

Education During the Pandemic: Communications Challenges Facing School Districts



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Education During the Pandemic: **Communications Challenges Facing School Districts**



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PowerPoint and Handouts

1. On NJSBA Website at...
www.njsba.org/pandemic-communication

2. On Virtual Workshop 2020 Website...
Below program description

Education during the Pandemic: Communications Challenges Facing School Districts

Thu, October 22, 2:00 PM
(EST)
22:23:17

This session will explore challenges that range from assuring parents, students and staff about the effectiveness of health and safety protocols, to pivoting to all-virtual instruction when students or staff test positive, to combatting rumors on social media. Also addressed will be the roles of board members and administrators in communicating during the pandemic.

Panelists:

Mary Ann Bell, superintendent, Burlington Twp. Public Schools

Bethany Summers, president, Warren Co. SBA and North Warren Reg. BOE

Lori Perlow, president, NJ School Public Relations Assn.

Mary Ann McGann, school-community relations coordinator, Westfield Public Schools.



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Challenge 1:

Assure parents, students and staff

- 1. Best practices to assure parents, students and staff about school health/safety measures**



1. Best practices to assure parents, students and staff about school health/safety measures

- Videos and photographs showing what it looks like inside schools/classrooms. A picture is worth a thousand words.
- School Reopening/COVID-19 Information page on district/school websites
- Provide one-page infographics and other resources
- Be clear and concise in your communications
- Enlist experts from your school community



Challenge 2:

Social Media

2. Combatting rumors on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms



2. Ways to combat rumors on social media

- Don't try to argue on social media! That is a rabbit hole you don't want to enter.
- Encourage people to go to your school website for information.
- A weekly communication from your superintendent to the entire school community can help dispel rumors.
- Remind parents and staff to whom they should direct questions and concerns.
- Remember—many negative comments are all from the same people. Don't let them be the thermometer for the majority.
- If you are commenting as a board member, you need to have a disclaimer that you are not representing the BOE (unless you were explicitly given permission from your board)
- Do have some members of the public who will advocate for you (PTO/PTA is a great source for those people)



Challenge 3:

The Board-Superintendent Team

- 3. The distinct—and important—roles of the chief school administrator and board of education in communications**



3. Roles of boards and administrators in communicating during the pandemic

- The superintendent is the primary communicator for the operations of the school.
- If the board needs to comment on a board-level decision, most boards have policy that the board president is the spokesperson
- Communication between the board and superintendent is vital so that everyone is on the same page
- Remember that the superintendent runs the schools. The BOE's role is to ensure they are well-run.
- Parents (and the general public) may reach out to the BOE directly via email. It is important to acknowledge their concerns, but you should pass those to the superintendent.
- Public comment period during BOE meetings: Have a consistent policy on the parameters, such as time limits.
- Presentations during BOE meetings on exactly what is going on in the school and why are helpful.



Challenge 4:

Addressing Positive Covid Tests

- 4. Best practices to inform the school community when a student or staff member tests positive for Covid-19**



4. Informing the school community when a student or staff member tests positive for Covid-19

- Have a plan BEFORE it happens
- Work closely with your local or county health department to craft a clear and factual message.
- Confidentiality is important- in small districts people may figure out who has it, but the communication should not indicate that.
- As a BOE member, you may have inside information- don't share it
- Be as detailed as possible on exactly what happens now and how safety is the top district's primary concern



Challenge 5:

Pivoting to All-Remote Instruction

- 5. Informing the community of the need to change the learning platform due to the presence of covid**



5. Pivoting to all-remote instruction when students or staff members test positive for the virus

- Have template communications prepared in advance
- Be sure to communicate with stakeholders in this order: staff, families, and then the community.
- Follow up superintendent email with one from the school principal(s)
- Communicate exactly how the all-remote schedule will work (It may be different than an all-remote day each week in a hybrid schedule.)



Challenge 6:

Parental Involvement

6. Engaging and helping parents meet the challenge of virtual learning



6. Involving parents in virtual instruction

- Make resources available to parents on helping their student with online learning – including how-to guides for using district platforms like Google Classrooms, and log-in information
- Provide information accessing free or low-cost internet in N.J.
- Provide information and guidelines for students using video-chat for online classes—both technological information and dress code/behavioral expectations.
- Consistency in online platforms makes it easier for parents to help their children. Parents don't have time to learn several platforms.
- Give teachers the tools to communicate effectively with parents.
- Encourage teachers to reach out to parents- when students are struggling and when they are succeeding!



Communications challenges

- Conditions are constantly changing; information is frequently outdated
- The need to communicate as districts are doing things – “designing the plane while flying it”
- The audience for crisis information has heightened concerns, fears, and emotions – and made parents less patient
- One size doesn’t fit all – conditions and how districts deliver instruction varies in different school districts



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Questions?

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