your school? A compelling, succinct message is the key to opening these doors and motivating people to choose you over the other options. To stand out from the crowd, you must capture the imagination.

**EFFICIENCY.** If you tell a really good story right out of the gate, you're going to hook a donor, parent or teacher more quickly than if you stumble through many periphery messages before getting to your best message.

**PROFESSIONALISM.** Telling a sticky story elevates the public's perception of your school and builds trustworthiness and respect - both critical elements for stakeholder buy-in. This process will also help you create a more coherent, compelling brand that can be applied to all school communications.

**MISSION CREEP.** A strong internal story helps your staff stay on mission. Take, for instance, this example from Southwest Airlines.

### EXAMPLE

Herb Kelleher (the longest-serving CEO of Southwest) once told someone, "I can teach you the secret to running this airline in thirty seconds. This is it: We are THE low-fare airline. Once you understand that fact, you can make any decision about this company's future as well as I can."

"Here's an example," he said. "Tracy from marketing comes into your office. She says her surveys indicate that the passengers might enjoy a light entrée on the Houston to Las Vegas flight. All we offer is peanuts, and she thinks a nice chicken Caesar salad would be popular. What do you say?"



The person stammered for a moment, so Kelleher responded: "You say, 'Tracy, will adding that chicken Caesar salad make us THE low-fare airline from Houston to Las Vegas?' Because if it doesn't help us become the unchallenged low-fare airline, we're not serving any damn chicken salad."



*\*From Made to Stick, by Chip and Dan Heath*

# WHO'S YOUR STORY FOR?

At this point, you might be wondering who exactly this school “story” is for. The short answer is: **EVERYONE**. A highly effective school story can be shared with almost any audience and through most mediums with only a few tweaks.

Your story isn't only for external audiences (prospective parents, funders, community members, etc.), although they are critical to your school's success.

A strong story is just as important for your internal audiences - teachers, support staff, current families, etc. A strong story and clear understanding of who you are helps everyone do their jobs better. It allows you to build or maintain school culture and engage teachers around a cause bigger than themselves. It also helps you and other school leaders maintain a tight focus on your school's mission.

**Your school story is the essence of your school brand.**



# WHAT IS YOUR SCHOOL STORY?

Without a doubt, you talk about your school daily with both internal and external audiences. However, we'd like to ask that for a moment you put your "typical" narrative to the side and reconsider a few things. Over time, we've found that school leaders, teachers and staff are so close to their work that it can be difficult to understand and remember what others need to hear.

In the guide that follows, we'll talk a lot about your school story and how to make it "sticky" - in other words, how to make sure people truly hear and remember what you have to say so it sticks with them.

To do that, first you must define your WHY: the core mission of your school.

Your story should represent your school's mission.

What is your school's WHY:

1. Why does your school exist?
2. What problem are you solving?
3. Why does the community need you? (Why are you unique?)

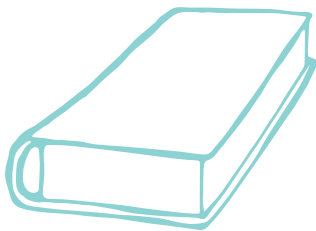


Not only do people want to know why your school is great, but they also want to know what makes it different. What makes your school unique or better than another option down the street? These are your key differentiators. Ruthlessly prioritize and find the core so that you can communicate a "simple" message.

**Watch out!** One common pitfall here is the urge to use insider lingo. Guard diligently against the "curse of knowledge" and be sure to talk about your key differentiators in ways that actually make sense - and are compelling - to non-educators (which is 75% of who you're talking to - donors, parents, community).

Once you've clearly defined your "why", you'll be positioned to implement communications that truly motivate your desired target audiences, whether they are families, teachers, funders, community leaders or local, state and national legislators who make school policy.

In the following section, we'll discuss how to capture singular stories of real people affected by your school's work. As we do this, keep your overall "why" in mind. The story should represent the core of who you are as a school - why you exist, why you matter, why you're making a difference.



# WHAT MAKES A GREAT SCHOOL STORY?

So, we've outlined why a good story matters. Now let's get to the real work. What exactly is a good school story?

## *ESSENTIAL PIECES OF EVERY STORY*

There are a few aspects that every good story shares - from the fairytales you heard as a child to blockbuster movies. If a story draws you in, without a doubt it has the following three ingredients:

### **CHARACTER/HERO**

Every good story has a protagonist we're rooting for. From an animated ice princess (Elsa) to Atticus Finch, there's a main character whose story we become invested in.

As you think about your school story, keep in mind that your school is NOT that character. To be compelling, the character of your story must be a real life, singular person whose journey and challenge we can identify with. Most likely it will be a student or family in your school.

### **DESIRE**

What does that protagonist need or want?

While we might not be able to empathize with the protagonist's specific life circumstances, we can empathize with their desires, and empathy is key to compelling storytelling.

### **CONFLICT**

What is preventing your protagonist from accomplishing their goals, and getting what they desire?

Most likely, your school is helping the hero - the real person - overcome their conflict and reach their desire. It's up to you to draw me into your school's mission by crafting an emotional story that captures my heart and has me rooting for your hero and your school.



## EXAMPLE

A few years ago, a group of neighbors in Kansas City band together to increase quality school options for the families of Midtown. Their core message was this:

Families want to live in Midtown. They want to raise their children in the city, and actively engage their neighborhoods and the city they call home.

But right now, when their children reach school age, many families reluctantly put a for-sale sign in their yard, pack their boxes, and move a little north, south, east or west in search of better schools.

What if, instead of asking each other on the playground, “what are you going to do about school?” we asked, “what are WE going to do about schools?” Together, we can increase quality school options for Midtown families.

In this example, we see the 3 pieces of story:

**CHARACTER** - Families with young children

**CONFLICT** - Where are the quality schools?

**DESIRE** - Families want to live in the city, contribute as engaged citizens, and live full lives in the city. And - put simply - they want good schools for their kids.

Families were the main characters of the Midtown Community School Initiative story. It's important to note that they did not talk about educational equity, accredited schools, superintendent turnover, or numerous other systemic issues which were all certainly part of their driving motivations.

They focused on the real people effected by the conflict they were working against. The couched all of their work in those families' lives:

This is a story about families leaving the city. This is a story about families without good schools to send their children to.

In every interview, presentation or social media post, they stuck to this story. Their work created a collective voice for discouraged families so that, together, they could work to increase quality school options in their neighborhood.

This narrative resonated with the community - families, city officials, foundations and more, and led to a successful campaign to increase quality school options.

# Success

In their book *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath outline the six ingredients for a “sticky” story – a story that people connect with, remember and feel compelled by. In their book, they use the acronym SUCCEs. To be sticky, a story must be:

SIMPLE | UNEXPECTED | CONCRETE | CREDENTIALLED | EMOTIONAL

Let’s look at three of those more closely:

## **SIMPLE.**

This might sound like the easiest – the simplest – of the *Made to Stick* guidelines, but in actuality, it can be the most difficult. As a school leader, you can list tens of things that make your school great. And often, those aspects feel equally important.

But as any good defense lawyer will tell you, if you argue ten points—even if each is a good point—when the jurors get back into the jury room, they won’t remember a single point you made.

Humans can only remember so many things, even if and when they want to remember more.

Therefore, you must **relentlessly prioritize** what makes your school great and focus only on one or two things. You must find the **core of the idea** and translate it into a “sticky” story.

## EXAMPLE

In journalism, they call this core the “lead.” The lead is the opening sentence of a newspaper article and must contain the most essential elements of the story. After the lead, journalists present the information in descending order of importance, like an inverted pyramid.

The inverted pyramid works for readers because they’ve read the most important information first, regardless of their attention span. It also works for editors because they can lop off the end of a story without losing any essential information, especially if breaking news comes in at the last minute.

It is said that the concept of the lead comes from the Civil War, when reporters would telegraph their

stories. They never knew when the telegraph signal would fail or be overtaken by military messages, so they knew they had to communicate the most important information first.

Don Wycliff, a prize-winning editorial writer, says, “I’ve always been a believer that if I’ve got two hours in which to write a story, the best investment I can make is to spend the first hour and forty-five minutes of it getting a good lead, because after that everything will come easily.”

However, journalists will also tell you how easy it is to “bury the lead” – to get lost in the pieces of the story and forget the most important element.



## APPLY IT

Imagine you are a wartime reporter and can telegraph only one thing before the line gets cut. What would it be? For Southwest Airlines, it would be that they are THE low-fare airline.

There’s only one lead, and there’s only one core. You must choose.

What’s your school’s core message?

## CONCRETE.

What makes a story concrete? To be concrete — or “real” — a story must be **specific** and **sensory**. We tend to use abstract language to communicate about our schools, but real life is not abstract. Real life is full of specific people doing specific things – which is the essence of concreteness.

Using concrete language is difficult because you are an expert in this subject matter, and abstractness is the luxury of an expert. You understand what you’re saying because you’ve had hundreds of concrete experiences with this subject matter—what works in schools, what works in classrooms, and why you do what you do. You see your core ideas lived out each and every day in specific moments at your school: when you pass by the second-grade class in the middle of a cooperative learning activity, or when you listen to seventh-grade teachers plan their next unit during a professional development day.

But most of your audience doesn’t have these experiences each day, nor do they have a history of them. So, **they need you to tell them specific, sensory-based stories of real people doing real things** so they can imagine with you what your school is like.

Take, for example, the way Citizens of the World Kansas City chooses to talk about their club programing. Each club is planned to work on specific skills they believe all kids should have – things like sequential thinking and problem solving. But instead of talking about this feature of the school using only big, abstract words, they say this instead:

### EXAMPLE

“Students in coding club are using ScratchJr to build strings of computer codes and create their own stories and movies.

Through this activity, students are developing sequential thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as coding skills such as looping.

The kids are excited to use these skills one day for careers in game design and movie making!”



This school is taking an abstract educational theory and putting a face on it: a little girl using a computer program to learn important skills. They don’t just tell you that they’re working to develop problem-solving skills in their students; they show you a specific example of HOW they’re teaching students those skills.

## EMOTIONAL.

The data doesn't lie – and it's overwhelming: if you want someone to be motivated to action (to donate, to enroll their child, or to teach at your school), you must appeal to their emotions.

As Mother Teresa famously said, “If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will.”

We are wired to feel things for people, not for abstractions.

Which means that when you want people to care about the work your school does every day, telling one, detailed story about a SPECIFIC STUDENT at your school will always be more effective than giving data about your test scores.

That's not to say that data doesn't matter or that families, teachers or politicians won't want to hear the data ... eventually. But data should only be used later – to support the heart connection an audience has already made with your school and your work.

### EXAMPLE

Thirty years ago, Kansas State University's enrollment was declining. Faced with the daunting task of turning around dwindling enrollment and public misconceptions about the university, Dr. Pat Bosco, Vice President for Student Life and Dean of Students, decided to hire a team of recent graduates and launch a full-scale recruitment program.

His keys for success were many, but included the fact that he only hired recent grads of K-State who were passionate about the university and bursting at the seams to talk about their own positive college experience. Thanks to a rigorous training process, they were armed with all the K-State info one could need, but most importantly, they were armed with their own personal stories.

These Admissions Representatives (ARs) would often remark that every day, parents of prospective students would ask them a few specific questions about the school that would draw on their vast knowledge about the educational opportunities

available to a prospective student. But soon, the parents would look the AR in the eye and ask, “Why did *you* choose K-State?”

Because although parents needed to check off a few boxes in their minds that would “justify” why K-State might be a good university, they ultimately wanted to know – at an emotional, personal level – why someone else decided K-State was the right school for them. They wanted to try on the AR's experience and imagine their son or daughter in their story – their real, live, personal story.

Those personal stories created ripples of enrollment growth at Kansas State University. Through these efforts, Dr. Bosco started a transformation that would continue to present day, making K-State the top choice for Kansas high school graduates and growing enrollment by almost 35%.



## THE VILLAIN: CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE.

This all sounds easy enough, right? But there's a villain in our story: the curse of knowledge.

The reason why it's hard to routinely tell "sticky" stories is because you know too much. As an expert in the field of education, you're intimately familiar with your school and the methodologies, culture and more that make it great.

It's hard to remember what it was like to not have that level of knowledge. This phenomenon has been studied and proved by a Stanford psychologist:

### EXAMPLE

In 1990, Elizabeth Newton earned a Ph.D. in psychology from Stanford by studying a simple game in which she assigned people to one of two roles: "tappers" or "listeners." Tappers received a list of 25 well-known songs, such as "Happy Birthday to You" and "The Star-Spangled Banner." Each tapper was asked to pick a song and tap out the rhythm to a listener (by knocking on a table). The listener's job was to guess the song, based on the rhythm being tapped. (Go ahead, try it out...)

The listener's job in this game is quite difficult. Over the course of Newton's experiment, 120 songs were tapped out. Listeners guessed only 2.5 percent of the songs: 3 out of 120.

But here's what made the result worthy of a dissertation in psychology: before the listeners

guessed the name of the song, Newton asked the tappers to predict the odds that the listeners would guess correctly. They predicted that the odds were 50 percent.

The tappers got their message across 1 time in 40, but they thought they were getting their message across 1 time in 2. Why?

When a tapper taps, she is hearing the song in her head. Go ahead and try it for yourself – tap out "The Star-Spangled Banner." It's impossible to avoid hearing the tune in your head. Meanwhile, listeners can't hear that tune – all they can hear is a bunch of disconnected taps, like a kind of bizarre Morse Code.



*\*Made to Stick by Chip and Dan Heath.*

It's hard to be a tapper. You hear the song in your head – you know what project-based learning looks like executed in the classroom and why it's beneficial for students, or you know what differentiated instruction means and why it's important. But for most of the world – and almost all of your target audience – we're the listeners and all we hear is weird Morse code.

You overcome the Curse of Knowledge by focusing on SUCCESs: Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credentialed and Emotional stories.



# LET'S CREATE YOUR SCHOOL STORY.

Use the following questions as brainstorming prompts as you think through what you want to include in your school story.

## WHY

1. What is your school's "why" – the reason you exist, the gap you're filling, the core value you hold.

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## KEY DIFFERENTIATORS

2. What makes your school unique? What are your key differentiators? Maybe it's the curriculum? Location? Student body? Culture? Mission?

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**Remember:** Humans can only remember so much!  
Ruthlessly prioritize to get to the core of your message.





## EXAMPLE

**Crossroads Academy - Central Street** is an elementary school in downtown Kansas City. Two of their key differentiators are their location as the only school located downtown and their focus on project based learning.

Crossroads' Executive Director, Dean Johnson, frequently tells the following story when he's talking with potential funders or parents:



A few years ago, our kindergarten classes learned that a family at an orphanage in Guatemala they support had suffered a terrible tragedy. An elder brother was now responsible for raising his younger siblings, and they were hoping to expand the family bakery to support their family.

The kindergarten class started to brainstorm ways they could support this family, and the students suggested holding a bake sale to raise money to expand the family bakery.

At such a suggestion, I think many teachers might have thought, "Nice idea, but a kindergarten bake sale would be a ton of work, and we have enough to do already."

But one of the things I love about our Crossroads teachers is their openness to be inspired by their students, and to work with the students to shape their vision into a project-based learning unit that incorporates mastery of the state learning standards into a real life project that serves people— achieving a value that is above and beyond student learning.

So, the students got to work planning their bake sale. They baked at home with their parents - reading recipes, practicing measurements, mixing ingredients. They planned their sales strategy, learned how to count change to customers, made signs to advertise their new business, and studied Guatemalan culture.

And then they set out to sell their goods to our downtown community - walking in a line, wearing their uniforms, pulling a red wagon from office to office, engaging with our neighbors and incorporating the city into a meaningful learning activity. They set up shop in wood-paneled conference rooms, toured bank vaults and more.

At one stop, they pulled their wagon into the Vice President's office of a large downtown bank. One of the students confidently explained to him which items were available and their cost. The VP asked him, "how many can I buy?" and without skipping a beat, the student replied, "how much money do you have?" The adults all chuckled while the customer bought several baked goods and wished the students well.

All in all, the bake sale was a huge success! Our students were given the opportunity to engage adults in professional work places - valuable exposure at such a young age that I believe helps build confidence - while learning math, entrepreneurship, business skills, and ultimately helping others. In essence, they lived the Crossroads mission through brownies and businesses.



***This story works for several reasons. It's concrete and tangible. It allows your heart to connect to cute kindergartners while you imagine them pulling their wagon full of baked goods around downtown's skyscrapers. And it puts flesh and bones on a few of the school's key differentiators - the way they use their downtown location and their focus on project based learning. To top it off, it connects to their vision statement, which speaks to creating "culturally literate and service-oriented individuals."***

***In short, when you hear this story, you can imagine in your head what it's like to be a student at Crossroads, and their mission comes to life in your heart and mind.***

## PUT IT IN PRACTICE.

4. Consider your current communications channels. How could you apply this framework when sharing your story in your oral communications? Prospective parent tours? Your fundraising pitch?

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What about your school website? Social media?



- Do you have a story of a student featured prominently on your website homepage?
- Do you talk about your school's "why" and mission statement in real, emotional words (not lingo)?
- Do you use engaging photos of students and teachers on your website and social media that allow for a personal connection?
- Do you highlight mini-stories of classroom projects, school activities or student success on your school's social media?
- Are you capturing stories of specific student and school success to use in an annual report or fundraising appeal?

Every day, countless mini-stories are being lived out in your classrooms. Capture those and invite others into the life-changing work of your school.

# CONGRATULATIONS!

You have now discovered, or isolated, the core of your school's story. You are empowered to create messages – funder pitches, prospective parent tours, website content, family newsletters, teacher professional development (the list is endless!) – that give life to the essence of your school.

As you apply the principles of this guide, constantly reevaluating how to make your story “sticky,” you’ll find that your passion for your school—and others’ passion for your school—will grow.

Recommended resources: Made to Stick by Chip and Dan Heath.  
<http://heathbrothers.com/download/mts-teaching-that-sticks.pdf>

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