

We the Media

Communicating in Times of Crisis

It's a dark 5:30 a.m. as I write—the only time I can work uninterrupted by kids, husband, or dog. Like the rest of the world, COVID-19—“granola virus” as my five-year-old calls it—has turned our lives upside down. In the short time my homebound family has been “flattening the curve,” I've observed two things: Effective, clear communications in uncertain times is critical—for parents, policymakers, and the public. And many states have knocked it out of the park.

Communications in crisis is hard. The tenets of crisis communications are simple enough: Get everyone on the same page fast, communicate often with key constituents, ensure transparency and credibility, be helpful and compassionate. However, the embattled state leader rarely has time to prepare and must respond without knowing the extent of the problem at hand.

Centralize the Message. You need a dedicated crisis response team. Springing into action without close advisors can yield confusion and missteps. Set up a committee that represents different skill sets, expertise, and viewpoints to help you make informed decisions, interpret feedback, and anticipate problems. The Kansas State Board of Education quickly stood up a task force to guide educators in supporting continuous learning. The task force made clear recommendations on technology, meal delivery, limited in-person instruction, and school-based mental health services, among other topics.

Transparency Is Credibility. You don't have to know everything to open lines of communication, but it is important to exude both confidence and honesty from the start. Share what you know, clarify what you don't, and pool

credible sources. Almost every state has a COVID-19 webpage to share pertinent policy developments and resources. The Utah and Illinois state boards created an FAQ to reflect the latest guidance and decisions. North Carolina's board issued a resolution to signal their support of the governor's closure of schools and a commitment to working alongside other state agencies.

Communicate Often. Keeping constituents informed helps maintain calm and ensures your strategy is on target. Daily briefings, statements about each decision, regular guidance, and a place for public questions or comments are all good tactics for state boards. Several also use social media to communicate changes in guidance. A glance at the Illinois state board's Twitter feed is sufficient to keep residents well informed of its coronavirus response. One word of caution. While it's important to inform the public, too much can have the opposite effect. So keep messaging relevant and succinct.

Be Helpful. Show Compassion. Not a soul is unaffected by COVID-19. Parents may be anxious about their next meal or their kids' online learning. Teachers may be juggling online teaching with caring for homebound children. States like Delaware and the District of Columbia have mapped where families can get meals. School buses in Virginia deliver meals, and in South Carolina and Texas they are wi-fi hot spots. Tennessee partners with public television to deliver instructional content. Celebrating successes can be uplifting and instill confidence in the response effort, so don't be shy about sharing. Let's also use our platforms to give credit to the adaptive, creative teachers who, now as ever, are on the frontlines of this work. ■



Renée Rybak Lang
Communications Director