THE **CORONAVIRUS COMMUNICATIONS CRISIS** FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

NSRA

National School Public Relations Association

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Introduction

Concerns about the spread of a new coronavirus disease, COVID-19, gained public attention across the United States in January 2020. Public schools, along with their surrounding communities, are now in the midst of dealing with a public health crisis that was deemed to be a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11.

Crisis events such as this one are challenging for school communicators, but they are also the times at which effective, accurate, transparent and timely communications are needed most.

The National School Public Relations Association, in partnership with Blackboard, is publicly sharing the following tips, resources and best-practice examples to support all school communicators, everywhere, in delivering responsible communications that support families, educators and educational systems during the COVID-19 crisis.

10 Tips for COVID-19 Communications

1. Communicate early and often.

As a school communicator, most crisis events you prepare for are single incidents such as a bomb threat, a violent incident on campus or a natural disaster. COVID-19 is different. The ongoing spread of the disease is a developing situation. Guidance from public health officials is constantly evolving, may seem contradictory at times and could go on for weeks and potentially even longer.

Commit now to delivering regular updates to staff and families.

Your goal should be to provide clear, factual information while maintaining a sense of calm. With information on this situation changing rapidly, maintaining that calm may require daily updates; consider delivering them on a dedicated webpage. (See Page 3 "Communication Examples.")

Another daily to-do: Meet with the leadership team planning your school district's crisis response to get updates on the public health situation in your schools and community. Talk about what questions you have received—from families, employees, the media, etc.—in the last 24 hours and what decisions you know will be made that day. Develop an outline of topics to address in messaging with your school district stakeholders. Then spend time gathering information, reviewing updates from health officials and drafting your messages.

2. Let your local public health department take the lead.

Closely follow the guidance of public health authorities. They are the experts in keeping our communities safe during a disease outbreak. Share public health recommendations with your staff and community. When you get pressure and pushback on decisions like school closures, remind people that following the guidance of public health professionals is the best way to control the spread of the virus.

3. Don't be overly confident with reassuring messages.

It's tempting to say you are confident your schools are safe, but if someone in one of your schools tests positive for COVID-19, your credibility is blown. If people think you are overconfident, they will worry more. Express that you are concerned, be upfront about risks to individuals with compromised health, and encourage people to consult with their healthcare providers. People are more likely to stay calm if they see you are taking the situation seriously.

4. Be human.

Acknowledge that public schools are in uncharted waters, even after the H1N1 pandemic of 2009-2010. Assure people that though you may not have all the answers, you are doing your very best with the information you have, at a time when information is changing quickly. Thank people for their patience and partnership. Most people will appreciate that the district is facing tough decisions in uncertain circumstances.

WORDS TO KNOW

- **Coronavirus** – A large family of viruses that are common in people and many different species of animals.

- **COVID-19** – Abbreviation for the coronavirus disease 2019, a disease caused be a novel (or new) coronavirus that has not previously been seen in humans.

- **Social Distancing** – Measures intended to limit the movement of people in order to interrupt the transmission of infectious, contagious diseases.

- **Isolation** – Separates sick people with a contagious disease from people who are not sick.

- **Quarantine** – Separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick.

- **Community Spread** – When people have been infected with the virus in an area and some are not sure how or where they became infected.

- **Epidemic** – Affecting or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community or region at the same time.

- **Pandemic** – Occurring over a wide geographic area and affecting an exceptionally high proportion of the population.

- **Presumptive Positive** - Individuals with at least one respiratory specimen that tested positive for the virus that causes COVID-19 at a state or local laboratory

Sources: U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary

5. Be flexible and adjust messaging.

This is new territory for many school communicators. Be patient with yourself and be prepared to adjust messages and decisions based on changing information. Yesterday's message may need to be updated today. Don't sweat it—take it day-by-day and remind your audience that the situation is evolving. As you post new information and materials online, just be sure your posts are dated and the most recent updates are first so that it's clear which information is current.

6. Acknowledge, apologize and re-phrase when your communication is not clear.

Coronavirus communication is moving fast. Sometimes a message raises more questions than it answers or results in unintended consequences. If that occurs, apologize, reevaluate and clarify. Acknowledgment of a misstep goes a long way to restoring public confidence in the school system.

7. Put coronavirus information front and center.

Sharing accurate information during a time of heightened concern is critical. Rumors and misinformation can distract from the facts that help contain the spread of a virus. Commit to being transparent with your community about COVID-19 cases in schools. Transparency builds trust, which is critical in a public health emergency.

8. Stay organized.

If there was ever a time to be organized, this is it. With so many moving parts, it is critical to stay on top of what you have communicated, when you communicated and to whom you communicated. Identify an organizational process and stick with it. Consider using spreadsheets, labeled email boxes and virtual or paper folders. You will thank yourself later that you kept track of everything.

9. Brush up on your health and science vocabulary.

Understand the difference between quarantine versus isolation and epidemic versus pandemic. Review the AP Coronavirus Topical Guide and use the CDC's resource library. (See "Expert Resources") While public health officials should take the lead in discussing the new coronavirus disease, school communicators must understand the lingo so they can clearly articulate messages to their communities. (See Page 1 "Words to Know.")
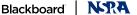
10. Lean on your fellow school PR professionals.

As school communicators, we are all in this together. Don't be shy to phone-a-friend, ask for help and reuse public resources shared by school public relations associations and practitioners. To get you started the next page contains the coronavirus resources developed and released by public school systems.

Susan Enfield
@SuptEnfield

I cannot emphasize enough to fellow district leaders how absolutely essential it is to invest in a communications team and/or strategy. It pays dividends. @AASAHQ @NSPRA @wspraboard @wasa_oly #k12prchat

Catherine Carbone @CCarboneRogers · Mar 10
This is the most important takeaway IMHO: It's times like these when investing in comms really shows up. B/c @SuptEnfield values comms, we have a robust team so I can bring the PR perspective to the decision-making table while my team runs with the tactical. #k12pr twitter.com/school_ceo/sta...

9:28 PM · Mar 10, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

13 Retweets   49 Likes

COVID-19 Communication Examples From Public Schools

Coronavirus information website with situation updates, tips for talking with children, FAQs and more (Highline Public Schools)
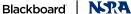http://bit.ly/2U31L1g

Coronavirus information website – en Espanol (The School District of Palm Beach County
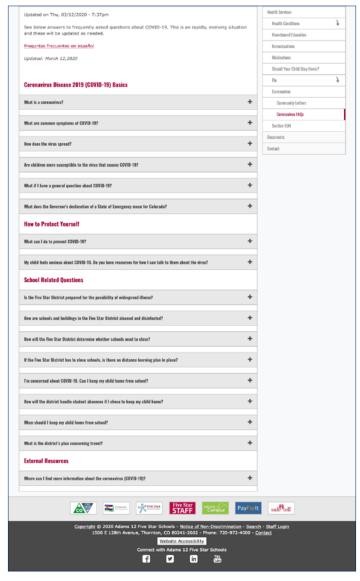http://bit.ly/2lHniHM

Coronavirus disease emergency preparedness plan website (Jeffco Public Schools)
http://bit.ly/38ElM3K

Coronavirus frequently asked questions (Adams 12 Five Star Schools)
http://bit.ly/2vPSNN7

Joint message from coronavirus task force involving schools and civic officials
http://bit.ly/2w3DHU5

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http://bit.ly/2vPSNN7

District-level letter to staff (San Diego County Office of Education)
https://conta.cc/3aPoHb9

Travel health notice to families (Pearland Independent School District)
http://bit.ly/39LEnMD

District-level letter to families (Lower Merion School District)
http://bit.ly/2Q862PS

School-level newsletter to families (Brooke Grove Elementary School)
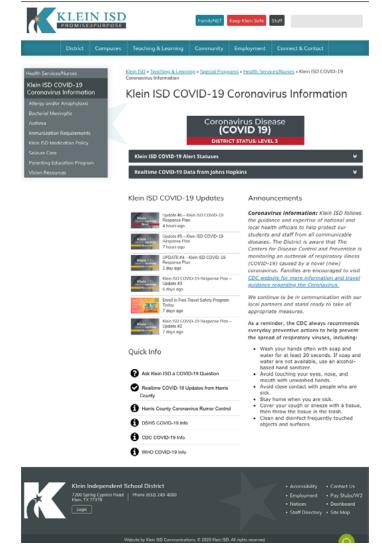http://bit.ly/2Qc8THP

Handwashing poster for use with students (Peel District School Board)
http://bit.ly/2Qc5Uit

Joint message from coronavirus task force involving schools and civic officials
http://bit.ly/2w3DHU5

Toolkit for Communicating about Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Michigan SPRA)
http://bit.ly/33el8sA

Coronavirus information website with status updates (Klein Independent School District)
http://bit.ly/2QfOIsy

#coronavirus #k12PRchat on Twitter with more examples and tips
http://bit.ly/39MXjux

Coronavirus information website with status updates (Klein Independent School District)
http://bit.ly/2QfOIsy