



## Tips for Communicating During a Crisis

Good communication doesn't happen by chance—You have to plan for it.

### **Clarity and consistency: agree on your messenger—and your message—then stick with them**

An effective communication plan includes practices that will be effective, but also fosters two-way communication with all of a school district's audiences.

#### **Be proactive, not reactive**

Determine how much and what type of information the district will share and what communication platforms to use. Many districts find that their websites are an effective platform for communicating information and updates. Use of social media by the district can also provide a pathway to link the public to accurate and timely information posted on the website. Here are some communication tools to consider:

- Create a one-stop shop for information on your district's response to the emergency and use your other communication tools to highlight key points while directing people back to this comprehensive repository. Within the repository, provide links to reputable sources of information, such as county health districts and OSPI, which are updated frequently.
- Develop a well-organized and easy to navigate Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document/webpage that gives answers to common questions about the district's response and the board's goals in handling the current situation, as well as possible future effects.
- Consider creating a dedicated hotline for people to reach a live person to ask questions about the situation and your district's response.
- Counteract false information through a daily status update and FAQ.

#### **Have a tight social media plan**

Proceed cautiously with social media because there are many ways to make a situation worse but only a few with the possibility to make things better.

The best use of social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) is for fact-based information-sharing *originating from the school district*. If your communication team has decided to use social media to share information and updates, those messages should be very carefully crafted by the district and its legal counsel to take a neutral tone.

Any launching of a social media campaign must be paired with a commitment to assign a trained communicator to monitor the accounts and promptly remove any offensive or inaccurate posting within the limitations of the law. Again, it is important to check with your legal counsel to ensure removal of comments on social media does not violate free speech rights.

Use restraint in using and responding to social media as a board member. The safest approach is to agree that no individual board member will engage in any social media discussion about how the district is handling the situation. Decide as a team how you will engage or not engage in social media and stick to it.

*Remember: Multiple board members weighing in on a single post or tweet may be considered an illegal meeting.*

#### **Consider your audiences and how best to connect with them**

Keep in mind how various audiences might be influenced by these messages and how you can cultivate good relationships with them.

#### **PARENTS:**

- When you talk with parents, make sure the language is clear and simple and express the board's commitment to student health, safety, academic achievement and long-term district viability.

- Help them understand the board's high-level mission and goals for their students and their tax dollars during the duration of the crisis.
- For specific questions or concerns, ask parents to reach out to the person closest to the situation within the school district. This might be a teacher, a coach or a principal. If they don't get the information they need at that level, refer them to the next most appropriate staff member, such as central office staff, a program director or the superintendent.
- It is important to have a proactive communication plan that keeps parents informed of the facts.

#### **MEDIA:**

- Like parents, the media's understanding of the details of an emergent situation may be very general, less detailed or even incorrect.
- Conflict is interesting and makes for good news stories. Provocative language and actions by stakeholders are much more interesting than the quiet, consistent approach taken by the district and board. Remember that it is better not to end up on the evening news or newspaper because of an action you or the board took that contributed to a conflict.

#### **SCHOOL EMPLOYEES:**

- Questions and concerns from staff should be directed back to the employee's supervisor. Remind school staff to follow the chain of command to ensure they are heard. If they persist in asking you to solve a problem for them, offer to work with them to connect with the appropriate person. Do not offer to solve the problem for them.

### [Expect challenging situations and plan for contingencies](#)

Communicating during challenging situations when emotions for all involved may be high is infinitely more difficult. Having a plan ahead of time makes it more likely that you will respond in a way that you will feel good about later.

Talk through how board members can appropriately respond to questions, comments, or even accusations in a variety of situations. Here is a checklist of situations in which your board-superintendent team (in collaboration with legal and communication personnel as appropriate) should agree on a consistent approach:

- At a board meeting – before, during and after
- At the grocery store, at a school or sporting event, or at work
- From a friend, neighbor, or church member
- On Facebook, Twitter or other social media
- Questions from a reporter
- In an email or text
- From a teacher
- From a parent
- From a student
- From a community member

In challenging situations, try to model the behavior you want to encourage in others. When you take the situation seriously and offer empathy and concern, but not panic or blame, others will have a good role model to emulate as they, in turn, communicate with others.

### [Talking points - plan ahead and practice so you are prepared](#)

There are a variety of responses board members can consider using when responding to inquiries by the public or school district staff. Here are a few examples of talking points. All options should be reviewed and approved by your district's legal counsel and communication team before using:

- *We are very proud of our community's families, teachers and all staff in our school district. The board is committed to ensuring that the actions being taken are in the best interest of our students and staff and are sustainable for the district throughout the duration of the crisis.*
- *The board's job is to set the mission, vision and direction of the school district at a high level, with management and operations taking place at the superintendent and administrator level. Getting involved in the details of the day-to-day management and operations of our schools is inappropriate for the board. We have confidence in our superintendent and our staff to make the best decisions in the interest of our students.*

- *As elected officials, school directors are responsible for safeguarding the school district as a community resource. We consider both public opinion and what we know about a given situation when making a decision. Sometimes the loudest voices are not representative of the larger community's opinion. We always weigh all competing interests – various public opinions, budget considerations, policies, potential impacts, and sustainability – to try to make the best decisions.*

When you cannot give details due to confidentiality or because the current situation is still fluid, there are still options when communicating with your district. Again, all options should be reviewed and approved by your district's legal counsel and communication team before using:

- You can describe the context: *We are working closely with public health officials. This situation is changing fast and we are planning now so we'll be prepared.*
- You can describe any known actions your schools are already taking, including any of your routine, everyday actions that are relevant but might not be universally known (e.g. regular and expanded cleaning protocols, cancelling or adjusting activities, being assertive about employee health, etc.)
- You can talk about your district's values, policies and procedures, noting how they will guide your work. You can also describe the operational considerations and challenges that your team is working through.

### **Calibrate frequently**

Throughout the course of the crisis, the need to communicate may become more or less intense. Ensure that your board is discussing communication needs and strategies with your superintendent and others on the district's communication team. Discuss the current climate and what messages are being shared among staff and the community. Board members should also share with each other what questions they are receiving and how they are answering them to ensure messages are consistent. Calibrate your thinking around appropriate responses (which sometimes may include deciding not to respond at all) and commit as a team to follow the agreed-upon strategy.