# COMMUNICATING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Communication has emerged as a key element of an effective COVID-19 response policy as school systems have managed school closures and reopenings over the course of the year. This note summarizes good practice on how to communicate and what to communicate. The major principles include communicating early and often using multiple channels, localizing communication efforts to involve community leaders, and ensuring inclusivity in messaging by using multiple languages and nonwritten modes. In addition to communications around health and safety, communicating to encourage learning continuity has been found to be effective at improving achievement (in pre-pandemic settings). Opening feedback channels to hear from parents is equally important for planning ahead.
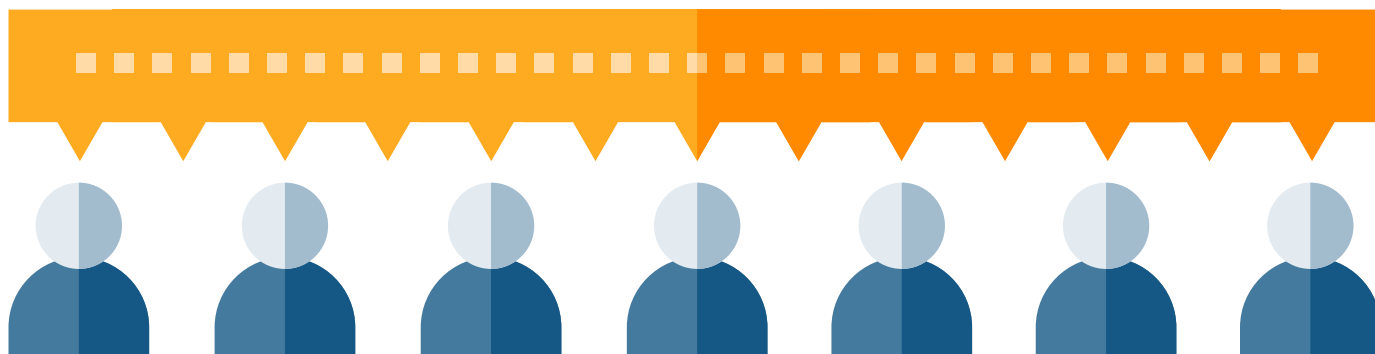
Importance of Prioritizing Communication

Communications around COVID-19 have been particularly difficult as public health and regulatory officials have had to make decisions and adopt policies while the body of evidence was emerging (and continues to grow). For education officials, it has been especially important to manage communication around school closures and reopenings, the availability of distance learning opportunities, decisions around high-stakes assessment, and other issues. Families are likely to be confronted with multiple sources of information about COVID-19 itself and its impact on schools. Clear and frequent communication is crucial to ensure that students and their families are well informed and reassured. Transparent communication is also key for building trust between the state and its citizens, who are likely experiencing anxiety around the uncertainty and disruption of school routines.

What Countries Can Do

Communicate Early and Often, Using Multiple Channels

Early communication, before or while decisions are being formed, builds trust rather than erodes it (Fernandez and Shaw 2020). Early communication can help reduce fear and encourage the community to respond positively to the school policies implemented (Carvalho et al. 2020). In addition to timing of messages, combining multiple methods of communication could increase uptake and influence public behavior as schools reopen. For example, television and SMS messaging can complement each other to strengthen a single strategy. Broadcasting the same information in multiple formats can make messaging more coherent (Fernandez and Shaw 2020). It is necessary to ensure that all stakeholders have a way to access communications, so multiple channels will be important if different groups of stakeholders rely on different modes of communication (Fernandez and Shaw 2020; UNICEF Romania 2020).

Messaging across multiple channels should be consistent so that all groups are receiving consistent and correct information, and people do not get confused and frustrated (Carvalho et al. 2020). The Gambia launched a multifaceted communication strategy called "#ContinuityOfLearning" using emails, flyers, radio, television, and social media to communicate plans for learning and health/safety information starting at the beginning of the pandemic (UNESCO 2020). In Cameroon, cell phones, WhatsApp, and Zoom were used to communicate with parents (UNESCO 2020). The Palestinian Authority Ministry of Education in the West Bank established a centralized task force coordinated by its public relations department to ensure that messaging remained consistent, but not redundant, across platforms (2020). Palestine's Ministry of Education has found media and social media messages to be central to their response for sharing regular updates with families (MoE Palestine, 2020). Analog communications such as signs posted in/on schools and other public places may also be helpful (UNICEF Romania 2020).

Localize Communication Efforts

It is important to open communication channels with teachers and teachers' unions, parent organizations, and other community groups to facilitate positive responses to policy changes. Communication efforts should match local norms and come from sources whom local communities know and consider credible. Word-of-mouth communication from well-respected community leaders and community members is still an important channel, particularly in areas with limited technology or limited literacy (Carvalho et al. 2020). Lao PDR used village loudspeakers to disseminate important messages about school (Karki 2020).

Ensure Inclusivity

To ensure inclusivity, some countries may also need to make sure that communications are available in multiple languages. China, Lao PDR, and Mongolia have been translating video communications into sign language (Karki 2020; UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office 2020), and Myanmar is translating written materials into dozens of ethnic languages (UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office 2020). Among other strategies, the New South Wales Department of Education in Australia recorded audio translations of letters sent out to families that could be accessed via QR code, and community liaison officers and teachers made phone calls to parents in their native languages (Gorfinkel et al. 2021).
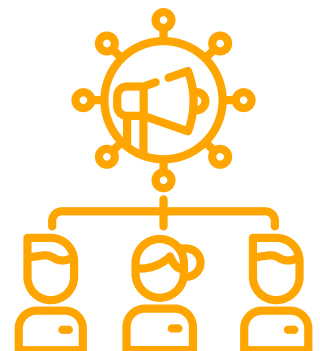
Communicate about Health and Safety

In a pandemic, governments must make decisions before adequate information is available to guide them. The limitations as well as advantages of all types of evidence should be acknowledged explicitly, and officials should be candid about uncertainty. Given that the emerging nature of pandemic-related scientific evidence has contributed to mixed and changing messages, confusion and distrust among stakeholders can hinder implementation of recommendations. Stakeholder engagement can be used to potentially mitigate this risk. Creating settings to allow education leaders, faculty, students, parents, and public health professionals to share evidence and rationale for local strategy selection and implementation (Hoover et al. 2021). Concerning decisions to reopen, education officials should communicate that schools are considered sufficiently safe in the face of the overwhelming benefits of a full return to face-to-face teaching coupled with strategies in place to reduce risk (Leask and Hooker 2020). A school in Colombia used a catchy mnemonic to remind students of handwashing, mask wearing, and physical distancing and to avoid congestion, enclosures, and closeness. [1]

Communicate for Learning Continuity / Student Learning

The engagement of parents and caregivers in students' learning at home has proved to be more essential than ever before, especially for younger children. Botswana deployed a low-technology, cost-effective program that sent text messages and made direct phone calls to families and students. These messages and phone calls presented mathematical exercises for students to solve. The randomized control trial showed significant learning gains (Angrist, Bergman, and Matsheng 2020). The implementation and deployment of the program occurred within six weeks and included phone number collection, pilots and program design, setting up texting and calling infrastructure, and training. The 60 facilitators were ready to make phone calls, but in the absence of this workforce, governments could rely on teachers at national scale to conduct direct phone calls.

Prior to the pandemic, evidence pointed to poor communication between parents and schools as a contributing factor to low student performance. In another low-cost text message intervention, schools in Chile sent parents information on student outcomes like absenteeism, performance, and conduct. After four months, students whose parents received the messages had significantly higher math grades, improved attendance, and a lower prevalence of bad behaviors, and they were less likely to fail the grade at the end of the year (Berlinski et al. 2021).

Open Communication Channels to Hear from Parents

To ensure that school plans are equitable and to foster trust between parents and schools, parents from all backgrounds must be able to give feedback (Hill and Gayle 2020). In Mozambique, the ministry of education created an official channel for parents to give feedback (World Bank, forthcoming). Other methods of opening communication channels include creating a dedicated hotline, email address, or WhatsApp phone number for receiving and responding to questions. Where possible, surveys for families and other stakeholders about tech availability, communication preferences, and comfort with returning to school can help with information exchange.

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1. In Spanish: "Recuerde las 3 Emes: Manos, Mascara, Metros" and "Evite las 3 Ces: Congestion, Cerramiento, Cercania."

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