

Communicating in Crisis

School leaders have always been called upon to act quickly, making strong decisions to protect students and families. But even in this tough situation, there are successes worth celebrating. In most areas, schools have led the charge in keeping staff and students safe, serving as an example for other organizations. As districts organize food services, adjust to remote learning, and provide emergency child care, they prove again and again the integral role public schools play in their communities.

Discussion Guide



“These first days or even hours, however, are an opportunity to build the foundation for a strong communications response.”

- What tools does your district use to communicate a crisis to students, families, staff, and the community?
- How quickly does your district share important information in a crisis?



“As you begin to communicate the details of an emergency, your goal isn’t necessarily to reduce unease or discomfort; your goal is to build your credibility.”

- In what ways has your district shown empathy when communicating a crisis? How could you use empathy in the future to communicate in a crisis situation?
- Who are the decision makers in your district when communicating a crisis? In what ways could they incorporate transparency in the decision making process in a crisis situation?
- How does your district incorporate action steps when communicating a crisis situation to students, families, staff and the broader community?
- How does your district’s crisis communication mitigate perpetuating stigmas when communicating a crisis?



“If people start hearing conflicting information from different sources, that undermines trust in the overall process.”

- What are the communication sources your community seeks out on in a crisis? Which of these sources does the district align with?



“An important strategy in effective communication is to make sure that all leaders in the district—those to whom students, parents, community members, and employees turn with questions—know their role in communication.”

- Where do you fit into your district’s tiers of crisis communication?
- How do you work with your site administrator to clarify messaging when communicating with the broader community?
- What clarity do you need on your district’s internal communication process?



“When the crisis is affecting the entire community, not just your district, you need to build consistency with other organizations across your area.”

- What community groups would you like the district to communicate with to reach an inclusive audience?
- How can the district partner with local organizations to build a network of communication that reaches all members of the community?
- What is the district’s relationship with local media?



“Setting a pattern for updates helps alleviate anxiety—even if you’re not providing new information.”

- How does your district currently update its students, parents, staff, and community members on new information? How might frequency of the district’s communication impact these groups?



“Crisis communications literature recommends that each organization have a trained spokesperson ready to address the community. The point is simple: to put a face to the crisis response. When people see a trusted leader moving the situation forward, it can do wonders to build unity.”

- Who is the singular spokesperson for your district?
- How does this person interact with the community on a regular basis? Does this differ in a crisis situation?
- Where can you find your district spokesperson’s remarks archived?



“After the first few weeks of crisis communications, life begins to settle back into a predictable rhythm. Even though your community’s day-to-day may be far from normal, the upheaval and transition felt in the first few days or weeks of the emergency often subside.”

- How could you split your district community into smaller groups to improve long term communication?
- What strategies would you suggest in monitoring your community’s communications needs?
- Do you agree with Highline’s strategy for staff wellness? In what ways would you change this strategy for your district?



“After an emergency, one of the best ways to move forward is to take a little time looking back.”

- How have you seen leaders in your community encourage positive responses to crises? In what ways has this built a culture of resilience?
- What ways has your community come together and better communicated through previous disasters? How do you suggest maintaining this momentum?
- Have past emergencies trained your community to adequately prepare for future crisis situations?



“Teamwork has been so important at the leadership level—having that trust and the ability to work with each other and hold it together as a team. Every team has probably seen where their strengths and weaknesses are, and that gives them an opportunity to know how they can improve and also how they work well together.”

- In what ways can your district team maintain and improve its communications and build a culture of support?



For more information on Communicating in Crisis:

<https://www.schoolceo.com/a/communicating-in-a-crisis/>