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Crisis Communications and School Administration—COVID-19

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and Jennifer Lester

For 49 years ERC has been working with health concerns and crises within school systems. We have learned that it is not enough for school leadership to do the right thing—they must effectively communicate that they have done so. How leadership communicates in a time of destabilizing crisis is nearly as critical as making wise decisions. As they address reopening amid the COVID-19 crisis the communication dynamic requires consideration.

Seven Basic Rules of Crisis Communication

1. Maintain a single point of communication.

Maintaining a single point of communication can be difficult to achieve amid a crisis. It is made especially challenging as the mediums of communication now include unregulated internet outreach. If there are multiple sources spreading differing information, the result will be an almost certain questioning of school leadership.

The school's communication plan requires designating an individual to step forward and, in a calm, confident manner, make it clear that she or he is the official spokesperson regarding this issue. They must make it clear that they have been formally authorized by an elected board or by traditional school leadership to provide the authorized release of information.

Both individuals and, quite often, the media will seek input from other sources associated with the school. We've been involved in crisis situations where the media interviewed frantic students, and parents who were convinced of mismanagement prior to contacting the school. Occasionally un-designated school employees may come forward, publicly sharing various opinions or misinformation.

The individual who holds the responsibility for formally representing the school needs to authoritatively state to the public that they represent the singular source of official information and that they will, with frequency, make information available and accessible. The use of electronic media to share information may be especially helpful in terms of dealing with the media. Maintaining an updated school information website is important.

It should be made clear to employees that releasing public information contrary to the school's programming is problematic. While employees, are free to express their personal views they must make it clear that they are not speaking as agents of the school.

Often the most effective path for curtailing employees from expressing their personal views is to explain how detrimental it is to create conflicting information especially regarding matters of health and safety.

2. Obtain current, reliable information but qualify statements of fact.

In other words, share what the school believes to be the best information, even if it's negative, but make it clear that it is information, "as we understand it."

Confidently supporting facts or concepts which may be found to be inaccurate undermines credibility. In new technical areas, such as COVID-19, many of our initial understandings regarding risk, prevention, and remedy have been found to be inaccurate. Assume that there will be a continual evolution of best practices.

3. Maintain and monitor feedback loops.

In addition to presenting information, is important to listen carefully, especially to concerns, rumors, and criticism. Often leadership in crisis and under pressure becomes internally focused. School leaders consistently share information among themselves and the concerns of others may be outside their line of vision. This disconnect, often exacerbated through the internet, can undermine the school's effectiveness. Using technology to proactively request information, questions, and concerns will create more targeted understanding of concerns and inherently create support. One mechanism that is often appreciated by the media is for school leadership to privately ask a professional media provider what they believe are the major concerns of the public or special interest groups. Media professionals are inherently focused on public perceptions and have insight into community concerns.



4. Present consistent basic information for the public and specialized topical information for sub-groups.

There are two considerations in sharing of information relating to a crisis-oriented topic. The first involves providing general information on the school's approach to addressing the crisis. This typically involves general communication through a school website and outreach to the local media. Secondly, the school may need to provide targeted information to those with special concerns.

Approaches for working with challenged students, athletic programs, college entrance testing, fine arts programming, health insurance, transportation, and educational options are all specialized areas that may not be of interest to the general public but require response to those with special concerns,

Following website outreach and a formal public presentation the district may consider offering a more in-depth briefing for the professional media or those who have special interest. This is especially appreciated by the professional media and allows the presenter more leeway in targeting messages to specific subgroups. This approach helps assure the compatibility with different aspects of the school's messages. Obviously ongoing communications with employees and educators are maintained.

5. Always make it clear you are dealing with a complex and evolving issue and both perspectives and policies may change.

As you have observed with COVID-19 our understanding of preferred protocols of hygiene, prevention, and level of risk are continually changing. For instance, the concept of fomite contamination through touching smooth surfaces and the focus on frequent washing of hands wasn't inaccurate but it did not address the main causes of school contamination—air transmission.

As we gather more information and insight, approaches will improve and change. Acknowledging the reality of change will, in the end, help assure credibility.

6. Understand and work with multimedia communications.

Society is undergoing a profound change in mediums of communication. The internet and other cyberspace mediums have proved highly beneficial, making it easy to access important information. They also have spread inaccurate and dangerous messages. There are three patterns to help mitigate problems created through internet/cyberspace miscommunication.

- Consider reaching out to as many reasonable information mediums and platforms as possible. Putting out targeted messages to the local Chamber of Commerce or faith community groups is likely valuable. Trying to connect with a conspiracy theory blog is unlikely productive.
- Keep your proverbial, “ear-to-the-ground” and be prepared to quickly address any topic that conflicts with or may undermine school programming.
- Monitor other related websites and blogs watching for trends, unanticipated perspectives and potentially compatible or contradictory messages.

7. The three components in a successful crisis-oriented message.

Following the nuclear disaster at Three Mile Island, the overwhelming fear and confusion were effectively addressed by appropriate engineering controls and following several principles of crisis communication:

- **Connect with Audience Concerns**

The presenter pays attention to and addresses the sentiments, stereotypes, values, and especially fears of those affected. The message focuses on both the technical response and the concerns of the audience.

- **Accurately Describe Risk**

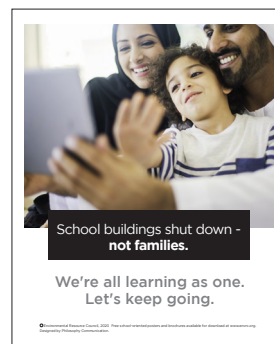
The presenter describes the situation, even if negative, gaining confidence that she or he is being honest and straightforward.

- **Inspire**

The presenter creates a typically positive rallying point, promoting a team sense of confidence that the community will successfully address the crisis. The presenter acknowledges the reality of risk but expresses confidence it will be overcome. A rallying call for team response in the face of threat becomes the ultimate focus of the message.

Following are two examples of creating a “rallying call” regarding COVID-19 challenge for schools:

A district is required to close its high school facility. School administration responds to the criticism that the, “school should not be shut down” by coining the phrase, “Our school is more than a building,” and using imagery showing students and families positively engaging in distance learning. The phrase is used as a logo on all COVID-19 related communications, sending a consistent and clear message of resilience. (The poster on the right and others can be found in the attachment on page 6.)



Winston Churchill
Keep Calm and Carry On

A district requests that a popular history teacher create a video presentation on “resilience in crisis.” He focused on a key phrase, used by Winston Churchill during the darkest days of World War II, “Keep Calm and Carry On,” which was imprinted on a button with Churchill’s face which and worn by students and faculty. The history teacher also makes the point that in the future, people may say that regarding the way the school and community are conducting themselves, “This was their finest hour.”

The major school crisis communication pitfall—the collaborative chronicler reporter turns into a community conscience.

The most common error in school crisis communications is misreading media and community reactions.

A school learned that one of its graduates, a soldier, had lost his life in the Middle East. Students in his former elementary school decided to plant a tree in his honor and raised a small amount of money to purchase a tree. The nursery owner donated the tree. They decided to plant the tree near their school playground. The planting ceremony was made more poignant by a sensitive newspaper article beautifully capturing the emotion and meaning of the event. The story was framed and permanently placed in the school and school district board room. The reporter was viewed as a sensitive friend of the school district.



The memorial that was planted near where the soldier played as a boy.

A couple of years later the district’s food service inappropriately used a toluene compound inside a food storage area. The toluene off-gassed and contaminated a quantity of food which was then fed to students and employees. Toluene is technically capable of potentially causing birth defects.

The same reporter who had covered the tree planting requested a meeting with the superintendent. Having a positive relationship with her, he was confident the meeting would go well. He did not seek technical advice regarding toxicity characteristic intending to explain that he would eventually do so. The interview was stunningly hostile.

She asked incredibly difficult questions, “Would he feel responsible if a child was born with a birth defect?” etc. The superintendent was shocked and stumbled through the interview. He was portrayed as over his head, confused and seemingly unconcerned. It was an interpersonal and career disaster for the superintendent and a source of lost confidence for the school district. We helped address the problem explaining the dose of the exposure is inconsistent with a toxic effect and it was problematic that the provider of the toluene product did not provide a warning for use near food. Still, the status of the superintendent and of the school was compromised.

School leaders are typically comfortable interacting with media and become confident in their ability to communicate in a public setting. These media interactions are more chronicles than news stories. Reporting relates to a popular teacher retiring, athletic accomplishments, academic achievements, and technical bond issues—not potentially salient emotional issues. Often the media develop a symbiotic relationship with school leadership. They work together to support and educate. However, when crisis strikes the reporter quickly transforms into a righteous protector of the community and is on the lookout for community risk and mismanagement. The community chronicler becomes the community conscience.

In the case of COVID-19, destabilization, disease, and death are realities affecting every family in the country. School leadership coming to terms with this historic challenge may be facing an uncommon level of public scrutiny. Preparing for explaining conduct and responding to criticism requires access to technical competence, and anticipation and preparation for addressing potentially hostile questioning.

The school district requires responsible technical counsel, beyond simply reviewing the current public health guidelines, and sometimes should consider professional support for crafting and maintaining effective communications.

About the Authors



Bruce Bomier, MPH, has spent almost 50 years working hands-on with health policy and designing public health solutions. He founded one of the largest environmental engineering firms in the Midwest, the Institute for Environmental Assessment (IEA), and was appointed by three successive governors to service on Minnesota’s Environmental Quality Board. In 2007, Bruce retired from his engineering company to serve as Board Chair of a nonprofit organization, the Environmental Resource Council. He holds a bachelor’s degree in Forensics and a master’s degree in Public Health/Epidemiology.



Jennifer Lester is a communications expert based in Denver. She co-founded Philosophy Communication in 2001 and has counseled many educational institutions on marketing and public relations throughout her career. Jen currently holds a marketing board position with the University of Denver’s Daniels College of Business and is on the advisory board of Public Health Council, a division of the Environmental Resource Council.

ATTACHMENT

Following are several posters we developed for schools including some addressing school shutdowns or selective distance-learning. Not only can these be used as posters but also as imagery in websites and other communications that relate to dealing with COVID-19 challenges. They are available at **envrc.org** to download at no cost.

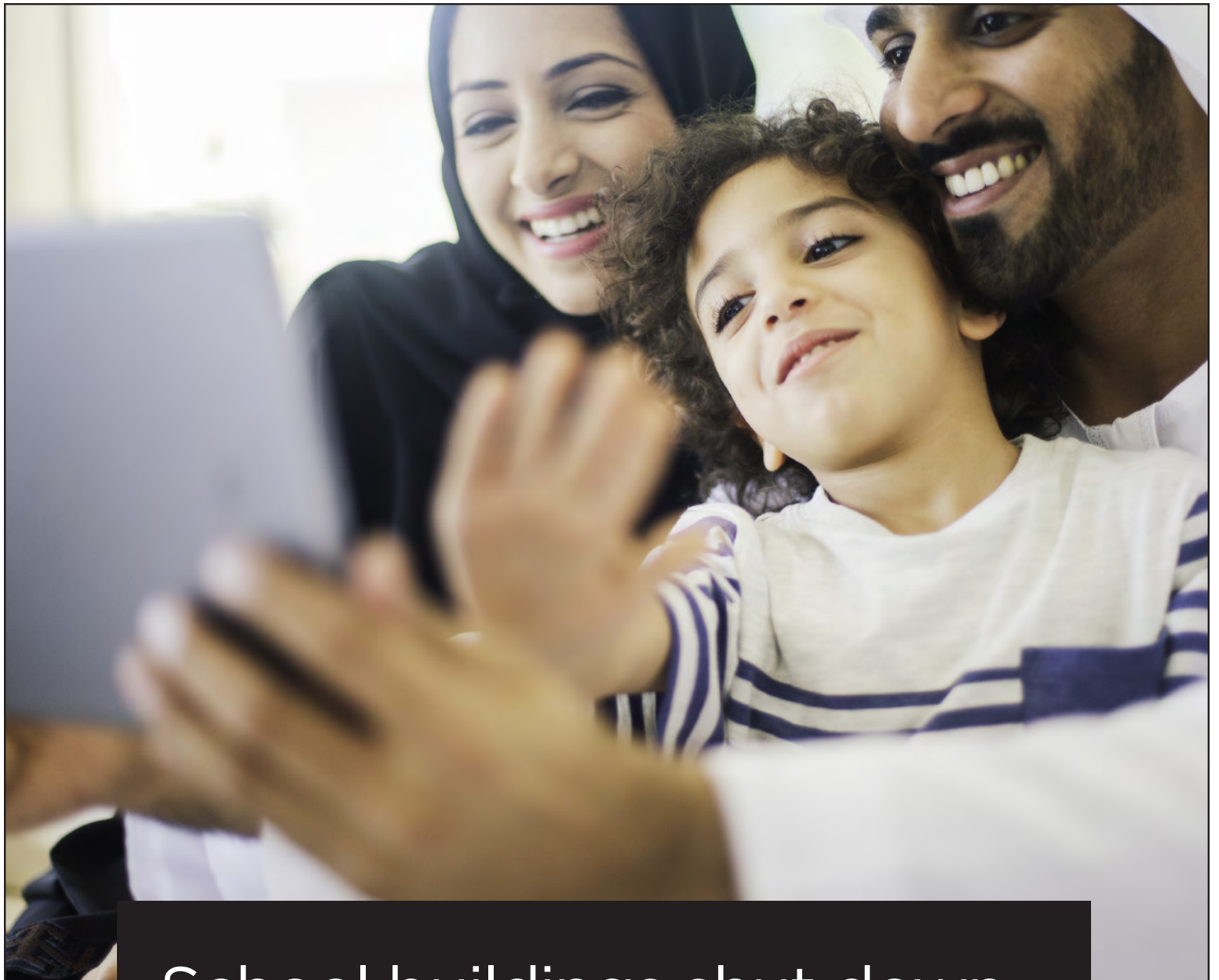
Feel free to put your own logo or even alter the messaging. Please retain our website and copyright if you reproduce material. We've had organizations copy our material and sell it on the Internet. We want our material to be FREE for all schools.

THE ERC BOARD



We're not just learning history.
We're making it.

Keep calm. Keep learning.
Keep on keeping on.



School buildings shut down -
not families.

We're all learning as one.
Let's keep going.



School buildings shut down.
Schools don't.

We will never stop learning.
Stay calm and carry on.



**My school has
a kitchen table.**

**Keep calm. Keep learning.
Keep on keeping on in your home.**

CORONAVIRUS



**We're all in this
together.**

Stay calm and carry on.



School buildings may close—
but our school is more
than a building—it's US.

Stay calm and carry on.

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Free school-oriented posters and brochures available for download at www.envrc.org