



COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to assist district leaders as they look to streamline communication to provide coherent messaging to support students, families, and staff in creating effective learning environments. This secondary literature review compiles best practices for communicating and maintaining effective engagement with stakeholders and how best to use communication tools (e.g., video conferencing applications, social media platforms) for keeping the community engaged during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Hanover also profiles exemplar districts on their communication and engagement information, strategies, and innovative ideas.

KEY FINDINGS



Effective strategies for communicating with stakeholders include using multiple communication methods and tools, individualizing communications to families, and ensuring communications are accessible to culturally and linguistically diverse stakeholders. District and school administrators use a variety of tools and channels (e.g., websites, e-mails, apps, texts, newsletters) to communicate important information to students, families, employees, and community stakeholders. The literature recommends developing district and school websites as a streamlined information source for most communications (e.g., student/parent/staff portals, announcements, updates). Similarly, districts can increase the effectiveness of communicating via these platforms by personalizing communications and interactions to include information valuable to families, specific to their child(ren), and available in stakeholders' preferred language.



District leaders foster effective internal communication with staff through face-to-face interactions and frequent e-mails. Examples of effective interactions include retreats for administrators to establish goals, share ideas, and voice concerns; regular district and school leader meetings; and ongoing dialogue to examine communication examples and refine practices. Developing internal communication plans to detail goals, strategies, and action steps can also help promote improved internal communications.



Districts and schools strategically use social media platforms to provide stakeholders with important information and promote direct communication from administrators. For instance, district personnel post on social media on topics ranging from district and school accomplishments to frequent updates during emergencies in order to reach stakeholders on popular platforms. The increase in public social media use by community stakeholders has led to a rise in the level of accountability and transparency they seek from district administrators and leaders. Social media platforms give school administrators a centralized location to quickly provide information, engage with stakeholders, and deepen two-way communication. However, internal protocols and practices need to be established to avoid over-communication or conflicting messaging.



Publicizing emergency communication plans and emergency resource pages facilitate organized and centralized district communications during an emergency. Many districts developed COVID-19 websites or resource pages in response to the pandemic. Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS)'s dedicated COVID-19 website is a notable example. The website features multiple phone support lines, COVID-19 updates, and news media, as well as distance learning resources, the instructional continuity plan, mobile device distribution sites, food distributions, and assistance for families in need available in English, Spanish, and Haitian-Creole.

SECTION I: BEST PRACTICES IN GENERAL COMMUNICATION

In this section, Hanover details best practices in how district and school administrators provide essential information on resources available to students, families, and staff; streamline information coming from all levels of school governance; and engage the school community.

COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

Districts and schools need to have frequent and consistent two-way communication with families and community members. Standard methods include website information, text messages, written notes, e-mails, phone calls, printed materials, and face-to-face meetings. Additionally, families and community members should have access to multiple platforms (e.g., school websites and hotlines) where they can ask questions, provide comments and concerns, and suggest improvements to district and school administrators with rapid response times.¹

COMMUNICATION FREQUENCY

A recent survey by the Center for American Progress (CAP) of K-12 parents, teachers, and school leaders found that while schools communicated most types of information between weekly and monthly, all groups felt that more frequent communication would be ideal. School leaders reported the most similarities between their current and preferred communication frequencies. Yet, stakeholders still wanted more frequent contact from districts and schools.² Additionally, the survey reveals respondents are most interested in regular communication about day-to-day matters (e.g., homework student behavior, and logistics). Figure 1.1 shows communication topics and the average desired communication frequency by group, per category. Survey respondents rated the ideal frequency of communication on a scale from “never” to “daily.”³

Figure 1.1: Communication Topics and Ideal Communication Frequency by Group

COMMUNICATION TOPIC	IDEAL COMMUNICATION FREQUENCY BY GROUP		
	PARENTS	TEACHERS	SCHOOL LEADERS
Teacher Qualifications and Experiences	Monthly-Quarterly	Quarterly	Monthly
Information on School Budget Use	Monthly-Quarterly	Quarterly	~3 weeks
College and Career Preparation Resources and Information	Monthly-Quarterly	~6 weeks	~2 weeks
Schoolwide Achievement	Monthly	Monthly-Quarterly	~2 weeks
Decision-Making Opportunities	~2 weeks	Monthly	~2 weeks
School Volunteer Opportunities	~3 Weeks	~3 Weeks	~2 weeks
Curriculum	~2 weeks	~6 weeks	~3 weeks
Disciplinary Action	~Weekly	~Weekly	~2x per week
Behavior Patterns	~Weekly	~Weekly	~Weekly

¹ [1] “How Two-Way Communication Can Boost Parent Engagement.” Waterford.Org, November 8, 2018. <https://www.waterford.org/education/two-way-communication-parent-engagement/> [2] “With Schools Closed and Distance Learning the Norm, How Is Your District Meeting the Needs of Its Students?” Digital Promise and The Education Trust, May 2020, p. 10. <https://edtrustmain.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/06163247/10-Questions-for-Equity-Advocates-to-Ask-About-Distance-Learning-During-COVID-19-May-2020.pdf>

² Benner, M. and A. Quirk. “One Size Does Not Fit All.” Center for American Progress, February 20, 2020. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2020/02/20/480254/one-size-not-fit/>

³ Ibid.

COMMUNICATION TOPIC	IDEAL COMMUNICATION FREQUENCY BY GROUP		
	PARENTS	TEACHERS	SCHOOL LEADERS
Individual Student Achievement (Progress or Challenges)	~2 weeks	~2 weeks	~2 weeks
Logistics (e.g., early dismissal, enrollment)	~2 weeks	~2 weeks	~2 weeks
Classroom or School Event	~2 weeks	~2 weeks	Weekly
Homework	~2-3x per week	~2-3x per week	~2-3x per week


Source: Center for American Progress⁴

INDIVIDUALIZED COMMUNICATIONS

Community stakeholders find individualized and personalized communications most helpful and valuable, regardless of the communication method or tool. The CAP survey discussed above found parents, teachers, and school leaders value systems that facilitate individualized interaction and communication (e.g., web portals with individual student information, parent-teacher conferences) most highly out of all communication options used at their school.⁵

For example, Sunnyvale School District (CA), shares how students, parents, community partners, and other key stakeholders receive and customize communications and information from the district through a public page on the district’s website. Figure 1.2 displays the types of communication platforms Sunnyvale School District uses to communicate with families and community members.

Figure 1.2: Sunnyvale School District (CA)



Text Messages: Students can sign up for urgent messages via text by texting “YES” to the number 67587 and can opt-out anytime.

PowerSchool Parent Portal: Students and parents have access to real-time information, including attendance, grades, lunch balances, detailed assignment descriptions, and school bulletins through this electronic student management system. Teachers can share information with parents and students, and parents can participate in their child’s education. Students and parents can also change or update their contact information as well as their communication preferences through the portal.

The District Digest is a quarterly online newsletter published by the SSD covering programs, happenings, and issues affecting schools, the district, and public education. Community members can subscribe to receive a condensed digest.

Social Media: Half of SSD’s schools have social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) in addition to the district’s accounts. Community members can follow any of the channels.

Mobile App: Students and parents can download SSD’s free mobile app from the iOS App Store or Google Play to follow and receive news/notifications from specific schools. Users can customize the app, including language preferences, individual student information, push notifications, SSD’s events calendar, and a district/school directory.

SSD uses **Peachjar** to create and distribute district- or school-approved electronic flyers directly to parents’ inboxes and posts them online to each school’s website, where parents can find and view them and immediately sign up for activities and events. Parents can click the Peachjar button on school websites to receive flyers. They do not need to log in to receive or view flyers and can opt-out at any time.

Source: Sunnyvale School District⁶

Impactful communication initiatives use a combination of strategies to individualize dialogue with families. For example, the Flamboyant Foundation, a nonprofit organization focused on supporting family engagement,

⁴ Ibid.

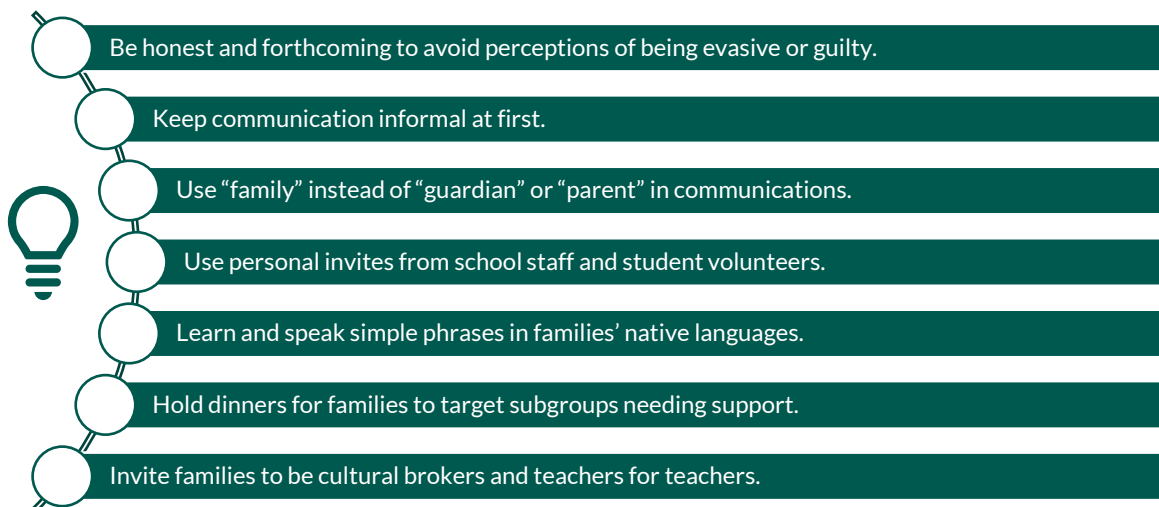
⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “District Communications / Ways We Communicate.” Sunnyvale School District.

<https://www.sesd.org/Page/1321#:~:text=Sunnyvale%20School%20District%20uses%20Peachjar,up%20for%20activities%20and%20events.>

identifies strategies to communicate with hard-to-reach families. Initial outreach to these individuals can be informal to ease communication comfort. These tips have general applicability despite being meant for hard-to-reach families (detailed in Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3: Strategies to Personalize Family Communications



Source: Flamboyant Foundation⁷

Additionally, schools can personalize communications by including information specific to families and their students, as families are most interested in information about their child(ren). For instance, teachers might describe examples of the child’s behavior to their families in illustrating social and emotional learning skills in writing or in-person communication, or by including positive highlights of a student’s week in a weekly newsletter. Personalized outreach also increases the likelihood that families look at and review communications sent to them.⁸

COMMUNICATION WITH CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES

District and school staff may need to take additional steps to enable proper communication with culturally and linguistically diverse families. The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) notes cross-cultural communication “minimizes the confusion and frustration that people can experience when they enter an environment where not only their language, but also their attitudes, values, and behaviors differ from those of others.”⁹ Cross-cultural communication considers cultural influences on the ways people communicate and helps ensure educators and families of all backgrounds understand each other. Translating all written information into the native languages of families the district serves and including classroom signs in different languages help improve cross-cultural communication.¹⁰ Figure 1.4 shows additional specific strategies to strengthen two-way and cross-cultural communications with culturally and linguistically diverse families.

⁷ Figure contents quoted verbatim from: “Tips for Reaching ‘Hard to Reach’ Families.” The Flamboyant Foundation, 2011. <http://test.flamboyantfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Communication-Tips-for-Hard-to-Reach-Families1.pdf>

⁸ “School-Family Partnership Strategies to Enhance Children’s Social, Emotional, and Academic Growth.” Colorado Department of Education. p. 6. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/school-familypartnershipstrategies>

⁹ Garcia, M.E. et al. “Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education Part 3: Building Trusting Relationships With Families and Community Through Effective Communication.” U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, September 2016. p. 6. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/pdf/REL_2016152.pdf

¹⁰ Ibid.

Figure 1.4: Two-Way and Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

TWO-WAY COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES	CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Translate materials to the home language. ▪ Use bilingual staff members to help provide a direct link between families and the school community. ▪ Be open to hosting school meetings in a location where families feel comfortable (e.g., community centers or local businesses). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Begin the conversation on a personal level rather than starting with a formal progress report. Allow personal life to be mixed with the discussion of academics. ▪ Show respect for the whole family, instead of paying attention to the child who is the focus of the conference. ▪ Use indirect questions or observations rather than questions asking for information about the child at home (for example, “Some parents prefer to have an older child help with homework...” rather than, “Do you or someone else help the child with her homework?”). ▪ Discuss student achievements in the context of all students, suggesting how the child contributes to everyone’s well-being. ▪ Explain goals and expectations of the school and help parents and family members find ways in which they are comfortable supporting their children’s learning. ▪ Create a sense of common purpose and caring using the pronoun “we” rather than “you” and “I.”

Source: Institute of Education Sciences¹¹

Additionally, the IES notes educators benefit from training in basic communication methods. This training may cover skills such as “observing verbal and nonverbal behaviors, using dialogue for two-way conversations, using active listening, asking questions that are not offensive, and other skills that enhance communication and relationships with parents.”¹² Training on communication methods can help district administrators, school leaders, and educators ascertain what communication mediums to use for diverse audiences. The literature indicates that due to factors such as a lack of internet or cultural preferences, many culturally and linguistically diverse families may prefer home visits and meetings at non-school public locations (e.g., community centers, places of worship, libraries). Additionally, these families may also feel most comfortable with informal conversations at drop-off and pick-up time, phone conferences, newsletters, and bulletin boards.¹³

INTERNAL DISTRICT COMMUNICATIONS

As internal district communications are often the weakest part of school district communications, districts can improve internal communications by developing internal written communication plans, goals, strategies, and tactics. This plan should also include desired behaviors of all audiences, required actions to achieve this behavior, and evaluation strategies to achieve desired communication outcomes.¹⁴ District communications audits conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) often found that pockets of staff members reported little authentic engagement and wanted more communication from

¹¹ Figure contents quoted verbatim with minor modifications from: Ibid., pp. 5–13.

¹² Ibid., p. 16.

¹³ [1] Eisenbach, B., et al. “Cultivating Connections with Diverse Families.” Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), September 2016. <https://www.amle.org/BrowsebyTopic/WhatsNew/WNDet/TabId/270/ArtMID/888/ArticleID/686/Cultivating-Connections-with-Diverse-Families.aspx> [2] Ferguson, C. “Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections?” National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools. September 2005. p. 6. <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/rb/rb5-diverse.pdf>

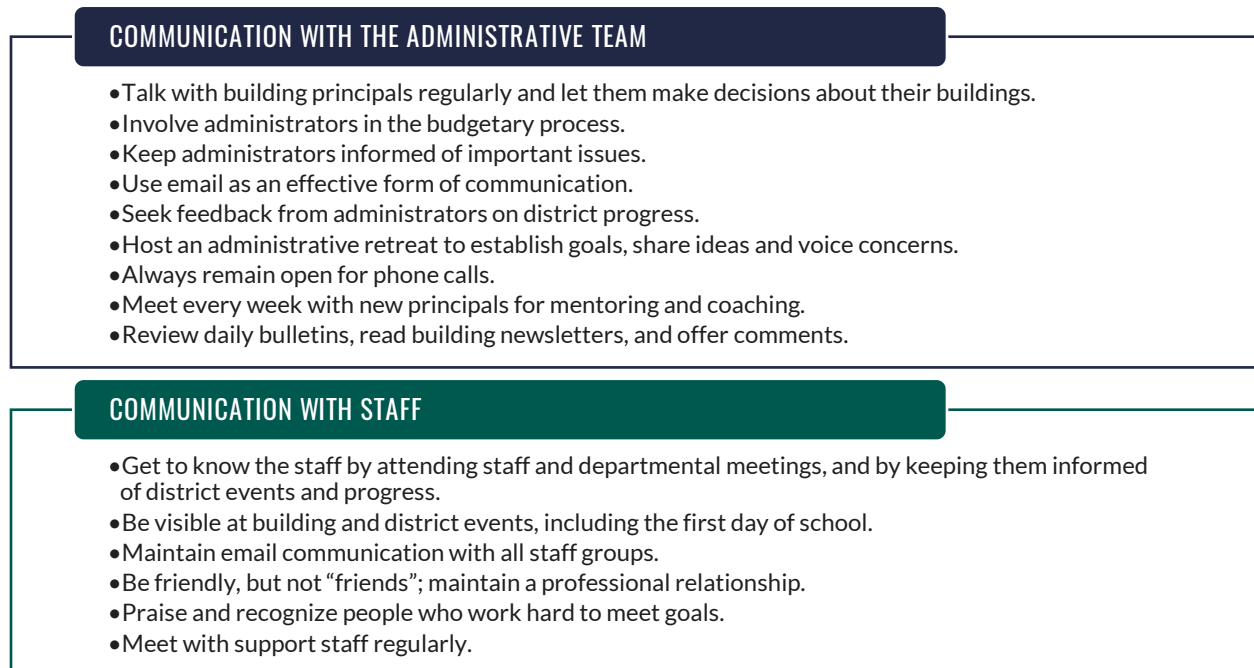
¹⁴ “Communication Planning Resources.” National School Public Relations Association. <https://www.nspr.org/complan>

district leaders.¹⁵ Employees and civic leaders are also becoming increasingly interested in sharing information, and often require different messaging and mediums than external community stakeholders.¹⁶

District leaders can further strengthen internal communication and information flow through ongoing and frequent communication with the school board and school staff. Literature highlights communication between the superintendent and the school board and emphasizes collaborative partnerships between superintendents and staff as critical to successful internal communication relationships. For example, one superintendent/school board communication strategy is for superintendents to send a weekly update e-mail on Fridays to all board members highlighting significant events, issues, and meetings the superintendent led or participated in during that week. Before creating an e-mail template, superintendents should “provide a confidentiality disclaimer at the end of the document and check with the school district attorney related to issues with the state’s open meeting law.”¹⁷

Superintendents can have in-person collaborative retreats with administration staff and get to know their colleagues through attending departmental and team meetings.¹⁸ Additionally, staff climate surveys help assess the best internal communication methods for individual districts.¹⁹ Figure 1.5 details how superintendents can best communicate with their administrative team as well as staff.

Figure 1.5: Internal Communication Strategies for Superintendents



Source: Region 10 Education Service Center²⁰

¹⁵ Bagin, R. “Internal Communication Is Critical for Success.” National School Public Relations Association. <https://www.nspr.org/communicationmatters/april-2017/internal-communication-is-critical>

¹⁶ “Trends in Digital Communications Priorities and Challenges: The front-line views of district communications officers.” Blackboard. p. 1. https://www.nspr.org/sites/default/files/newsletter/communication_matters/k12_2016_report_project-tomorrow-communication-leaders_091516.pdf

¹⁷ Carlson, H. “Three Keys To A Successful Superintendent/School Board Relationship.” AASA-American Association of School Administrators. <https://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=15188>

¹⁸ “Communication Essentials: What Superintendents Need to Know and Want to Share About Communicating.” Region 10 Education Service Center. <https://www.region10.org/r10website/assets/File/communicationessentialsforsuperintendents.pdf>

¹⁹ “Communication E-Kit for Superintendents.” National School Public Relations Association, 2013. p. 19. https://www.ssc.coop/cms/lib/MN06000837/Centricity/Domain/9/Communication_E-Kit_for_Superintendents%20NSPR.pdf

²⁰ Figure contents taken verbatim with minor modifications from: “Communication Essentials: What Superintendents Need to Know and Want to Share About Communicating,” Op. cit.

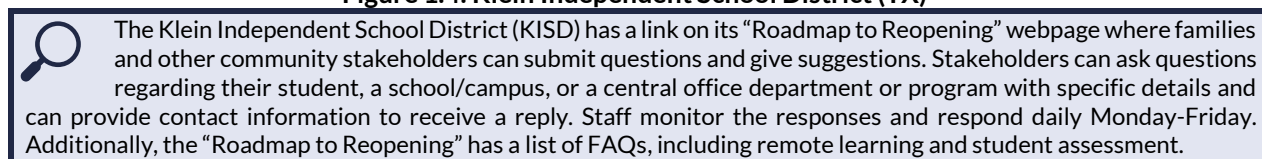
Using multiple communication channels helps districts and schools ensure successful and centralized communication with staff, teachers, and employees. In particular, staff portals on the district or school website are valuable places for staff, teachers, and other employees to access centralized information strictly pertinent to them (e.g., internal announcements, e-mails, technical support, support and coaching, and performance reviews).²¹ Video e-mails, collaborative blogs, voice messages, weekly updates, and face-to-face communication are other significant internal communication channels that allow districts and schools to streamline information and foster positive working relationships.²² Additionally, schools can use digital signage to communicate with educators throughout the school day. Digital signs are especially vital for communication when educators cannot immediately access e-mails or log into portals. Digital signs placed throughout schools are recognizable and do not require additional effort to process the information and can display both general and emergency information.²³

COMMUNICATION METHODS AND CHANNELS

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL WEBSITES

District and school websites are important self-service portals for communicating information to both external and internal stakeholders. Websites should be mobile device-accessible, serve as the social media hub, and be easy to manage. District and school websites can also host submission forms for gathering information or conducting registration.²⁴ Additionally, websites often facilitate two-way communication between the district and families in assisting district administrators in responding promptly to families' concerns.²⁵ Families should be able to access links easily and submit questions that receive a response in 24-48 hours.²⁶ For example, due to COVID-19, the Klein Independent School District's (TX) has a "Roadmap to Reopening" subpage. Figure 1.4, below, details how the district responds to questions and concerns surrounding the pandemic.

Figure 1.4: Klein Independent School District (TX)



The Klein Independent School District (KISD) has a link on its "Roadmap to Reopening" webpage where families and other community stakeholders can submit questions and give suggestions. Stakeholders can ask questions regarding their student, a school/campus, or a central office department or program with specific details and can provide contact information to receive a reply. Staff monitor the responses and respond daily Monday-Friday. Additionally, the "Roadmap to Reopening" has a list of FAQs, including remote learning and student assessment.

Source: Klein Independent School District and EAB²⁷

SOCIAL MEDIA

While districts and schools generally use social media to share information, school leaders also need to have a visible professional presence on these platforms. Community stakeholders look for school leaders to quickly share information, listen and engage with the community, and establish two-way communication via

²¹ Lynch, M. "6 Best Practices for Internal Communication in Public Schools." *The Edvocate*, September 14, 2016.

<https://www.theedadvocate.org/6-best-practices-internal-communication-public-schools/>

²² "Good Ways to Communicate with Teachers." *Educational Leadership*, April 2015. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr15/vol72/num07/Good-Ways-to-Communicate-with-Teachers.aspx>

²³ Lynch, Op. cit.

²⁴ "School Communication Planning Guide." *Campus Suite*. p. 8. <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/296999/School-Communication-Planning-Guide.pdf>

²⁵ "With Schools Closed and Distance Learning the Norm, How Is Your District Meeting the Needs of Its Students?" Op. cit., p. 10.

²⁶ "Keeping Equity at the Forefront During COVID-19 School Closures." *Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership*, 2020. <https://masseduequity.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2020/03/Keeping-Equity-at-the-Forefront-During-COVID-19-School-Closures-Massachusetts-Education-Equity-Partnership-March-2020.pdf>

²⁷ [1] "Klein ISD Roadmap to Reopening." Klein Independent School District.

https://kleinisd.net/district/klein_i_s_d_roadmap_to_reopening [2] McNeill, J. "Efficient and Effective Communication Strategies for Schools and Districts to Connect with Families during COVID-19." EAB, March 24, 2020. <https://eab.com/insights/expert-insight/district-leadership/schools-and-districts-connect-with-families-during-covid-19/>

social media. School leaders should clarify how they plan to use social media and what kinds of communications community members can expect.²⁸



Relatedly, school blogs offer a simple and accessible way for school and district leaders to communicate. For instance, Burlington Public Schools (MA) created a district-wide blog in 2012 to provide streamlined information to a wide audience. Although the district mostly posts on news and events, several blog entries have included stakeholder feedback on a variety of topics. For example, community members had the opportunity to comment on a school improvement plan between the first and second proposal readings before a final vote. Two-way conversations via the blog have given the district the ability to make better-informed decisions, created more transparency, and provided community members a voice in decision processes. Many teachers in the district subsequently created blogs or websites to communicate with families.²⁹

VIDEO CONFERENCING APPLICATIONS

Identifying and selecting an official video conferencing platform is essential for districts to streamline communications and eliminate potential Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) violations. If a district already has a relationship with a video conferencing provider, all staff should default to using that platform, even if they already have personal accounts. According to EdWeek, “District contracts with video conference providers typically have outlined restrictions on how and under what circumstances the company can collect and share student data.”³⁰ The California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) provides [a list of video conferencing resources](#) for schools to consider through its distance learning page, including Zoom, Microsoft, and Google Hangouts.³¹

As video conference meetings can be chaotic, especially with large groups of students, staff, or community members, districts and schools should follow the guidelines:³²

- All participants should mute their audio if they are not talking;
- The conversation leader should choose the view that suits them: one person’s face at a time or a gallery of all participants;
- Use earbuds with a microphone to improve audio;
- Participants should feel comfortable in turning off the video for any reason; and
- Utilize additional features (e.g., sharing a whiteboard and offering nonverbal feedback).

²⁸ “Rethinking Your K-12 Social Media Strategy.” Association of California School Administrators, January 2, 2018. <https://content.acsa.org/articles/rethink-k12-social-media>

²⁹ Larkin, P. “Say It with Social Media.” *Educational Leadership*, 72:7, April 2015. Accessed via EbscoHost.

³⁰ “How to Keep Students and Staff Safe on Videoconferencing.” *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/media/videoconference-safety.pdf>

³¹ “COVID-19 Supplemental Learning Resources.” California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA). https://docs.google.com/document/d/1e-qzq4BPIAthuW_O6elcnaomGZ5LjrhV1Do2R6kv7yl/edit?usp=embed_facebook

³² Bullet points adapted from: “How to Keep Students and Staff Safe on Videoconferencing,” Op. cit.

SECTION II: BEST PRACTICES IN EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION

District administrators increasingly face questions from parents, students, community stakeholders, and government officials during or after emergencies or crises about school safety and incident responses. While districts usually have safety and security protocol teams, they may lack district preparedness communication plans to convey this information to the community.³³ The following section provides best practices, tips, and tools to develop an emergency communications strategy.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR PLANNING AND RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES

INCIDENT COMMUNICATION TEAM

Districts can streamline emergency communications by appointing a staff member to serve as the district’s spokesperson for communicating emergency responses and information to the media. In coordination with other district and school leaders, this staff member can determine specific times and locations of news conferences and briefings, when necessary.³⁴ Additionally, compiling an incident communications team will help the district delegate responsibilities and assist in more rapid responses. Figure 2.1, below, details functional areas for the incident communications team and their roles and responsibilities. The literature recommends each group have at least one primary and one alternate contact.

Figure 2.1: Incident Communication Functions, Roles, and Responsibilities

FUNCTION	ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES
Incident Communications Team Lead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is often an administrator or designee. ▪ Convenes scheduled and emergency team meetings. ▪ Oversees incident communications strategy. ▪ Ensures resources are available to team members for assigned duties.
District Spokesperson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contacts the media. ▪ Prepares official statements and plan for regular updates to the media. ▪ Maintains contact with police, first responders, hospital representatives to keep information current. ▪ Handles all media requests for information, with support of team lead. ▪ Indicates location for media “command center.”
Information – Communications Coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Screens incoming calls, maintains a log of telephone calls related to the incident event. ▪ Monitors all relevant media coverage of the incident. ▪ Helps prioritize media requests for information. ▪ Monitors all district social media platforms for questions or misinformation. ▪ Strategizes content for FAQ document with the support of team lead.
Staff Notification Coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prepares short, fact-based statements to share with staff about the incident and provides updates when available.

³³ Talbot, P., Buccela, A., Manasiev, L., and Taylor, J. “Safety and Incident Communications Toolkit: Ideas and Tools for Improving District Safety Communications.” EAB, 2018. p. 4. <https://attachment.eab.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/944BA24008C34E9D83486D83F2939AEA-3.pdf>

³⁴ “School District Public Relations and School Communications.” Edina Independent School District 273. <https://www.edinaschools.org/cms/lib/MN01909547/Centricity/Domain/92/Board%20Policy%20Manual/107.pdf>



- Establishes a plan to rapidly disseminate relevant information to all staff during regular school hours.
- Coordinates and initiates a telephone tree when school is not in session.

Source: EAB³⁵

Furthermore, a rapid response telephone tree of all organizations and individuals that district or school leaders must contact immediately in the event of an emergency is critical in centralizing communication and involving key stakeholders. For example, these organizations and individuals include:³⁶

- Police chiefs;
- Fire chiefs;
- President of the school board or a school board member;
- Family liaison;
- Local and regional media outlets (e.g., TV, newspaper, radio); and
- General counsel.

MEDIA COLLABORATION

District leaders can closely partner with local media to provide additional community awareness of district safety policies and procedures. For instance, districts can provide media outlets with information through superintendent interviews with television, radio, newspaper, website outlets, media advisories, and short blogs or content pieces. Local media coverage can also help districts give safety information more quickly to community members who may not have access to the internet or mobile devices.³⁷ When collaborating with the media, communications staff should engage the following emergency media response and outreach strategies:³⁸

- Create a set of district policies that comply with state laws in releasing information to and interacting with the media (e.g., determining when to talk to the press, media presence on school grounds);
- Develop tactics for answering media questions (e.g., specific talking points about the emergency) and know who to contact at all local media channels;
- Train all staff and students to refer media requests to the designated communications point person; and
- Determine who will coach educators on media interviews.

COMMUNICATION FREQUENCY: LONG-TERM EMERGENCIES

Many families rely on schools to foster meaningful connections in the community while also supporting students' academic and non-academic needs. This reliance has led to communication challenges, as evident during the current COVID-19 pandemic and the need for streamlined, consistent, and clear communication.³⁹ Long-term emergencies are atypical, as they can affect all aspects of operations, may not have an end date, and can require districts and schools to provide ongoing support as has happened during COVID-19. Much of the literature recommending how often schools and districts communicate with families during COVID-19 that applies to future long-term emergencies is from March and April, early in the pandemic. At the beginning of a potential long-term emergency, districts and schools can offer updates summarizing relevant information through websites, e-mail, social media, robocalls, and texting every one-to-three days.⁴⁰ Education-related organizations and states recommend continued frequent communication in school reopening plans. For

³⁵ Figure content taken verbatim with minor modifications from: Talbot, P., et. al, Op. cit., p. 20.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 26-27

³⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁸ "NEA's School Crisis Guide." National Education Association, 2018. pp. 31-32. <https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/NEA%20School%20Crisis%20Guide%202018.pdf>

³⁹ "With Schools Closed and Distance Learning the Norm, How Is Your District Meeting the Needs of Its Students?" Op. cit., p. 10.

⁴⁰ McNeill, Op. cit.





example, Education Minnesota advises schools to establish weekly contact with community organizations, tribal nations, and community leaders to help expand the resources and referral services for staff, students, and families as well as identify underutilized resources and unmet needs.⁴¹ The Los Angeles County Office of Education (CA) and Canandaigua City School District (NY) exemplify districts that respectively send weekly and biweekly COVID-19 related communications from district administrators to the community posted on their COVID-19 resource pages. Communications include school reopenings and stakeholder surveys.⁴²

However, during COVID-19, parents and students have often sent e-mails and phone calls to teachers and other school officials during all hours, expecting immediate replies, resulting in increased responsibilities and stress for teachers and school officials. Therefore, districts and schools should set boundaries and expectations for communication frequency that are applicable to the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, such as not requiring teachers or administrators to reply to e-mails after a specific time of day.⁴³

COMMUNICATION METHODS AND CHANNELS

Districts can use a variety of communication methods for internal and external emergency communications. For example, Figure 2.2 offers a list of internal and external communications methods districts typically utilize during emergencies, from fastest to slowest. The figure also includes best strategies, practices, and tips for using text messages, “Robo” all-call systems, social media, district websites, letters, and in-person meetings. For instance, districts can post links to additional resources on social media, and some districts utilize color-coded banners on their websites to indicate time-sensitive updates.






Figure 2.2: Typical Incident Communication Methods, Fastest to Slowest

METHOD	NOTES
 <p>Text Message</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage parents to sign up for text notifications during back-to-school days, in parent newsletters, and on the district website. Be aware of the character count (160 characters max). Link directly to additional information. Prepare internal staff who will receive inquiries as a result of the message.
 <p>Push Notification</p>	N/A
 <p>“Robo” All-Call System</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider maintaining cell phone records of parents and staff to route “Robo” calls directly to stakeholders more quickly. Use a familiar, trusted voice. Aim for 30-60 seconds for the entire message. Note when to expect further communication. Prepare internal staff who will receive inquiries as a result of the message.
 <p>Intercom/PA System</p>	N/A

⁴¹ “2020-2021 Planning Guidance for Minnesota Public Schools.” Education Minnesota, June 18, 2020. <https://www.educationminnesota.org/EDMN/media/edmn-files/resources/MDE-Guidance-for-2020-21-School-Year-Planning.pdf>

⁴² [1] “COVID-19 Resources.” Los Angeles County Office of Education. <https://www.lacoe.edu/Home/Health-and-Safety/Coronavirus-Resources> [2] “COVID-19 - Canandaigua City School District.” Canandaigua City School District. <https://www.canandaiguaschools.org/district/coronavirus-info>

⁴³ Schwartz, S. “Round-the-Clock Communication Is Exhausting Teachers.” *Education Week*, July 21, 2020. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/07/22/round-the-clock-communication-is-exhausting-teachers.html>

METHOD	NOTES
 <p data-bbox="264 449 402 478">Social Media</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Use social media regularly during an incident. ■ Update frequently throughout the incident, even if there is no new information to share. ■ Link directly to additional resources. ■ Be aware that there are multiple community stakeholders. ■ Monitor social media channels for misinformation or concerns. ■ Do not respond to each message over social media. ■ Strategize appropriate action (e.g., private message, phone call, link to resources, public statement) based on the constituent and comment made.
 <p data-bbox="297 642 373 672">E-Mail</p>	<p data-bbox="938 604 982 634">N/A</p>
 <p data-bbox="245 877 423 907">District Website</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Many districts add color-coded banners to the district homepage to highlight time-sensitive updates. ■ Consider developing a “dark site” web page to activate only when an incident occurs. A dark site should look like the district homepage for brand consistency—it can either replace the main page temporarily or be accessed through a link from the homepage. A dark site web page might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fact sheets specifically for incident use; ■ District information, history, statistics, safety record; ■ Placeholder for incident-specific messages or updates; and ■ References to other web sites that provide additional information.
 <p data-bbox="297 1098 373 1127">Letters</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Letters only need to be updated with details as incidents occur. Maintain a library of sample letters for the most likely scenarios to ease and expedite responses.
 <p data-bbox="228 1213 440 1243">In-Person Meetings (e.g., town hall, staff meeting, safety summit)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Invite local law enforcement to public-facing safety events, especially following an incident in the district or community. The presence and participation of trusted community figures provide reassurance and reinforces district decisions during incident response and aftermath.

Source: EAB⁴⁴

Furthermore, the National Education Association (NEA) recommends districts develop the following additional tools for emergency communication:⁴⁵

- An e-mail list of stakeholders (e.g., staff, media, parents, and elected officials) to be contacted regularly;
- Non-electronic means of communication in case cell, internet, and electricity services are not working as well as for students and families who may be homeless or do not have access to electronic devices;
- Translation services (e.g., a translation hotline, subscribing to a commercial translation service, or a translation app); and
- A daily fact sheet.

⁴⁴ Taken verbatim with minor modifications from: Talbot, P., et. al, Op. cit., p. 22.

⁴⁵ [1] “With Schools Closed and Distance Learning the Norm, How Is Your District Meeting the Needs of Its Students?” Op. cit., pp. 6-7.

[2] “NEA’s School Crisis Guide,” Op. cit., p. 31.

EMERGENCY RESOURCE PAGES

Districts can create an emergency resource page on their websites that serves as the central resource for information and updates (see Figure 2.3 below) as well as the place for any safety-related questions, comments, and concerns.⁴⁶ The page should be user-friendly, multi-lingual, and smartphone compatible.⁴⁷ District leaders should direct community members to the page and provide content through social media, print media, e-mails, newsletters, and flyers.⁴⁸


Figure 2.3: Example Important Information for Emergency Websites or Resource Pages

For All Emergency Situations	For COVID-19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The latest district and school updates on reopenings and closures • Safety procedures • Emergency contact links • Planning and guidance documents • Laptops and mobile hotspot check-out • School meal site locators • Special education • Childcare • Responses to FAQs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDC and WHO guidance on cleaning and hygiene • Steps schools have taken or will take to prevent the spread of COVID-19 • Remote learning • Partial content reuse, Structures for Equitable Digital Learning

Source: National Association of Independent Schools and the Maryland Department of Education⁴⁹

Effective website communication also relies on a district’s capacity to provide this information in multiple languages, according to the needs of the community. Providing website communications only in English can be a significant barrier for families for whom English is not their first language.⁵⁰ For example, Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) developed a series of COVID-19 resources to provide families with information on school closures, health, safety, and educational needs (see Figure 2.4). M-DCPS translated all resources into all languages specific to the community.

Figure 2.4: Miami-Dade County Public Schools (FL)



M-DCPS divides their COVID-19 website into the following sections:

- **Phone support lines:** These lines are available for instructional learning plans, mental health services, employee assistance, adult and career/technical education, and Project UP-START (a program for unstably housed students).
- **Online resources:** This section has distance learning resources such as digital tools and tutorials and free Comcast internet, the instructional continuity plan, and distance learning FAQs. Materials in this section are available in English, Spanish, and Haitian-Creole.
- **Additional resources:** Information about mobile device distribution sites, food distributions, and assistance for families in need (both available in English, Spanish, and Haitian-Creole), and student meal distribution sites.
- **District COVID-19 updates and news media**

Source: M-DCPS.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Talbot, P. et. al., Op. cit., p. 10.

⁴⁷ “With Schools Closed and Distance Learning the Norm, How Is Your District Meeting the Needs of Its Students?” Op. cit., p. 11.

⁴⁸ Talbot, P. et. al., Op. cit., p. 6.

⁴⁹ [1] Mann, M. “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Schools.” National Association of Independent Schools, July 29, 2020. <https://www.nais.org/articles/pages/additional-covid-19-guidance-for-schools/#website> [2] “COVID-19 Resources for Maryland Schools: Guidance, Resources and Updates for Maryland Schools and Communities.” Maryland Department of Education. <http://marylandpublicschools.org/newsroom/Pages/COVID-19/index.aspx>

⁵⁰ “With Schools Closed and Distance Learning the Norm, How Is Your District Meeting the Needs of Its Students?” Op. cit., p. 10.

⁵¹ Figure contents were adapted from: “COVID-19 Coronavirus: Important Information about the Coronavirus.” Miami-Dade County Public Schools. <http://covid19.dadeschools.net/#!/fullWidth/3097>

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a valuable tool for emergency communications, where posts can provide accurate information to quickly acknowledge and address safety rumors as well as link users to the proper resources for additional information. Additionally, social media posts often highlight emergency and safety preparation in multiple ways, including:⁵²



During a crisis, an incident response team staff member can oversee the district's social media channels, including appropriate hashtag usage and monitoring. This staff member also monitors social media channels commonly used by students, staff, and families for intelligence gathering, decision-making purposes, community engagement, and collaborative problem-solving. Keeping up to date on social media use trends helps district staff identify with which social media platforms to engage: currently, students tend to mostly use Instagram and Snapchat, while Facebook is most popular with adults.⁵³

EXAMPLES OF OTHER PLATFORMS

Additional platforms districts and schools use for emergency communications include video conferencing and public broadcasting television and radio.

Video conferencing: Districts and schools should consider setting up a dedicated video conferencing account for emergencies (e.g., Zoom, RingCentral). Districts could conduct mock conferences using one of these services to prepare staff, teachers, and other employees to use the platform in the event of an emergency.⁵⁴ Due to potential security threats in using these platforms, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) provides several best practices in ensuring district/school video conferencing security (see Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5: Video Conferencing Security Best Practices For All Emergency Situations

- Assess your organizational needs and determine the appropriate product to use for your institution or district;
- Establish a distance learning and virtual meeting policy or recirculate the procedures if they already exist;
- Develop a list of approved collaboration and video conferencing tools for your organization;
- Prevent system administrators from using collaboration tools on the system while logged on with administrative privileges. Administrators should not perform non-privileged operations on the systems they are administering;
- Prohibit the use of collaboration tools and features that allow remote access and remote administration; and
- Articulate the legal, privacy, and document retention implications of collaboration tools to employees.

Source: Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency⁵⁵

⁵² Talbot, P. et. al., Op. cit., pp. 7-9

⁵³ "NEA's School Crisis Guide," Op. cit., p. 31

⁵⁴ "Supporting Continuity of Teaching and Learning During an Emergency." Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center. p. 3. https://rems.ed.gov/docs/Supporting_Continuity_of_Learning_and_Education.pdf

⁵⁵ Taken verbatim with minor adaptations from: "Cybersecurity Recommendations for K-12 Schools Using Video Conferencing Tools and Online Platforms." Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. May 2020. https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/CISA_Cybersecurity_Recommendations_for_K-12_Schools_Using_Video_Conferencing_S508C_3.pdf

Public Broadcast Television and Radio: Districts and schools may have the option to work with local television and radio stations in providing information on how distance learning will continue or having the television and radio stations host some distance learning lessons.⁵⁶

⁵⁶“Supporting Continuity of Teaching and Learning During an Emergency,” Op. cit., p. 4.



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