GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS TO COMMUNICATE WITH STUDENTS, PARENTS/CAREGIVERS AND TEACHERS

SCHOOLING IN TIME OF COVID-19
School administrator’s guide to communicating with students, parents/caregivers and teachers

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INTRODUCTION

During a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, communication is key to develop and sustain the effective and trusted relationship between students, teachers and parents/caregivers. Credible and consistent two-way communication ensures a clear understanding of messages, facilitates ongoing dialogue and enables collective decision-making with the active involvement of students, teachers and families.

As a school administrator, you play a large role in shaping communication and engagement among schools, families, and teachers to support children’s continued participation in quality and inclusive learning. This guide will help you to communicate to and with your key audiences – students, parents/caregivers and teachers – and help them to make informed decisions to send children back to school, and build strong partnerships with stakeholders.

YOUR KEY AUDIENCES

- Parents/caregivers
- Teachers
- Students

CONTEXT

Children are paying the heaviest price for school closures

Students’ learning suffered a major setback as most educational institutions cancelled or reduced in-person instruction and moved to remote learning and teaching in an attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19 last year. The switch from offline to online exacerbated existing educational inequalities, as the most marginalized and disadvantaged students were more vulnerable to the risks of education disruption, such as lacking access to relevant digital resources including laptop/computer/ smartphone or broadband internet connection at home. Children with cognitive and physical disabilities, refugee and migrant children, Roma, children from the poorest families and often girls faced even more severe exclusion from the learning process while their parents and caregivers were more likely to lack the resources to support learning at home. Family stresses related to the COVID-19 crisis heightened the risk of violence at home against children by caregivers/parents. School closures and subsequent isolation have cut children off from teachers who can identify risks and signs of violence against children and seek appropriate intervention. There is clear evidence that early marriages, sexual exploitation and abuse of young women and girls, and child labour have increased across the world.
Schools are essential for children’s learning, health, safety and well-being. With each passing day of schools being closed, a generational catastrophe is unfolding, one that will lead to profound consequences for society as a whole. The lost hours of in-person learning have damaging implications for each child. School is a place to go to interact with peers, seek support, access basic healthcare and get a nutritious meal. The longer schools remain closed, the longer children are cut off from these critical elements of childhood. The prolonged closure of preschools and early childhood education services deprives younger children of learning experiences at the specific time of their lives when they need those experiences the most in order to support their development and vital foundations for future learning. At this early age, distance learning solutions have proved less effective as they require intensive parent/caregiver interactions and early primary age learning process requires direct engagement through play and other activities. School closures have had significant implications for the mental health of children and young people and the prevalence of anxiety and depression has risen dramatically among young people.

School closures led to an additional burden on parents/caregivers

Closures have added pressure to parents and caregivers, who have assumed the role of supervising children throughout the day. Working parents/caregivers have faced competing challenges – they have not had enough time to directly support children’s learning due to work. Similarly, parents with lower levels of educational attainment than their children’s current levels found it difficult to support their children’s learning. It has been observed that the school closures contributed to mothers of students suffering from worse mental health. As a result of negative labour market shocks, many parents have had to cope with losing their jobs or part of their income and have found it difficult to invest time and resources for their children’s learning. It has impacted the quality of parent-child interactions as well. Parents strongly agree that schools and preschools need to be reopened as soon as possible, with the implementation of adequate public health and social measures to minimize COVID-19 transmission and believe that their children would be happy to go back to school.

School closures took a great toll on teachers

Teachers across the globe were largely unprepared to support the continuity of learning; the increased workload such as the planning time for classes, learning and adapting to new teaching methodologies and new ways to engage students virtually that came along with the transition to remote learning left teachers overwhelmed, exhausted and anxious. Many teachers
lacked adequate digital skills which had a negative effect on the quality of online teaching. The mounting pressures to keep children engaging through online platforms and reducing absenteeism led to burnout and impacted the mental health of the teachers. In addition to it, teachers didn’t have adequate training and guidance to support and respond to student’s socio-emotional needs\textsuperscript{viii}. The COVID-19 pandemic has put the spotlight on the need for alternative and flexible approaches to learning delivery to ensure continuity of learning during this and future crises. This requires that teachers receive adequate training on digital skills, continuous professional development on quality, inclusive pedagogy even when learning takes place at a distance, and support, including for their mental health.
PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

Key principles for effective communication and engagement are:

Establish trust

It is important to maintain transparency and proactively inform parents/caregivers, teachers and staff with regular communications about the COVID-19 situation in the country and the social community as well as health and hygiene measures, safety protocols, learning schedules, status of school infrastructure and vaccination of teachers and students. This can support them to navigate new and evolving safety and health measures at school, address any hesitancy they may have and assure them that the schools are a safe place for the children to return. A clear and consistent flow of information would help in controlling speculations and misinformation. When communication is open and honest, it forms a bedrock on which to build trust and foster strong relationships in the long-term.

Make it participatory

Efforts are required from schools, teachers, students and parents/caregivers to create a schooling environment that is adaptable and inclusive. This can strengthen resilience in light of uncertainty and can facilitate smooth transition to any changes in the learning schedule or delivery modality.

Parents/caregivers have played an active role in ensuring the continuity of children’s learning during the last year, and they can provide valuable insights from their own and their children’s perspectives. As a school administrator, you can create pathways for participation of all families to listen and gain better insights on parents/caregivers, teachers and students’ concerns and needs. It is essential to make sure that these pathways include even the hardest-to-reach learners and their families, and that they provide meaningful opportunities for students, caregivers/parents and teachers to express their thoughts and opinions.

Ensure inclusivity

Respecting everyone’s views, acknowledging diverse perspectives and sharing information that all your audiences (parents/caregivers, teachers and students) can access and understand enables as many as parents, caregivers, students and teachers to be included meaningfully in the exchange of information. Ensuring that parents/caregivers residing in low income settings, with low literacy levels or functional difficulties receive information is vital; lack of accessible information will leave them ill-informed, and any messages that are unclear and unrelatable can cause confusion, inadvertently exclude certain learners and their families, or even reduce compliance with health and safety measures. Inclusive communication uses language that are free from stereotypes and bias, uses multiple
modes and must be accessible to everyone across the socio-economic spectrum – from setting up a dedicated hotline to sending out regular e-mail updates and voice notes through text messages or apps.

**Ensure timeliness**

It is essential that you make meaningful information, advice and guidance on reopening of schools available in a timely manner, so parents/caregivers, students and teachers have the information they need to make appropriate decisions and act promptly. Involving them during the early stage of charting out communication plans and strategies leads to meaningful and collective decision-making.

**Be consistent**

Communication should always be consistent across all platforms and align with the local government regulations and health advisories on the reopening of schools. If the messages are in conflict, it creates confusion in the minds of the audience and leads to doubt and distrust. It also diminishes the ability to be influential with the messaging, negatively impacts the communication’s effectiveness and calls into question the decision-making capabilities. When referring to COVID-19 terminologies, use wording consistent with government messaging.

Adopting these principles will help you to design the right approach in building communication strategies and plans, which encourages parents/caregivers, teachers and students to work together and create an enriching learning environment amidst the challenging situation.
TIPS TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY WITH STUDENTS, PARENTS/CAREGIVERS AND TEACHERS

Communicate early and often

Early communication builds trust. Timely clear intent and guidance from the school administrators helps to reduce fear and encourage students, teachers and parents/caregivers to understand any changes that need to be made in the learning schedule while appreciating the importance of in-person learning. In times of uncertainty, like the COVID-19 pandemic, delayed communication can lead to misinformation and guesswork. It is critical to inform and engage early.

Sending frequent communication about essential school health services, safety measures and referral protocols to prevent and mitigate the transmission in the school setting would help parents/caregivers, teachers and students to be better informed about the measures that are put in place to ensure a safe learning environment at school.

Consult

Regular consultation and dialogue create an opportunity to inform as well as to be informed. It is essential to encourage the active participation of students, teachers and parents/caregivers in the decision-making process.

Listening provides insight into what your key audiences think and how they may act based on their understanding of the disseminated information. To foster trust between parents/caregivers, school and students, effective communications channels need to be identified to gather feedback. In addition to the usage of existing channels, the introduction of two-way communication channels helps in collecting input and understand the audiences’ take on various things. Two-way communication channels include a dedicated hotline, e-mail address, phone number or apps for receiving and responding to questions. Wherever possible, surveys for families, teachers and students can be sent out to learn about communication preferences, safety measures they value the most and the concerns/barriers for sending their children to school. The introduction of new channels may be challenging and so plan ahead. Before the wider launch, test it with a small group and train the families on how to use it.

Use multiple channels

Combine multiple modes of communication to ensure all audiences have access to messages and influence the positive behaviour as schools are preparing to reopen. For example, social media and SMS messaging can complement each other to strengthen the communication aimed at
students and parents/caregivers, while teachers can be reached via e-mail. Messaging across multiple channels should be consistent so as to not cause confusion, frustration and, importantly, miscommunication. Analog communications such as signs posted in/on schools and other public places have proven to be effective as well but may need to be updated regularly as the situation changes.

**Ensure inclusivity**

Inclusive communications is about verbal and non-verbal ways you communicate to ensure that it reaches and is understood by parents/caregivers, teachers and students. A mix of print, auditory and visual communications might include large printed materials using compelling visuals or infographics, subtitling videos along with sign language interpreters, podcasts and voicenotes and usage of social networking sites. A dedicated hotline would help in including the parents with low literacy levels. Letters/e-mails could be accessed via QR code – Quick Response code can store a lot of information and once it is scanned using a smart device camera, the QR code provides the access to the information instantly.

**Communicate for student learning continuity**

Good communication clearly conveys the message and helps the person on the other end to understand the full meaning on what's being said, and paves the way for two-way dialogue. Evidence points out that good communication between parents and schools can lead to improved academic performance, reduced absenteeism, lower prevalence of challenging behaviours and lower likelihood to fail the grade at the end of the year\textsuperscript{xix}. As a school administrator, you should actively engage with your diverse community of families and communicate that schools with effective public health and social measures and referral protocols in place are considered sufficiently safe. The benefits of a full return to face-to-face teaching are overwhelming and must be coupled with strategies in place to reduce risk from COVID-19. Communicating these messages to families can help to reduce stress and anxiety amongst parents/caregivers and encourage them to send their children to school. Set-up new channels and create opportunities for teachers to communicate regularly and effectively about students’ learning needs with parents. The continuous dialogue with parents strengthens the relationship and helps them to play an active role in students’ leaning journey.

**Focus on internal communication and staff wellbeing**

Retaining and regaining the trust and support of teachers and school-based staff is critically important for the success of in-person learning. They are on the frontlines and the interactions they have with students and parents/caregivers are powerful to influence
the positive approach towards school reopening. So, prioritise setting up consistent lines of communications directly to teachers and staff such as weekly newsletter, direct e-mail or regular updates on the school’s intranet.

Teachers or other educational staff may have experienced some form of personal stress due to the pandemic – including the concerns about their health - which can be exacerbated by the strains of supporting students experiencing stress. Equipping teachers with coping skills and emotional well-being practices such as managing mental health tips, inspirational talks from medical experts or counselling sessions to better manage and respond to stress and establishing clear boundaries between work and personal life contributes to their own sense of well-being and lead to better educational outcomes.

**Help students’ re-establish routines**

Students had to confront cycles of disruption and adaptation, driven both by pandemic-related health reasons and a new way of learning. Communicating with empathy - it’s about stepping into the shoes of students, understand their perspectives and feelings and using that understanding to provide information/advice that resonates with the students - is central to help children navigate some of the complicated emotions they may be facing with going back to school or any changes in the learning practices. Encourage teachers and parents/caregivers to check in on their feelings, acknowledge them and provide the support and comfort they need. Start positively interacting with students and mention what to expect from the day/week, what is expected of them and accepted behaviours – establishing a consistent and predictable routine helps students to take responsibility in the classroom and feel the normalcy of getting back to in-person learning.

**Recognize the challenges students have gone through**

All children, of all ages across the globe, paid the heaviest price for the school closures – from adapting to a new way of learning to not being able to meet friends and dealing with a loss of a parent or a loved one. It has been also identified that children experienced increased violence and abuse at home, higher rates of child marriage and sexual exploitation.

By being cut off from emotional and social interaction with teachers and supportive learning environment, their mental health has been on the decline. For many students, especially from vulnerable communities, school is a warm and inviting space where they are likely to receive much-needed care and emotional support at schools to get back on track. It is vital that school administrators ensure a learning environment as safe as possible for the children to learn, grow and thrive.
Avoid jargon and use simple language to communicate about the pandemic

If parents/caregivers, teachers and students have to read a message several times to understand it, they are unlikely to act on it. While sharing science-based information or any facts about COVID-19, choose a familiar word or phrase instead of jargon. Write in plain language and use short sentences. Use visuals, drawings and cartoons to visualize messages and concepts, and tailor communications to the learning level of the children you are targeting.

Engage with students, caregivers and teachers when developing your crisis communication plan

It is important to build a COVID-19 communication plan to reassure students, parents/caregivers and teachers that schools are safe to attend once the public health and social measures have been put in place. Communication should address and counter rumours and misleading informing as well as avoid any stigma among education staff, teachers, parents/caregivers and students. New evidence continues to emerge about COVID-19 and as we adapt to new circumstances, the plan needs to be flexible with collaborative input from parents/caregivers, students, teachers and educational staff and in compliance with national, state and local guidance.

Make the learning schedule and all-communication visible and easily accessible

As students are getting ready to return to their classroom, it is more likely that schools adopt a mix of face-to-face instruction in the school setting and virtual learning. Sharing the learning schedules with parents/caregivers, teachers and students through multiple channels gives an opportunity on what to expect in the coming weeks/months. You can publish the schedules on the school’s website or send out a weekly e-mail newsletter, with print copies for families who do not have access to the internet. It can also be reviewed during phone calls and live sessions with parents.

Give scientific-based information when promoting vaccination among teachers

The vaccination of teachers and school staff is critical to help keep them healthy and protect children. It is one of the key elements to regain continued access to education and social life at schools. Schools can promote COVID-19 vaccinations by providing information and encouraging vaccine confidence. Engaging teachers and other school staff about COVID-19 with frequent communication through staff meetings, newsletters and e-mail updates, and organising information sessions with prominent doctors and public health experts about the latest updates on the COVID-19
vaccination will reinforce the importance of getting vaccinated.

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xv Study of parents and key informants’ attitudes towards distance learning and school reopening, 2020. This opinion poll in Montenegro was conducted by IPSOS and supported by British Embassy Podgorica and by UNICEF Montenegro.


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