

March 2022

ONcall

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inside

An informed staff is essential to crisis communication

Your staff should be at the top of the list when you share information, but they are often overlooked during crises. Be sure your internal communications and crisis communication plans include all staff — licensed, administrative and *all* support staff. Be sure that everyone understands who is included, what the decisions are and why they have been made.

Apology-writing tips and how to make the most of a mistake

Mistakes are inevitable, but good leaders demonstrate high-quality leadership with thoughtful, sincere responses to errors. Plan for apologies ahead of time and be sure to acknowledge what went wrong and what, if any, changes will be implemented to avoid repeating the mistake in the future. Include your team in the planning process.

Developing empathy as a board member

The pandemic has created stress, anxiety and disruption. Schools have become a flashpoint of emotion for staff, students and parents. Many people are saying things out of fear that they would not normally say. White Pass School Board Chair Ricky Emerson shared a reflection based on the comments she's heard and the challenges she's seen during this time. She acknowledges the difficulties facing schools and expresses gratitude for hard work on behalf of students.

Understanding the budget process

Budget reports are among the most important documents in your district, but they are hard to understand. Read these tips to help simplify your budget process and report to ensure that your community can participate in the process and support your efforts.

Why email is still an effective way to reach people

Does email seem like an old-fashioned communication tool? This tried-and-true method of reaching people should still have a place in your communication plan. Read some tips and best practices to use it effectively for your goals.

INSIGHTS FOR PARENTS: Recognize and stop virtual bullies

Bullying has long been a problem that continues to threaten students' well-being during virtual instruction. Parents should watch their children for changes in behavior and routines. Tips are included to minimize risks that your child will be bullied or be the bully.

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An informed staff is essential to crisis communication

School staff are among your most important — but overlooked — audiences to inform during a crisis or constant change, like adjusting to a pandemic.

If staff learn about an incident or decision from the media or online before hearing news from you, you've eroded trust. And trust is essential to creating supportive staff that can counteract bad press and rumors.

Key concepts for effective internal communications:

- Don't leave anyone out — in fact, secretaries, bus drivers and other support staff are often the most believed information sources in a school district. And because they have lived in the community a long time, they tend to have a wider circle of influence.
- Employees should receive critical information in a timely, direct (face-to-face, if possible) manner, preferably from their front-line supervisor, such as a principal. Back up their messages with an intranet source with messages from the superintendent and board — and invite questions.
- If you want employees to behave like partners in a crisis, treat them like partners before, as well as during, a crisis.

Simply conveying the bad news isn't enough. Employees should learn the choices a school faces and understand why, such as switching to remote learning or shutting down for a day due to illness and quarantines. They should also be reminded about external crisis communication protocols in the crisis communications plan to keep messages consistent.

Partners in managing your reputation

The objective of timely, direct crisis communication to employees is to enlist them in reputation management. They are your front line, even more than leadership. That can involve asking for advice and seeking specific assistance in crisis response, such as sharing anticipated parent reactions — so make them part of creating or refreshing your plan.

Employees should respect protocols for who is responsible for external communications in a crisis, but you cannot expect them not to question decisions or offer alternative approaches.

Because crises come in all forms and sizes, internal communication needs to be flexible and scaled to match the circumstances. Budget cuts and staff layoffs will send shivers throughout an entire organization and require intensive internal communication. If a situation involves

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just one school, focus on the school with in-person communication while keeping information updated online for the entire district.

Crisis-generated chaos should never obscure the need for informed, appropriate internal communication — or be an excuse for not providing such communication. The superintendent or board chair's time may be better spent talking to the media, so someone else in the management circle must be delegated to inform and engage employees. That job is as vital as the job of communicating with the media.

A school district's reputation is inextricably tied to the reputation of its teachers and programs. It's a partnership that must be honored by timely, direct communication, which in complex crises demands ongoing updates rather than a one-and-done statement or video.

Management should cultivate employee engagement in an honest effort to improve — not as a “loyalty test.” Employees should respect protocols for who is assigned and responsible for external communications in a crisis, but you cannot expect them not to question decisions or offer alternative approaches. Effective internal crisis communication allows for two-way engagement and welcomes questions and alternatives, which often can improve the quality of a crisis response.

The reward for effective internal crisis communications is a more unified school district with greater respect for leadership from staff – and support from the community. How you respond to a crisis can bring you closer to the community ... and actually improve your reputation.

Contributed by Gary Conkling and Shannon Priem. Conkling, Principal with CFM Advocates, specializes in crisis communication, issues management and reputation management as founder of one of the 100 largest PR firms in the U.S. Priem is former communications director for the Oregon School Boards Association and current senior content specialist for Salem Health.

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Apology-writing tips and how to make the most of a mistake

We all make mistakes. It's uncomfortable and can be seen as a deficit, but how you deal with it shows your leadership quality. Do you own up to it, gloss over it, blame someone else? Whether your school printed a flyer with the incorrect date, a staff member was heard using offensive language, or sensitive information was shared erroneously — an apology is warranted.

Here are the ways to demonstrate great leadership when you or someone on your team makes a mistake:

- Acknowledge the mistake. Leaders who own up to their mistakes show strength and humility.
- Learn from your mistake. Don't let the fear of making mistakes deter you from trying new things. A good leader will take risks to try a new idea.
- Teach others. Share your mistake with your peers and what you learned from it. Sharing the lessons you learned builds connection and trust with your network.

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Plan ahead for apologies

You have a crisis communications plan, but do you have a strategy when you need to issue an apology? If you've never had to make a public apology, you may not have a PR plan to issue an apology. With a plan in place, you'll be able to respond as quickly as you can.

It's good to respond immediately to a mistake or blunder. But if you're not ready, plan to issue a statement acknowledging the situation and that you'll issue another statement shortly. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

Create a template

Apologies need to be personal, but research says they are most effective when they contain certain elements. Create a letter template to avoid forgetting an important element when you're under pressure.

A study in 2016 found six elements contributed to a convincing apology. Some elements of an apology were far more effective than others. Asking for forgiveness was the least convincing form of apology, while acknowledging responsibility was by far the most effective. Strive to include as many of these elements as possible in your apology.



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1. Express regret. Use “I” statements. Don’t say, “I’m sorry you felt this way.”
2. Explain what went wrong. Be direct, provide details and take ownership.
3. Acknowledge responsibility. Don’t blame someone else or make excuses. Don’t say “but.”
4. Declare regret and promise it won’t happen again.
5. Offer repair or a remedy. Say how you are correcting the mistake or taking steps to prevent a repeat occurrence. Be proactive with an appropriate solution. You might not be able to heal a person you offended, but the gesture demonstrates your sincerity.
6. Request forgiveness and the opportunity to regain trust and/or repair a situation.

Read more about the study’s findings here: <https://news.osu.edu/the-6-elements-of-an-effective-apology-according-to-science/>.

Include internal audiences

Remember to include staff in your apology plan. If you need to issue a public apology, you should also be transparent and honest with staff about the situation.

Develop specific plans for different apologies

A staff person offending a parent will need a different apology than a school board meeting accidentally not being recorded. Consult with HR, your legal team, and other necessary departments to decide on the best apology strategy. Every situation will need to be addressed individually, but it’s best to have a plan in place to save time.

Plan as a team

Get everyone on board before a mistake happens. In the middle of a crisis is not the time to discuss the best apology strategy. Make sure everyone agrees on the apology plan and process.

Contributed by Erin Good, communications consultant

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Developing empathy as a board member

The challenges of the pandemic have impacted everyone. It is an understatement to say it has caused disruption to daily life and routines. Significantly, it has also had a widespread adverse mental health impact on a variety of people.

While we have all tried to adapt and persevere, the effects are worse in some fields and for some people. Healthcare professionals, grocery store workers and educators are front-line staff members whose jobs require them to provide direct services to patients, customers and students.

Schools have become a flashpoint of emotions. Understandably, parents are worried about their children's education and safety. School staff members have concerns about health and safety and the new challenges of adapting to remote, then hybrid, then disengaged classrooms. District staff must meet the demands of delivering quality programs in an environment of uncertainty and concern while keeping staff and students in their care safe. And finally, school board members, those generous volunteers who help shape education in their communities, are on the receiving end of criticism from all sides over decisions they make or mandates they follow.

It's an emotional time, and people may be saying or doing things out of character because of stress and worry. We could all use a little empathy. And we should practice empathy because we do not know what other people are going through or the struggles they may be dealing with.

Ricky Emerson, School Board Chair in White Pass, Wash., shares the following reflection based on the comments she's heard and the challenges she's seen during this time. There are no easy answers, but recognizing that people are doing the best they can during a challenging time — and thanking them for their efforts — is a caring act of empathy that can help people feel seen and heard.

Do I really get it?

Do I get the daily challenge of how many kids will be able to show up in your classroom?

Do I get that your lesson plans seem to have a perpetual "to be continued" in felt marker across the top?

Do I get the revolving door of who was at school last week, or even who came to class today?

Do I get the phone calls, printed seatwork and follow-ups trying to stay in touch?

Do I get that some days you feel as if you can't do one more day of "this"?

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Do I get how many creative ways you've asked a student to wear their mask on AND up?

Do I get that your "to-do" pile has grown MILES higher than your "ta-done" pile?

Do I get that you might be confused about if it's five days out, 10 days out, or if it is now five again?

Do I get that who is teaching what, where and to whom today might be different than yesterday, or perhaps even "yet to be determined" for today?

No - I don't fully "get it."

And yet, I know our teachers, support staff, bus drivers, students and families are dealing with ALL this and so much more.

I can say that stress has now become a "four-letter" word.

I can say that I really, really appreciate you!

I can say that you are still making a difference.

I can say that your co-workers couldn't do this without your contribution each day.

I can say that I am glad to have seen patience and fortitude in action – which likely you have renewed numerous times daily.

I can say that I am glad for the resourcefulness you have exhibited to those around you.

I can say that I realize you care, you are committed and you are doing the best you can.

I can say, with a grateful spirit, THANK YOU from the bottom of my heart.

*Submitted with respect for each one who reads this.
Ricky Emerson, Board Chair*

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Understanding the budget process

Few reports are more important — or drier to read and more difficult to understand — than your district’s budget document. Page after page of numbers, usually with little explanation about what they represent. And typically, there’s little context for how the budget was developed and why different programs or line items were funded.

That’s why it’s important that districts “uncomplicate” the process as much as possible, so patrons don’t have to be accountants or bankers to understand it.

Link the numbers to the “real world”

A good first step is to simplify the budget document by using straight-forward language and eliminating the jargon that only educators are familiar with. Include a short summary at the start of each section, with explanations about how different budget items relate to student learning and success. For example, if there is a beefed-up investment in technology, include an explanation of what that means. Will it provide more computers so that every child has access to a device? Will it speed up connection rates so that all students can work on state testing on the same day, rather than staggered schedules?

Or how about the new math curriculum that is in the budget? Include a short explanation about what that means. Will every student now have access to their own book to take home?

If there are cuts to a particular program or area, outline how that will impact students. Will you have to eliminate any classes? Will there still be educational assistants in the classrooms?

Engage the community in setting funding priorities

The money in school budgets comes from tax revenues, so community members naturally are interested in how their tax dollars are being spent. The budget process should offer patrons an opportunity to engage in the conversation and offer feedback, both in written form and at public forums and meetings.

Engage your community early, before a proposed budget is presented to the Budget Committee. That way, they can help you determine the funding priorities for the new budget.

Look for ways to simplify what can be a very complicated process. Instead of having patrons grapple with multi-million dollar figures in setting priorities, some districts have had success using a \$100 budget. Here’s how it worked for one Oregon school district that was facing budget cuts:

The district symbolically reduced their entire budget to \$100 and created a worksheet showing how much of that amount went for different categories. For instance, it might cost

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\$16.46 for elementary teachers, 45 cents for K-12 textbooks and \$12.82 to operate special education programs. Participants were each given worksheets, and then they huddled in small groups to make decisions on allocating the funds. It was an eye-opening process for many as they struggled to prioritize the programs and expenditures that were most important to them. The administration used their responses to develop spending priorities.

In Washington, districts have used a similar process with “The Budget Game,” a board game that uses poker chips or play money to help participants see the relationships in district expenditures.

Online surveys are another good tool for explaining details of the budget process and enlisting feedback. There are many free and/or low-cost survey tools available, including Google and Survey Monkey. Questions can be asked in a number of ways, from simple yes and no queries to ranking funding options in priority order. Respondents can also be given an opportunity to offer comments.

Be open and transparent

There’s a lot of planning and estimation that goes into school budgets and often a lot of uncertainty. School districts are required by law to pass a budget by June 30 each year, and sometimes they don’t know their allocation from the state before they have to pass their budget. It’s important to help patrons understand that and the other constraints districts face when crafting budgets for the following years.

A few key steps in creating an open and transparent process:

- Publish a timeline that lists the dates and times for all budget meetings. Inform all key publics (parents, school staff, community members, etc.) about the budget timeline and encourage them to participate in meetings.
- Provide background information so that participants understand the budget cycle and the parameters districts face in preparing their budgets.
- Be sure to show how spending aligns with the district’s strategic goals and directions.
- Communicate frequently throughout the budget process. Post to your website and send electronic updates immediately after each budget meeting, recapping the discussion and any decisions that were made.
- Keep your staff well-informed about the budget process and decisions. That shows respect to your employees, and it equips them with accurate, up-to-date information to share with parents and community members.

Although everyone’s priorities won’t be met in the final budget, patrons appreciate the opportunity to be involved in the process and have their voices heard.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant

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Why email is still an effective way to reach people

The internet offers so many ways to connect and communicate with people. There is no question about the value of digital tools and outreach. Sometimes, however, it may seem too easy to reach for the newest social technology trend or employ so many tools that it becomes difficult to use them well or track their effectiveness.

Email is a tried-and-true way to communicate

For many workers, and most parents, it is almost impossible to imagine life before email. It is an essential tool. Almost four billion people worldwide have an email account, and an estimated 300 billion emails are sent daily.

For years, digital experts have announced the death of email for public outreach. This premature prediction hasn't held true because email offers many advantages as a tool in your communications toolbox. It offers a way to build an audience list, create targeted communications and ensure easy two-way messaging. A strategic email plan can be a valuable complement to social media, newsletters and direct communication.

Consider this district that combined email, website content, school newsletters and social posts to advertise a workshop for parents with a popular child psychologist.

The district was surprised by the unusually large turnout of more than 300 parents. When they asked participants how they'd heard about the workshop, parents said email, combined with supplemental details on the website, was the main source.

For general information, this combination is extremely effective for announcements and reminders. For targeted information, it is still hard to beat.

In another school district, the superintendent built a "key communicators network" that he can reach instantly via email whenever there is important school news. He's communicating with a large cross-section of his community and getting instant feedback that he can respond to immediately.

Email may not be as trendy or fashionable as social media channels, but it still needs to be part of a communication mix that maintains the balance between electronics and face-to-face.

Best practices for email communications

There are tips for writing effective emails that can help you overcome barriers to reaching your audiences effectively. Some of these issues can include a lack of trust, familiarity and quality.

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The content and structure of the message are critical. Recipients will be more likely to trust and understand what you say if the email is written well and presented professionally.

- Keep messages short, accurate and timely. When news needs to be shared quickly, be sure a message is ready to go. Having a template in your files can help you customize and respond faster.
- Email messages lack interpersonal clues. They can be easily misunderstood, especially when messages deal with sensitive issues. Recipients can perceive angry tones, abrupt manners and even humor incorrectly. Deal with sensitive, confidential or controversial issues — good or bad — face-to-face.
- Even now, some people may not have access to email. Make provisions to inform all parties. Also, be sure to consider your audiences with non-English language needs.
- Define your policies and protocols to ensure appropriate communication with parents, district- and building-level staff.
- Capture new email addresses to add to your lists. Do student registration forms include a space for parents' email addresses? A place for parents to indicate how they would like to receive school communications? Is someone at the building level assigned the task of making sure parents receive school communications in their preferred format? Do printed communications include the same notices as email messages? If you are sending unsolicited email, recipients need to opt in for subsequent messaging.
- What are you doing at the district level to build a database of email addresses of citizens who are interested in the schools and want to be informed? Are you working to send meeting agendas and minutes electronically? Are local media representatives included on your email list? The ability to use this list for targeted communications is a powerful benefit of email messaging.
- Be sure to reply to your emails. Assign someone to respond quickly to questions or comments, and be sure to maintain your mail list. Using an email marketing service, such as Emma, Mail Chimp, Constant Contact, or another service, can streamline this.

Email content tips

Understand and write to your audience. Tailor your correspondence, especially the tone. Your voice will be different in an email to members of your chamber of commerce vs. parents of your kindergarten classes.

Use active voice. This is standard practice for good writing. In an email, it will help messages deliver clear, concise information or requests for action.

Craft a catchy subject line. Your open rate will improve if the subject line is compelling. Write a subject line that captures attention and motivates readers to open the message to read more. This is essential for unsolicited emails that have a dismal open rate, estimated at only 20%.

Write for mobile reading. Increasingly, emails are opened and read on the small screens of mobile devices. Write text passages that are not too long. Avoid images or check to be sure they display correctly. Select a legible font. Again, an email marketing platform can help optimize your message for a variety of screen sizes.

Send it at the right time to maximize the open rate. Digital marketing provider Hubspot analyzed open rates for emails and found that 10 a.m., 1 p.m. and 6 p.m. had the highest open rates. (<https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/best-time-to-send-email>). That could be a rule-of-thumb for your district to get started. After a few email campaigns, check the analytics in your email marketing software to see if times are different in your district.

Using Email

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Electronic communications are a standard part of any communications plan and practice. Which ones create the most effective and powerful channels for your outreach to improve school and community relationships? Conducting a regular inventory of what you have in place and how you're using it will help you improve your efforts and consider integrating email communications into your plan if it isn't in regular use.

Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant

For Families



Recognize and Stop Virtual Bullies



**March
2022**

INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

Distance has been a part of the school experience for a few years now because of the pandemic. Students were physically distant when schools offered online-only instruction, and later they were socially distant as normal school routines and activities resumed following COVID protocols.

A positive outcome of this difficult time is fewer cases of bullying, right? Unfortunately no. Cyberbullying has long been a concern and is on the rise. Many students have reported bullying behavior during online school.

“According to the LIght, an organization that tracks online harassment, there has been a 70% increase in cyberbullying in just a few months. Aside from the increase in technology use, there are other factors contributing to the rise:

- **Increased stress:** The pandemic has been highly stressful and confusing for everyone. When kids feel stressed or confused, it can lead to acting or lashing out at others, arguing among friends and risk-taking behaviors.
- **Isolation:** Mandatory stay-at-home orders can cause feelings of loneliness, which can lead to fragmented relationships. Some kids may have limited access to the internet, which can make them feel further isolated. In return, they may make mean or cruel comments in frustration, especially if they feel like they are out of the loop within their friend groups.
- **Decreased supervision online:** With many parents trying to balance working from home, helping with schoolwork and managing this new world, they aren't available to pay close attention to what their kids are doing online.
- **Boredom:** Kids sometimes engage in cyberbullying because they are bored, lonely or want attention. Because the pandemic worsens these issues, it can lead to mean behavior online. Some kids bully to relieve stress, but also because they are bored.

<https://bit.ly/3rdYfTL>

What is bullying? What is cyberbullying?

Bullying is intentional and repeated over time. When it occurs online, it is amplified in the messages and impact because of the wider reach of social sharing. In virtual classrooms, bullying can still occur in direct messaging, interactions missed by the teacher and on social media.

Parents should watch their children for changes in behavior, resistance to online activity, distancing from family or disinterest in normal routines and activities.

Tips for parents

Experts say the most important thing parents can do if their child is a victim of bullying is to reassure them that it is not their fault. If a child is bullied, it is difficult for parents to see them suffer, but it also provides a good opener for additional conversation. It may even be an opportunity to discuss empathy.

This may be difficult, but it is valuable to help children think about the motives behind the actions of the bullies. “Hurt people hurt people,” according to Think Kindness (www.thinkkindness.org), an organization that promotes measurable acts of kindness in schools through online content and virtual and in-person assemblies.

This realization doesn’t make bullying less painful or easier for victims, but it may help them understand that it is not necessarily about them. They may be the target for reasons that have nothing to do with them.

Parents can help minimize the distress from bullying, which affects both the bullied and the bully. The following tips are recommendations from children’s health experts at Blue Cross (<https://bit.ly/3rdYfTL>):

Parents who are working from home are with their children more than ever. They have the unique opportunity to be observant and mindful of what their kids are doing online and how their interactions on social media may be affecting them.

- **Create guidelines:** By limiting screen time, parents can curb cyberbullying. This is not an easy step, but it can be done. Allocate time for family, games and other offline activities.
- **Talk about what’s happening:** It is important to have honest conversations with kids about what they are going through, especially during the pandemic. Times are very stressful for everyone, kids included. Talk about what that feels like for them or how it can be addressed.
- **Urge connections:** Staying home and not seeing friends is especially difficult for children and teens, as they need those connections to grow and develop. Encourage them to use video chat platforms to stay connected with friends, provided it be in a healthy way.
- **Listen and reassure.** Kids who fear repercussions or loss of technology privileges will not share their concerns with parents. Be clear that it is safe to share their concerns with you. Most kids would rather endure bullying than lose their phone or computer, which is a link to social connections.

Be aware of the seriousness of cyberbullying. Virtual bullying has increased significantly during the pandemic, but parents may not know about it. Watch for signs that your child is struggling or suffering in silence. Ask questions and stay alert for signs of trouble.