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Communicating to Your Communities During COVID-19

Top 10 Important Tips

It's important to ensure audience engagement throughout the length of this health crisis. By following communication best practices during a prolonged crisis you can avoid message fatigue, more effectively reach everyone, and give your community a positive experience. Here are 10 tips for optimizing your outreach.



1. Reserve the use of phone/voice for crisis notifications only

Overuse of the phone for non-emergency messaging will lead to ineffective emergency engagement if/when the time comes. Generally, audiences prefer other channels for informational updates and resources. When voice is reserved for emergencies only, families are more likely to listen carefully and take note of actions needed. This is supported by Project Tomorrow's Speak Up Research Project data.



2. Keep voice messages short (one minute or less) and use a familiar trusted voice

Voice messages must remain short and to the point to garner optimal engagement, retention, and attention. Messages should be kept to 30 seconds whenever possible, and no longer than one minute. Listeners should be directed to websites and other channels where they can learn more details. Use a familiar, trusted voice in recording the calls. Remember that many recipients may wait for your message to be transcribed on their phones. Take time to make sure the first words they'll read are clearly captured.



3. Leverage SMS in crisis and urgent notifications to push stakeholders to check other sources such as the website and social media for more details

Text messaging (SMS) is a great tool for catching people's attention and directing them to other resources. Not all audience members may be regularly checking email or the district website, so SMS is helpful in pushing them to take notice. Typical SMS notifications must be under 300 characters, so use shortened links to point recipients to web pages, resources, or newsletters with important information. Avoid multiple messages, and like Phone, reserve the use of SMS. Also, keep in mind that some recipients may be paying extra fees for these messages, so use them judiciously. In-app push notifications may be a less costly alternative for your audience. As always, knowing how your audience wants to be notified will help. Consider letting parents customize their own communication channel preferences.



4. Pace email notifications and direct stakeholders to your district website and social media channels

Whenever possible, keep the number of notifications to one or less per day. Direct the audience to your district website and social media channels for the most recent details and content. This will further ensure that audience members learn to use your persistent resources as a hub for information. Remember: over-messaging causes the audience to tune-out. You may be unintentionally over-messaging users due to poor coordination between teacher, school, and district messages.



5. Consider splitting up notification pushes into waves to prevent network overload

Local telephone networks can be disrupted by a sudden influx of large numbers of calls. Local phone infrastructure may be handling abnormally higher volumes during a nation-wide crisis, including traffic from other nearby districts. This can result in messaging interruptions. To mitigate this, you may consider splitting up large messages going over voice, SMS, and email. You may consider sending employee messages separately from parent messages or splitting up messages between primary and secondary schools. Call combining technology can also help reduce strain on phone networks. Also, use caution when calling parents at multiple numbers. While messaging every phone number on record for a parent can be useful in time-sensitive crises or when student's safety is at risk, using this unnecessarily can result in parent burnout, and lead to them ignoring your messages.



6. Leverage your entire team, including technology vendors.

Give your educational communications vendor(s) a heads up before holding large press events or pushing significant notifications by calling their client support line. Letting your communications provider know can ensure monitoring of the traffic and attention, should anything go wrong. If you're holding a large press event and directing all community members to your district site, your provider can do a quick audit and make sure your site is optimized for large amounts of traffic. Call your provider's support line for assistance at least two hours before your event when possible.



7. Use a "dark site" on your district website to offer critical content and resources

Some website CMS providers will offer a "dark site" or crisis website that you can quickly establish for all your COVID-19 resources and material. Dark sites are designed for incident response. They are intentionally "no frills" to ensure optimal performance with large traffic volumes and are quickly set-up so that you can turn your attention to other matters. Avoid adding unnecessary graphics, add-ons, or media, and keep content related to important information your community needs to know. Links to other pages should be used for these types of materials.



8. Keep families informed with a regular email updates from the Superintendent Monday through Friday

Creating a regular rhythm of email updates from your Superintendent will comfort audience members and establish a great sense of control over the information. Readers will learn to look forward to the update while also receiving regular reminders to visit the district website and social media pages. Avoid using phone and SMS to announce the superintendent's daily message unless the update contains urgent information.



9. Stay active and current on social media, especially Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, to ensure optimal reach beyond your district’s typical distribution lists

Social media is a great way to reach people in your community that are not on your regular distribution and calling lists. Keep your feeds updated often and link out to your district website and other resources. Be sure to always monitor your social media channels for misinformation and complaints. For tips and examples of effective use of social media during a crisis check out [#SocialSchool4EDU](#) on Twitter.



10. Partner with local media, neighboring districts, associations like NSPRA, and your communication vendors to stay informed and vigilant.

Your support network and colleagues are more important than ever. Check with local media and neighboring districts to coordinate message timing and content. Look to associations like [NSPRA](#) to provide guidance and peer-advice. Stay in touch with your communications vendors and collaborate on how best to reach families and communities during this crisis.

The Right Channel for Your Message			
Notification Example	Classification	Best Channels	Frequency
School Closure	Critical	Phone, SMS, Email, Social, Web	Once At Time Of Occurrence
Extension of School Closure	Critical	Phone, SMS, Email, Social, Web	Once At Time Of Occurrence
Return to School	Critical	Phone, SMS, Email, Social, Web	Once At Time Of Occurrence
Announcing Food Distribution During Closure	Urgent	Phone, SMS, Email, Social, Web	Once At Time Of Occurrence
Announcing Device Distribution During Closure	Urgent	Phone, SMS, Email, Social, Web	Once At Time Of Occurrence
Student or Staff Exposure to COVID-19	Important	Email, Phone, Web	Once At Time Of Occurrence
Superintendent’s Update	Important	Email, Phone, Web	At Regularly Established Cadence
Sports and Events Cancellation or Rescheduling	Important	Email, Phone, Web	Twice or More Leading Up To Event
Online Tools, Resources and Links	Important	SMS, Email, Social, Web	Once At Time Of Occurrence
Online Tools, Resources and Links (Reminders)	Reminders	Email, Social, Web	As Needed
Teacher-to-Home Academic Communications	Reminders	LMS, Google Classroom, Email, In-App Messaging Tools	As Needed