

## Best Practices for School-Based Emergency Communications

Effective emergency communication is a critical leadership responsibility. In a crisis, the ability to communicate quickly and with precision can determine how effectively staff, students, and responders carry out protective actions. Delays or inconsistent terminology risk confusion and can hinder a coordinated response. Trust, clarity, and speed form the foundation of this process, enabling administrators to lead through an emergency with consistency, efficiency, and confidence.

### Foundations of Emergency Communication

Effective school-based emergency communication requires preparation, decisive action in the moment, and follow-up. To ensure safety and trust, schools must commit to accuracy, timeliness, consistency, accessibility, and strong coordination with partners.

#### BEFORE

- Review communication protocol for clarity and functionality.
- Determine methods for alerting the school community of emergencies and updates.
- Identify which devices and systems will be used to mobilize emergency responders.
- Establish how the school will receive warnings of potential emergencies.
- Train staff and test systems regularly to ensure readiness.

#### DURING

- Activate the Communication Protocol immediately.
- Maintain regular, two-way communication between essential function personnel, emergency partners, and first responders.
- Ensure messages are factual, timely, and delivered in plain language.
- Use multiple channels to reach audiences quickly and consistently.

#### AFTER

- Deliver timely and factual post-incident information to staff, families, community partners, and media..
- Alert all personnel and responders when the emergency has ended.
- Monitor and correct false or misleading information to maintain accuracy and trust.
- Conduct an after-action review, complete required incident reports, and refine communication protocols as needed.



## Emergency Messages

Crafting an effective emergency message requires both structure and tone. A clear structure ensures that critical details are never overlooked. Equally important is the tone: communication should be calm, factual, and written in plain language that avoids jargon or codes. When possible, messages should feel personal and authentic, reflecting the school or district's voice. Using reassuring but straightforward language helps reduce anxiety, builds trust, and ensures that staff, students, families, and community partners know exactly what to do. The following best practices can be used for a variety of emergency communications across multiple communication platforms.

1

### Be the first to communicate.

- Provide accurate information as soon as possible to prevent misinformation.
- Use official school or district communication channels.

2

### Use direct and plain language.

- Avoid jargon, acronyms, or technical terms that may cause confusion.
- Be clear and concise while maintaining professionalism.

3

### Stay focused and stick to verified facts.

- Acknowledge the incident and explain what has happened based on confirmed details.
- Avoid speculation or emotionally charged language.

4

### Provide reassurance while recognizing the severity of the situation.

- Balance urgency with calmness—be transparent but not alarming.
- Use language that fosters trust and confidence in response efforts.

5

### Clearly explain actions taken and steps moving forward.

- Outline actions being done to manage and resolve the situation.
- Provide instructions on what the school community should do.

6

### Give people actionable steps.

- Instead of saying what NOT to do, tell people what they SHOULD do, for example;
  - ✓ “Parents should wait for official updates before coming to the school.”
  - ✗ “Do not come to the school.”

7

### Maintain a consistent and accessible message.

- Ensure all updates share the same key details across platforms such as emails, social media, and text alerts.
- Prepare to offer simultaneous communications in multiple languages and accessible formats.

8

### Protect privacy and confidentiality.

- Share only necessary details while respecting the privacy of individuals involved.
- Communicate sensitive information only with those who need to know.

9

### Provide channels for updates and feedback.

- Direct the community to official sources for ongoing updates.
- Offer ways for individuals to ask questions or share concerns.



## Emergency Communication Formula

When drafting school emergency communications, use simple, direct language. Creating clear, inclusive, and actionable templates in advance saves time and ensures effective messaging during a crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION WITH THE LEADER'S VOICE

2. WHAT HAPPENED

3. WHERE THE INCIDENT OCCURRED OR WHO HAS BEEN IMPACTED

4. SAFETY MEASURES BEING TAKEN

5. INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE MESSAGE RECIPIENTS

6. WHERE TO GO FOR UPDATES AND OTHER INFORMATION

7. OTHER PERTINENT INFORMATION OR CHANGES IN TYPICAL PROCEDURES

8. REASSURANCE WITH THE LEADER'S VOICE

### Template Example

**[1]** This is an important safety notification from Madison St Middle School. **[2]** Law enforcement has reported ongoing police activity **[3]** in the neighborhood near our campus. **[4]** Out of caution, the school has been placed in Secure to ensure all students and staff remain safely inside with exterior doors locked. A Hold is also in place to keep hallways clear while instruction continues in classrooms. **[5]** Families should not come to the school at this time. All students are safe and under the supervision of staff. Please avoid calling the school directly so phone lines remain open for emergency communication. **[6]** We will continue to provide updates through text, email, and the district website at [website link]. **[7]** We are working closely with law enforcement and will lift the Secure and Hold directives once we receive confirmation that it is safe to do so. Families will be notified immediately when normal operations resume or if additional actions are required. **[8]** The safety of students and staff is our most important duty and one we seek to perform with the highest standard of care. Thank you for the trust you place in us to do so.



## Standard Response Protocol

MCSS promotes implementation of the “I Love You Guys” Standard Response Protocols (SRP), Hold, Secure, Lockdown, Evacuate, Shelter, Reunify - as the statewide framework for emergency language. The SRP provides shared, plain-language directives that enable swift decision-making and seamless coordination across jurisdictions, families, and emergency response partners. In moments of crisis, even small variations in terminology can create confusion. The SRP’s six clear directives outline exactly what actions should be taken by school personnel and students in different types of emergencies.



**HOLD** - used when movement in the building needs to stop, but there is no direct danger to those inside classrooms.

During a Hold, teachers keep students in their classrooms, hallways are cleared of all students and staff, and instruction continues as usual. Visitors may be asked to remain in place until the Hold is lifted, and first responders are only involved if the situation is connected to a medical or safety concern.



**SECURE** - a response to a potential threat outside the school building such as police activity nearby or a suspicious person in the community.

During a Secure, exterior doors are locked, and anyone outside is brought indoors. Students and staff continue normal classroom activities inside the building, though movement may be limited. Visitors are not permitted to enter, and law enforcement may monitor the area until the all-clear is given.



**SHELTER** - used in response to environmental or natural hazards.

During Shelter, students and staff take protective actions appropriate to the hazard—for example, moving to interior rooms during a tornado or dropping and covering during an earthquake. Movement pauses until the threat has passed or it is safe to relocate, and emergency personnel may secure the area or monitor conditions until it is safe to resume normal operations.



**LOCKDOWN** - used when there is a direct threat inside the school.

During a Lockdown, classroom doors are locked, lights are turned off, and students move out of sight while maintaining silence. Phones are silenced, and staff prepare to take protective actions if necessary. No one is permitted to enter or exit the building, and law enforcement responds immediately to secure the school and address the threat.



**EVACUATE** - used when students and staff need to leave the building for emergencies like fire or an unsafe structural issue.

During an Evacuation, students leave belongings behind and exit the building calmly to a designated safe location. Teachers bring attendance lists to account for all students, and staff ensure groups remain together and organized. First responders may guide movement and safety outside, and reunification procedures may follow if necessary.



**REUNIFY** - used whenever normal dismissal is unsafe or impractical typically after evacuations, lockdowns, or major emergencies where safety, accountability, and clear communication are essential.

During Reunification, students are safely and systematically released to their parents or guardians following an incident. A reunification site, either on campus or at a designated off-site location, is activated, and staff manage the process to ensure accountability and security. Parents check in, show identification, and are guided through a structured process to be reconnected with their child. This procedure reduces chaos, confirms every student’s status, and provides families with reassurance during a difficult situation.



## Resources:

### Communications and Warning: A Fictional Example for Before, During, and After a School Emergency

[chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://drive.usercontent.google.com/download?id=12ch19WF5lcW80Kdm-lj5Knd\\_uMF1Bmn1&authuser=0&acrobatPromotionSource=GoogleDriveNativeView](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://drive.usercontent.google.com/download?id=12ch19WF5lcW80Kdm-lj5Knd_uMF1Bmn1&authuser=0&acrobatPromotionSource=GoogleDriveNativeView)

### School Safety Communications Planning Guide

<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.nc2s.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/School-Safety-Communications-Planning-Guide.pdf>



<https://iloveuguy.org/The-Standard-Response-Protocol.html>



<https://iloveuguy.org/The-Standard-Reunification-Method.html>

