



COMMUNICATION in the time of COVID-19

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by

Emily Kirzinger

*Vice-Principal, Ecole Reynolds Secondary School
SD 61*

I have been a teacher for 15 years, and a Vice-Principal in the Greater Victoria School District for more than five years, and in that time I have seen my share of challenges, celebrations and general craziness. I have completed a lot of professional development around trauma-informed learning, school safety, violent threat risk assessment and critical incident response, and felt fairly comfortable adapting and responding to the challenges of a complex secondary school.

But then, March 2020 came along.

We can all think back to what those early weeks were like ... empty schools, full Zoom meetings, questions, fears, concerns. There were no templates for operating a school during a pandemic, so we all needed to be patient and to navigate slowly. Here are some of the things I have learned from my first (and hopefully last) pandemic.

The staff you work with are your team. Besides my household, the staff at my school were the group of people that I was working with the most. I had spent more than four years with this staff, during which time

we experienced loss, triumphs, laughs and tears together. That connection and bond was essential in navigating what was to come.

Communication with staff began with phone calls. It was the most personal connection we could have at the time, but it was a far cry from face-to-face conversations in the hallway, classroom, or staff room. The phone calls revealed the worry, nervousness, and anxiety in peoples' voices as we wondered what was to come. The calls personalized the impact the early pandemic was having on staff as they prepared for remote teaching, and showed us their concern for their health, and the health of their own children and loved ones. While each of those early phone calls was challenging, time consuming and – at times – gut wrenching, reaching out to each staff member was valuable to maintaining our culture and preparing for the work ahead.

Zoom meetings were important for relaying information and school planning, but they are no replacement for seeing faces and hearing voices.

After effective communication with staff, we needed staff to begin communication with students and their families or guardians. This was complex and challenging: our staff excelled at in-person communications with our students within the classroom, but communication during the pandemic provided new and unique opportunities. Staff began by emailing students and families, which presented challenges and obstacles. *Did we have the student/guardian's current email address? Were they checking it? Who would send the email? How often? What if you didn't get a response? How would we track which students we had made contact with?*

Once we began reaching out to students and their parents and guardians, we got a glimpse into what remote teaching would be like: no response, incomplete response, wrong response, delayed response. We did notice how students might respond to emails at all hours through the day and night, indicating that teens' sleep patterns were becoming irregular. While most teachers were working during their regular work hours, if a student was responding overnight, it meant that the flow of communication and information was hampered by long pauses. What could be a very short interaction in a classroom could become an obstacle over several days.

Within a bricks and mortar school, we are accustomed to non-verbal communication with our students. Communication within a classroom can be a look, a wave, or a few minutes of conversation that digressed from the lesson for the day, but was important in establishing and continuing relationships. Remote teaching stripped teachers and EAs of much of their non-verbal communications, forcing them to rely on emails, Google Classroom, and Zoom meetings.

Communication with families has always primarily been 'COVID-friendly', meaning that parents typically do not receive regular communications in person, and should be used to communications through email or phone calls. So, that should mean that the pandemic didn't largely affect communication with families,

right? Of course not – COVID-19 was the pandemic that kept on giving! We noticed that families began to feel inundated with communications from teachers, counsellors, schools, districts, and the Ministry – and that is discounting that many of us already felt 'screened-out' with COVID-19 information through the news and social media, and would welcome screen downtime. We also needed to be mindful that each family was experiencing the pandemic differently, and some families rightfully needed to be more concerned about food insecurity and a paycheque than communicating with the school.

Arguably, effective communication between families/guardians and the school has never been as important. At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, in addition to all the regular school start up information, we provided very important information about our COVID-19 health and safety protocols. These protocols were essential for families to understand, and for students to be prepared to follow.

What we had to acknowledge was that while some of us were eagerly keeping up to date with daily case counts, restrictions, and safety guidelines, we

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could not assume that all families or students were as knowledgeable or indeed had the technology that would enable them to stay informed. This was a situation I relegated to my "can I control it?" pile (sample musings on the pile: "Can I control the pandemic? No. Can I control my response to it? Yes"). While I can't control whether parents and guardians read their emails or answer their phones, I can control how information is presented.

We improved our communications to homes in several ways. First, we tried to send fewer emails. Fewer, you say? Yes – fewer emails that were more succinct so families and students did not feel overwhelmed. Where possible, we piggybacked with district messaging to avoid multiple emails, or the sense that important information was being lost.

I also learned the value of Google translate in communicating with families, which I will continue to use in my practice. While I have known about Google Translate during my travels (pre-2020, *sigh*), I began to use it as an administrator when I needed to contact homes and knew there was a language barrier. My

Pro-Tip: begin the email by letting the recipient know you are using Google Translate, and include a link so they can respond the same way. It's not perfect, but it's culturally responsive to our diverse population and has, thus far, been successful. Google Translate removes a barrier to understanding, and shows the family you are committed to communicating in the best possible ways.

Wordy emails became clearer and more direct when we created infographics (*Canva is an excellent, easy-to-navigate free online platform*). While we were clear that we were not creating health restrictions or guidelines, we did 'brand' our school so that we would have consistent signage and messaging. While our district also did an excellent job with infographics – and theirs became a source of information for ours – it was helpful to have the information personalized for our building.

We increased and improved our use of social media. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram all become important tools for sharing smaller tidbits of information, such as infographics or notices for families to check their email.

During April 2020, as we were trying to establish the routines of remote learning and support staff and students working from home, it was clear that no number of emails, social media posts or phone calls would replace in-person communications and connections. While parents/guardians were primarily interacting with our Twitter and Facebook accounts, our Instagram account had a high number of student followers. This was great for communicating directly with students about general school information, and it became a way to remind our students that we



were also part of a school community beyond the classroom.

I began using the Instagram 'Stories' feature that posts for only 24 hours. Within IG Stories, you can post questions to your followers and they can privately send a response. I'll admit ... I was initially seeking my own connections with our students, as I desperately missed our informal interactions in hallways and around the property. Once a week until June, I would post a series of about five photos from 'mystery' locations within the school, and ask our followers to identify where the photo had been taken. It could be a piece of artwork from our foyer, an award in a cabinet, or a segment of architecture around the school. From the beginning, I was impressed by the degree of student engagement, so we expanded the games to include things like staff members' photos of *themselves* in high school, with followers prompted to guess their identity. I believe this use of Instagram was helpful in several ways: we were able to leverage followers to read our 'important' posts, but we were also able to maintain non-academic connections to our community and building at a time when students were not allowed to enter a place that should always be their 'safe space'.

As schools reopened in September, we have been fortunate to continue in-person communication – 'face-to-face' is debatable with the necessary use of masks! – but the lessons we learned in the Spring remained: how do we continue to communicate effectively with all our community, and what can we do better?

Signage within our building has been an interesting challenge. While I sincerely hope that all students



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read, understand, and follow all the COVID-19 related signage around the school, I must acknowledge that – from time to time – it appears the COVID-19 police have emptied their trunks around our building. If we aren't careful, we find that we have an abundance of signage ranging from May 2020 posters, to current health and safety measures, to outdated flyers, all occupying an exceptional amount of wall space. I have opted for the 'less is more' approach, and have tried to pare down health and safety information in hallways to the most essential: do not enter if you are not feeling well, time to put on your mask, and perhaps the most essential ... *welcome*. Using Google Translate and Canva, I have created signage in our students' most commonly-spoken languages to convey these messages.

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly presented enough challenges for administrators to work with during already busy and challenging jobs, but after one year, I am grateful for the lessons that it has taught me. When we get back to 'normal', I promise not to complain about students loitering in the hallways ... for at least one week.

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@emkirzinger