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Developing the Message

In this era of constant “Breaking News,” it’s understandable that school districts want to provide staff and parents as much information as quickly as they can.

But unfortunately, the result is often mixed messages and confusion.

The superintendent is quoted on the evening news saying one thing. The communications staff writes something else in a press release. A principal tells her staff something else.

Staff at one Oregon district expressed frustration that they received five different announcements from the superintendent and assistant superintendent about the return to buildings during the COVID pandemic.

It’s not just schools sending out muddled messages. Communications from politicians and health officials about COVID often left people frustrated and uncertain about what to do.

Masks aren’t necessary, except for medical personnel. If you really want a mask, use a non-medical one. Actually, it’s better to wear a mask all the time. You must wear a mask.

While districts may feel pressure to communicate quickly, a more prudent approach is to slow down and follow these guidelines:

- Take time to thoughtfully craft your message before distributing it to the world.
- Make sure it’s accurate and includes all the pertinent details.
- Make sure all of your communicators are on the same page, so that the same message is given by all. If more than one person is going to deliver the message, make sure the message is in writing, so everyone provides the same information and context to their different audiences.
- Make sure your communication doesn’t raise more questions than it answers.

That sounds simple but can be challenging, especially in a rapidly changing landscape. It’s better to take a few extra hours, or even an extra day, to release accurate information than to spend the next several days backtracking and trying to undo the confusion and frustration that comes with misinformation.

If you feel the need to communicate before you have complete details, remember that it’s OK to just say, “We don’t have all the information, but we will provide an update just as soon as we do.” Staff and community will appreciate your efforts to be transparent and to share whatever you can as soon as you can.

During the initial stages of COVID, when situations and rules were changing at breakneck speed, many districts issued weekly (and sometimes daily) updates, offering parents and staff whatever new information they may have. Sometimes the message was just that they didn’t
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have any new information, but it helped assure patrons that the district was staying abreast of the latest developments.

Transparency and timely, accurate communications help strengthen relationships with your staff and community. Delivering a clear message helps them understand what's going on, how it affects them, and what they need to do. Backtracking after inaccurate or confusing information raises doubts and erodes trust.

Some key points for crafting clear messages and delivering in a timely manner:

- 1. Be clear and consistent.** Set up a schedule for communicating regularly with your audiences, not just when there's a crisis. If there are important decisions or developments, communicate sooner and more frequently. It is important to assure people that you are staying on top of things and that you are making thoughtful, well-informed decisions that you believe are in the best interests of students and staff.
- 2. Tell parents how you plan to communicate different messages.** If you use a parent notification system, such as FlashAlert, to notify parents about school closures, provide information about how they can sign up to receive these alerts. If you send a weekly newsletter home in elementary students' backpacks, let parents know to check those backpacks every Friday. If you send important information via email, make sure parents provide their email addresses and inform you when there are changes. Whatever tools you use, make sure parents are aware of them, what kind of information you plan to share with them, and most importantly, how to sign up to use them.
- 3. Beef up your website.** There are a myriad of communication tools available, and it can be tempting to try them all. But your website should be your "go-to" communication tool, the place where you post all important information. Regularly reinforce with parents that your website is where to go for calendar items, to review school board policies and to find other items of importance. The key is to keep your website current and relevant. People won't continue to go there if the information is outdated or was never added in the first place.
- 4. Be strategic in choosing communication tools.** Electronic newsletters, email, social media and mobile apps are just a few of the many tools that schools use to communicate with parents and staff. However, less is more when it comes to communication tools. When you use too many different tools, parents get confused about which messages are located where. Social media is great for photos and short announcements. Newsletters are great for more detailed news and feature stories. Choose a couple of effective tools, educate your audiences about how to use them, and then be consistent in using them. A strong website, an electronic newsletter and a social media presence (such as Facebook) offer plenty of opportunities for communicating well.

Most importantly, make sure your message is clear, complete and accurate, so audiences can easily understand it and trust its content. A straightforward message, delivered in a timely manner, is a key step in building trust and strong relationships with your staff, parents and community.