Communicating through Uncertainty

One of the biggest challenges in communications is navigating uncertainty. Sometimes you have incomplete information or know that a situation may quickly change; other times you must share information that you expect will be unpopular.

Often school districts, eager to avoid conflict, respond to those situations by simply not communicating at all. But that is a huge mistake. Honesty and transparency are cornerstones of a strong relationships with your community, just as they are with your friends and family. And while they are uncomfortable at times, these hard conversations ultimately foster partnership and collaboration that will create a better experience for students and families.

This document provides high-level guidance for how to approach communications in two common difficult scenarios: when you are forced to communicate information that is incomplete or likely to soon change, and when you must announce a policy that is likely to be unpopular. Before going into specifics, there are two points to keep in mind:

First, **trust your community.** This isn't just about trusting what they tell you. It's about trusting that they will listen to you in good faith; that they believe you have the best interest of students at heart; and that they understand and appreciate how hard these decisions can be. Treat them with trust, fairness, and respect, and they will ultimately treat you the same way.

Second—and this may seem surprising in a communications planning document—**good communications cannot rescue weak policy.** Communicating well can help make situations easier and build effective relationships with your stakeholders, but it is ultimately the content you're communicating that matters.

Communicating When Information is Fluid or Incomplete

Districts often have to incorporate rules and directives from multiple levels of government as they set policy—and they are sometimes contradictory or released on different timelines. But it is important to share what you do know in order to build trust and alleviate anxiety. After all, if you don't provide information to fill the void, the community will generate their own.

Speak up, but only say what you know to be true. Describe the situation as you currently understand it, including any relevant background information. Resist the temptation to speculate.

Directly explain the uncertainty. If the situation is fluid, directly explain why. For instance, if you are still waiting for additional state clarification or guidance, say that, and if possible share when you expect to have that additional information.

Lay out different scenarios (if applicable). If there are a series of possible outcomes, describe what each of them are and why they might happen. It may seem counterintuitive to introduce additional uncertainty, but remember that your community will be uncertain regardless, and without specific possibilities they will invent their own. It is best to avoid surprise if possible.

Commit to your next update. State how and when you will share additional information. It is important to commit to a specific date, regardless of whether you will have the situation entirely clarified. If community members know when they will hear more, it will help to alleviate their anxiety.

Communicating Bad News

Sometimes you have to communicate information that you expect will be unpopular. The impulse for silence is understandable—after all, nobody likes inciting anger, frustration, or sadness. But remember that the information will reach your community regardless. If you start the conversation, you can help to ensure a productive dialogue that has you working with your community—not against it.

Don't sugarcoat it. Resist the temptation to appease your audience by understating or writing around the problem. It may feel less painful in the moment but will only lead to resentment and distrust later on. State the decision plainly and directly.

Explain your reasoning and acknowledge flaws. Especially in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, districts are having to pick the "least bad" out of a set of bad options. You are not required to enthusiastically support your decision. Acknowledge that it was a hard choice with real tradeoffs, and explain why you made the decision you did. If you anticipate shortcomings,

Make a plan for collecting feedback. It is critical to ensure that the community's voices are heard. As part of your announcement, share how community members can provide feedback. Use a variety of venues; email, phone calls, and virtual or in-person town halls can all be useful options. As part of this, explain how the district will be incorporating this feedback in to decision-making. And if this feedback ultimately does influence policy changes, be sure to acknowledge that when the changes are announced.

Commit to your next update. As above, commit to when the community should expect to hear from you next. If there are specific components of the policy that you intend to review, call them out here.

COVID-19 Scenario 1: Reconciling State and Local Guidance

One of the challenges of communicating about COVID-19 is that districts are forced to reconcile guidelines from different levels of government—guidelines that sometimes change rapidly. New Schools New Orleans recently provided a strong summary of these different levels that could be adapted to your context.

(original link: https://www.newschoolsforneworleans.org/latest-information-on-school-reopening-in-2020/)

Latest Information on School Reopening in 2020
Summer break is ending soon for our students and school will begin again. Each school will decide what that looks like for them within the guidelines that the state, and just recently the city, have set out.

We know students, families, educators, and community members are anxious about what these guidelines are. Here, we provide a high-level overview. Schools will send additional information to their families to ensure that any additional questions are answered.

The Big Picture
The City of New Orleans and NOLA Public Schools (NOLA-PS) have established health and safety protocols for each COVID-19 "phase."

Schools will then use that guidance to develop their own reopening plans. At any point during the school year, school models may shift based on the phase of reopening the city is in. Both the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) and NOLA-PS have developed plans for phases 1, 2, and 3. If the city announces a stay-at-home order again at any point, schools will operate completely remotely, as they did this spring.

There Are Three Levels of Planning: State Level, City Level, and School Level

State Level
These "Strong Start 2020" guidelines, set out by LDOE, focus primarily on public health and broad logistical concerns for returning to school.

How did LDOE develop these guidelines?
LDOE brought together top statewide public health experts and superintendents for extensive conversations, planning, and re-working of plans until they landed on a strong final product. Then, LDOE called upon three separate groups to review and sign off on the guidelines: the "Resilient Louisiana Commission" (RLC) organized by Governor John Bel Edwards, the RLC's Education and Workforce Task Force, and a K-12 subgroup of that task force of which our CEO, Patrick Dobard, is a member.

What do the guidelines say?
LDOE guidance specifies that schools must engage in protective measures such as social distancing, frequent monitoring of students and staff for COVID-19 symptoms, and frequent cleaning and handwashing. The document has more detailed information on drop-off and pick-up, class transitions, assemblies, athletics, and more. Younger students should be in small, static groups, with the understanding that physical distancing and mask-wearing may be harder. Older students should maintain a physical distance of six feet whenever possible and are required to wear masks.

LDOE's guidance also calls for "close contacts" of anyone infected with COVID-19 at school to self-quarantine for fourteen days. Close contacts are people who have been within 6 feet of an infected person for over fifteen minutes.

City Level
The "Roadmap to Reopening Schools" released July 1 by NOLA-PS is more specific. It provides uniform guidelines within which each school in our city can operate.

How were they developed?
NOLA-PS released a public survey through which New Orleanians could share their thoughts and concerns around school reopenings. NOLA-PS also assembled a Reopening Task Force, which was made up of city officials, school leaders and staff, charter school board chairs, members of the Superintendent's Parent Advisory Committee, and other key experts. This task force used the health and safety guidelines laid out by LDOE and the City of New Orleans alongside the survey results to develop the Roadmap to Reopening Schools.

What do they say?
The Roadmap to Reopening Schools details the different stages of school operation, based on grade level and phase of reopening. At any point, if safety considerations call for school closures, NOLA-PS will do so.

The Roadmap itself specifies more detailed notes on operational considerations such as transportation, school entry and exiting, hygiene practices, student transitions between classes, child nutrition, and extracurricular activities.

School Level
Each school and network will communicate to families how they will implement NOLA-PS' guidelines in the coming weeks. They will have adjusted for differences in their school models, class sizes, transportation requirements, and more.

It is important to note that these plans are adaptable.

At any point, the state, NOLA-PS, or a given school can choose to adjust (within the guidelines) based on how their plan is going. If they feel a model is not working to safely educate their children, they have the flexibility to re-evaluate. The priority, across the board, is keeping children, educators, school teams, and families safe. We are confident that while the return to school will not be easy, and COVID-19 will continue to present serious difficulties, our city and schools are up to the challenge.

COVID-19 Scenario 2: Sharing Disappointing News

In response to a crisis such as COVID-19, many families are eager for things to go "back to normal." But due to situations outside of district control, that may not be possible. Recently Los Angeles Unified and San Diego Unified School Districts in California announced that schools would start online only this fall—a decision they knew would be a disappointment to many. This can be a helpful model for similar announcements.

(original link:
https://achieve.lausd.net/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=4&ModuleInstanceID=4466&ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=91406&PageID=1)

On March 13, four months ago today, we made the difficult decision to close our schools to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Much has changed since that time: New research is available, additional information on school safety experiences from around the world, and updated health guidelines from state and county leaders.

Unfortunately, much of the research is incomplete and many of the guidelines are vague and contradictory. One fact is clear: those countries that have managed to safely reopen schools have done so with declining infection rates and on-demand testing available. California has neither. The skyrocketing infection rates of the past few weeks make it clear the pandemic is not under control.

Therefore, we are announcing that the new school year will start online only. Instruction will resume on August 18 in Los Angeles Unified and August 31 in San Diego Unified, as previously scheduled. Both districts will continue planning for a return to in-person learning during the 2020-21 academic year, as soon as public health conditions allow.

This announcement represents a significant disappointment for the many thousands of teachers, administrators and support staff, who were looking forward to welcoming students back in August. It is obviously an even greater disappointment to the many parents who are anxious for their students to resume their education. Most of all, this decision will impact our students in ways that researchers will take years to understand.

Our leaders owe it to all of those impacted by the Covid-19 closures to increase the pace of their work. No one should use the delay in the reopening of classrooms as a reason to relax. The coronavirus has not taken a summer vacation, as many had hoped. Indeed, the virus has accelerated its attacks on our community.

The federal government must provide schools with the resources we need to reopen in a responsible manner.

In the past four months, we have provided more than 47 million meals to families, distributed more than 250,000 computers to students and trained more than 35,000 educators in online learning. In the weeks ahead, we plan to continue this breakneck pace.

- The school year will resume on schedule.
- Teachers will receive expanded training in online education to better meet the needs of students.
- Students will receive additional training at the start of the year to become better online learners.
- Online supports for parents will be increased to make it easier for them to participate in the education of their students.
- Principals will continue customized planning for the safest possible reopening this fall.
- Free meals will continue to be provided at the current distribution stations.

On Friday, the American Academy of Pediatrics reversed course and said it was no longer confident that opening schools in the middle of a public health crisis is the best option for children. That reversal symbolizes the speed with which schools continue to receive vague and conflicting information from the medical and scientific communities. It is clear our two systems will need to create our own source for reliable scientific information.

Los Angeles Unified will provide more detailed information about both online and at-school programs in the coming weeks, with final plans by the first week in August. San Diego Unified plans to provide a public assessment on August 10 of how soon (after the first week of school) a physical return to class would be possible.

COVID-19 Scenario 3: Communicating When Information is Fluid or Incomplete

In the middle of the summer, Denver Public Schools announced an intent to return to in-person schooling, with a remote option available for any families who wanted it. As case counts have risen, the school district recognized a need to revisit plans and clarify that they are keeping tabs on the situation. Although the communication below does not include a specific change of course, it does highlight and preview potential shifts. Critically, it also includes a date by which a decision will be made and next steps families can take to share feedback and seek answers.

(original link: https://www.dpsk12.org/our-dps-weekly-important-updates-on-our-return-to-school/#en*)*

As we continue to plan for the upcoming school year, I want to share an update with you on our ongoing work. Our DPS leadership team has been responding to the changing realities of COVID with proactive, health-based plans for education since March. We have heard many questions and concerns about returning to school, and truly appreciate the feedback we continue to receive.

COVID in Colorado and across the nation
As we have emphasized throughout the past several months, we remain ready to adjust our plans based on changing health conditions and risk factors within our community. We are making contingency plans should the rates of COVID infection increase to a point where health officials recommend that in-person attendance is not feasible. Like many states around the country, we have seen an increase of COVID-19 cases in Colorado. Fortunately, our increases have not been as high as other states such as California, Arizona, and Florida.

As many of you have seen, this increase in community spread has led several school districts, including Los Angeles and San Diego, to decide to start next school year with fully remote learning. In consultation with our health partners, we believe that the current rate of spread in our community does allow us to continue forward with a plan for in-person learning, but please know that we are monitoring the ever-changing environment daily.

Building a responsive plan with safety in mind
We are striving to make our plans as responsive to changing health conditions as possible. For example, we are considering a "staggered start" schedule, in which schools would all begin virtually and phase in in-person attendance gradually.

We have also developed plans with health officials to safely run a hybrid or fully in-person model as health data allows. And of course, every family will still have the opportunity to choose a fully virtual program.

Delaying start of school to mitigate heat concerns, allow for teacher preparation
We are also considering pushing back the day school starts for students by one week to Aug. 24 (for most schools, as original start dates vary for some). This delay would increase the amount of time teachers have to prepare for a highly unusual school year -- and decrease the number of hot August days that our students and staff will be in classrooms.

We expect to be able to share more details with you about these decisions on Monday, July 20.

These conversations are ongoing, and we are grateful for the many partners who are making this possible. We will continue to update you on details. In the meantime, we encourage you to review the Frequently Asked Questions on our return to school webpage, and email us your questions and feedback at CoronavirusInfo@dpsk12.org.