

# Technical and Communication Actions for Schools During COVID-19

Earning public confidence in a crisis

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In what is now termed “the era of COVID-19,” what you do and how you communicate your actions are fundamental to the success and well-being of your school. You must guide the school through sound technical actions, and from there, gain the trust and confidence of students, parents, colleagues, and the community through transparent communication.

## Technical Actions

While we are learning a lot about preventing COVID-19, the fog of uncertainty is steadily lifting. We have reasonable postulates that schools can follow with confidence in the interest of health and education. (Detailed information dealing with schools and COVID-19 can be found at our website, along with lists of other responsible information sources [envrc.org]).

**These are the current technical procedures for schools:**

### ***Mandate Personal Hygiene Protocols***

This is the time to provide clear direction and establish personal hygiene protocols including face masks, reasonable distancing, promoting personal control of coughing and sneezing, restricting heavy-breathing activities in groups, including physical activities, singing, etc. For a good source explaining the benefits of masks, view the PBS documentary, *It's Okay To Be Smart: How Well Do Masks Work*.

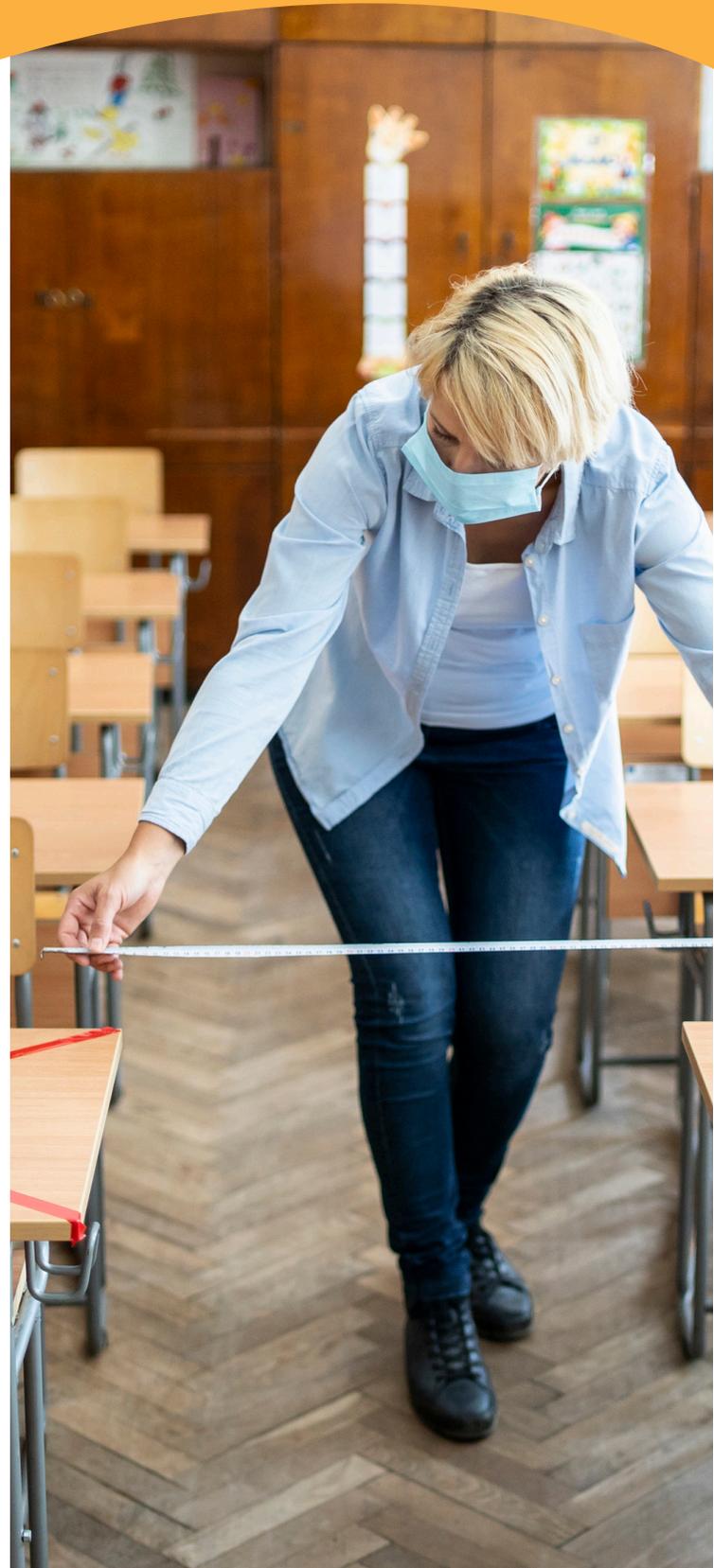
### ***Institute Facility Hygiene Protocols***

Every building and educational setting is unique and approaches for hygiene such as distancing must be individually crafted. These elements should include hygiene protocols that include frequent sanitation wipe-downs of touched surfaces, with physical arrangements to encourage safe separations, limitations on gatherings, controlled food services, and restroom hygiene, assuring wholesome ambient air distribution and dilution, and triggers for responding to occupant, group, or community cases, especially unanticipated increases.

### ***Create a Distance Learning Plan***

Minimize disruptions by establishing a distance learning plan from the outset so you can respond to elevated risk levels within certain communities or with individuals, including students, adult employees, and others, with whom either will have contact.

These and other safeguards can most effectively be accomplished on a district-by-district or building-by-building basis. Creative solutions and functional flexibility will almost certainly be a part of responsibly working through technical challenges.



# Communication Actions

It won't be enough to simply do the right thing — the school must persuade students, faculty, parents, and community that the COVID-19 threat is being wisely and humanely managed. **This may become the greatest and most threatening challenge schools must face.**

The media and internet sources focus on newsworthy tragedy, causing a destabilizing sort of terror gripping much of our society. It is within this atmosphere of understandable public fear and desperation that the school must effectively communicate how it is protecting and educating our youth.

**Each situation is unique, but you have several communication action options:**

### ***A Single, Consistent Point of Contact***

The school cannot have multiple information sources providing differing factual information or even differing perspectives. Staff and community must have a clear understanding that there is a single point of information distribution for the public and for professional media sources. Communication must be structured to respond rapidly to events or concerns as they arise, and above all project a sense of calm concern.

### ***Create a Communication Feedback Mechanism***

The public is scared and uncertain about COVID-19, so it is critical to hear people out. Create a feedback mechanism where parents can ask questions to an established point of contact who can dispel fears, correct inaccuracies, or calm nerves. During a crisis, transparency is paramount, so consider creating open forums as much as possible to allow parents to contribute to solving problems. Defaulting to public health professionals to support school decisions is imperative.

### ***Public Relations Support***

Consider support from public relations professionals to design and create empowering administrative messaging through predetermined communication channels.



**The more proactive and transparent the messaging, the less likely media or others will be compelled to accept inaccurate information.**

### ***Develop a “Rallying Cry”***

In times of crisis, communities need to unite. Work with your school to develop a word or phrase that encourages teachers, parents and students to unite and act in support. Look toward creativity and school uniqueness and make the theme positive. A strong approach to promote and celebrate resilience for your school has never been more needed.

### ***Rationalize Every Action***

Schools will make many decisions that affect perceptions of health and safety, and their rationales are subject to being challenged. As an example, a local certified industrial hygienist threatened legal action toward a school about the material used for face masks and made aggressive statements that were carried on the local radio station.

Understandably, parents became concerned, but in reality the industrial hygienist was wrong. The masks were made under guidelines suggested by OSHA and at least one federal agency. The school must be positioned to technically justify its many decisions within the context of public health.

Operating decisions must be backed up with responsible technical support and communicated actively. Expect public scrutiny of decisions made by the school.

As schools approach this monumental challenge to professional education, they will work faithfully toward making responsible decisions, but they must also prepare to effectively communicate at a level of unparalleled intensity.

## About the Authors



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