



Academic Institutions and COVID-19: The Critical Need for Effective Communications

This academic year is proving to be like none that administrators, faculty, students and parents have experienced before. Across the country, school districts have been constantly adapting to an ever-changing set of conditions related to the continuing spread of COVID-19. [Boston's school district](#) recently suspended its reopening plans. [Officials in New York City](#) have had to close schools in certain neighborhoods because of a rise in COVID cases. And the [Houston Independent School District](#) recently reopened schools and changed its closure procedures after closing 16 schools several days earlier due to confirmed cases of the virus. As the academic year moves forward, change will continue to be a constant, which means that school administrators will be called on to communicate clearly, confidently and in ways they may never have before.

As we have often seen, failure by a school to provide regular, detailed and compelling communications creates an information vacuum that is quickly filled by speculation from members of the community – or even by those outside the community – on social media and other platforms.

Further, COVID communications have coincided with issues related to social justice and the #MeToo movement, a one-two punch that has challenged even the most sophisticated communicators.

The quality and frequency of an administration's communications will greatly influence how much confidence and cooperation they'll receive from students, parents and teachers. As the academic year proceeds, administrators should consider the following principles to help them more effectively communicate to the school community.



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1. **Scenario plan now.** It isn't difficult to imagine likely scenarios and issues related to the pandemic. If a school hasn't already had to face this decision, how will the administration communicate that it will have to close or change its protocols because a student or teacher tested positive for the virus? What will the administration tell reporters looking for comment? What information will be provided to anxious families who desperately want to assess the likelihood their child was exposed to the virus?

Alternatively, how will administrators communicate a decision to change its operational model and why it's the right decision? How will schools adjust to and introduce policies around a vaccine that may take a long time for the student body to receive?

It is imperative to prepare communications for as many scenarios as possible now because those moments prompting profound change during the academic year will be sudden and intense. You should also consider any questions you are likely to get.

2. **Determine your audiences.** Your decisions and actions will impact a wide variety of people, not just students, faculty, and parents. There are community leaders, staff, health care providers, suppliers and vendors, even possibly labor unions. Your communications need to be tailored to each group yet be in alignment with each other.
3. **Prepare a core set of messages.** You want to be sure that your messages are as detailed as possible and project calm, thoughtfulness, and concern for the safety of your school's stakeholders. These messages can then be used to inform any Q&A sessions you have, written communications, social media or website copy.
4. **You don't have to have an answer for every question.** Each new educational plan or model that has been implemented this fall is a fundamental change in how schools operate and education is provided. Naturally, there will be questions for which there are no answers or that the administration hasn't yet considered.

In these scenarios, administrators often become defensive or ramble instead of simply admitting there is no immediate answer and committing themselves to find one. Acknowledge that the unprecedented nature and fluidity of the situation makes it impossible to have considered everything and lean into the idea that your audience knows and accepts this. The best course of action oftentimes is to acknowledge what you don't yet know, explain why that is and what will be done about it and offer any available details that may be directly related to the information being sought. Another approach in the absence of a concrete response is to state the principles that will guide your efforts to determine the answer.

5. **Practice, practice, practice.** Whether facing a group or a parent one-on-one, it's essential to practice in advance so that even admitting there's no answer makes stakeholders feel confident in your administration.

6. **Your regular communications methods and cadences are insufficient.** Stakeholders want frequent updates on how the new operational model is working, both educationally and from a health perspective. School administrators need to bolster existing processes to keep stakeholders apprised as new information becomes available. If not already part of your regular communications arsenal, consider dedicated newsletters or websites to keep people informed. Virtual town halls enable the community to ask questions and for you to relay important information. And setting up a portal for the community to submit questions will ensure that communications are two-way and the community feels they are being heard.
7. **Keep your eyes and ears open.** This will help you anticipate questions you are likely to get, identify information you will need and plan your next steps. As we've seen, in the midst of dealing with the pandemic, communities are also demanding to be heard and see action taken on race and gender issues.
8. **You are not going to please everyone.** The goal isn't to get everyone to agree that your educational model is the right one. Rather, the goal is to help stakeholders feel valued, listened to, and confident in leadership's thoughtfulness and ability to adjust as circumstances change.

Keeping everyone moving together in the same direction throughout the academic year will be challenging and require constant attention. But it will only be possible through open, sustained and effective communications.

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