

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING THE BAD NEWS

In schools throughout Ontario, there are often no shortage of tragedies and crises each year. Such situations call on principals to communicate with their school and external communities, and sometimes with the local media. But more common are the seemingly less serious events such as injuries, plant failures, police intervention, intruders, schoolyard fights or illness. These events can often escalate in seriousness when communications are late, inaccurate or incomplete.

How do you know when you should be communicating the “bad news,” particularly to your parent community? A good rule of thumb is this – if your students are likely to go home and tell their parents about an event that happened that day, and it is probable that parents will contact you the next day to find out the whole story, a letter should go home. Writing one letter that can be distributed to the school community takes far less time than spending hours on the phone answering questions or explaining a situation.

Letters are the most common form of communication, and can be sent in hard copy or via email. Although they may not always make it home in a timely manner, particularly in secondary schools, they are the best way to reach a wide audience and ensure everyone hears the same message.

When you need to communicate the bad news and choose to write a letter, keep the following points in mind:

- Use the letter to communicate the facts, put an end to rumours, clarify misconceptions and directly answer the tough questions you know you will get about the issue.
- If necessary, seek the assistance of your board communication staff person and/or your supervisory officer in helping to draft the elements of the letter.
- Keep in mind that once a letter has been sent home with students, it is considered a public document. Do not release any information in a letter that you are not comfortable releasing publicly.
- Before preparing any materials, check with all sources to confirm the facts and gather the most up-to-date information.
- Ensure the letter is timely, respectful, factual, free of jargon and has been checked for spelling and grammar.
- Keep it succinct. Parents are likely to skim the letter for quick information. Don't hide the important points in the bottom of a lengthy letter.
- Do not state anything in the letter that you don't know to be true. Don't presume, guess or speculate.

- Speak only on behalf of your role as a school leader. Some situations may involve others who should be answering questions such as the police, public health officials, a board official, other principals, manufacturers etc. If this is the case, provide names and phone numbers for parents to contact these other people.
- In most situations, information that identifies – either directly or indirectly – students by name, gender, grade etc. should not be released in a letter in order to comply with board confidentiality policies, as well as privacy and Freedom of Information legislation. If in doubt, contact your board's Freedom of Information Officer for assistance.
- Ensure that all staff members have a copy of letters and post them in the staff room. In most cases, the principal should be designated as the person answering any follow-up questions. If not, all staff should know who to refer calls or inquiries to.
- When preparing a letter, outline the facts, state what has been done to date and what will be done in the coming days/weeks/months and offer a name and phone number that people can call if they have further questions.
- Send a final copy of your letter to the board communications department, your supervisory officer and your trustee (where appropriate) so that everyone is delivering the same message.
- Keep a copy of the letter in the office so that it can be shared upon request.
- Distribute the letter to media outlets upon request, after checking with your board communications staff.
- Spend your time and energy communicating with the people who matter the most – your school community.

Since letters don't always make it home, you might also consider

- Providing time in the homeroom period for teachers to talk about the letter, asking students to share it with their parents. (Advise teachers to avoid referencing any individual despite the fact students often know their names.)
- Posting the letter on your school and board website. If these sites are kept up-to-date, parents are more likely to get in the habit of checking them on a regular basis.
- Posting key information from the letter on your Twitter account and in your school Facebook group, if relevant. This is a great way to keep parents informed and allow them to ask questions. However, keep in mind to only share information that is public, as anyone can see it once it is online.
- Sending a copy of the letter via email to your School Council members, as these are often the people other parents will call when they have a concern.
- Addressing the issue at your next school council meeting and referring to the letter that was written.

- Referencing the letter in your next newsletter and reiterating that additional copies are available in the office.
- If parents call you about the issue, asking them if they received your letter. If not, email them a copy or refer to it in your response.
- Posting the letter on the bulletin board outside your office for parents who may be in the school.

You may never reach all parents, but communicating via letter allows you to effectively and efficiently provide the facts and details that you want to address.

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