



Best Practice Guide

A Crisis Communications Guide: How Districts Can Prepare, Respond, and Rebuild with Confidence

A practical guide for school communications leaders

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Introduction

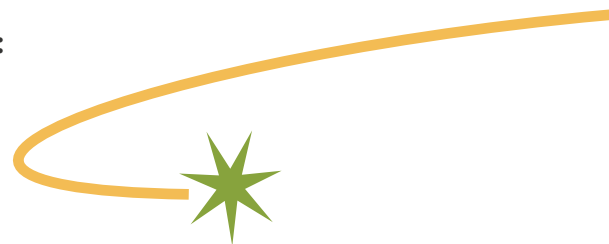


Every district faces unexpected moments. From weather emergencies and cyberattacks to threats, accidents, or misinformation online, schools need to be ready to communicate quickly, clearly, and compassionately.

In a crisis, how you communicate can make all the difference. Families look to district leaders for calm, accurate updates, staff need clear direction, and your community wants reassurance that students are safe and learning can continue.

This guide offers best practices for district and school leaders to:

- Build and activate a crisis communications team
- Prepare for a wide range of scenarios
- Respond effectively during an unexpected event
- Communicate with your community after a crisis



Plus, we've included a Bonus Resource: downloadable Crisis Communication Message Templates covering closures, lockdowns, drills, safety advisories, reunification updates, and more, so you have practical examples you can customize for your district.

Strong crisis communication starts long before a crisis happens. With the right plan, tools, and team in place, you can help your district respond with confidence.

Timely communication builds trust

Whether you're notifying families about a sudden weather closure or a last-minute schedule change, the key is getting your message out fast—and making sure it reaches everyone who needs it.

In every situation, timely communication should be:

- **Flexible:** Adaptable for everything from daily updates to true emergencies
- **Reliable:** Reaching every family, every time
- **Easy to engage with:** Shared across the channels your community already uses

ParentSquare brings all of this together, helping districts reach families quickly, clearly, and consistently.

“Using ParentSquare has been a fantastic experience for our school community. This platform sits at the heart of our communication strategy, ensuring parents never miss a beat. **Its versatility—from classroom communications to urgent alerts—makes it irreplaceable.**”

— Sarah Wells, Director of Communications, Troy Consolidated School District 30C (IL)

Building Your Crisis Communications Team

Why it matters

When everyone works from the same plan and platform, from leadership to first responders, communication stays consistent and credible. In every emergency, communication is a team effort. The best response plans are built collaboratively between district leaders, safety officials, and communications staff.

Core team members

Every district's structure is different, but your core crisis communications team should include:

- Communications leader or Public Information Officer (PIO)
- Superintendent or assistant superintendent
- School safety coordinator or emergency manager
- School Resource Officer (SRO)
- Building principals or site administrators
- Police and fire department representatives

Additional support roles may include:

- Classroom teacher or staff representative
- Facilities and transportation leaders
- Counseling or mental health staff


Pro tip: Make sure everyone on your team has a way to communicate quickly and efficiently. If your core team includes members who aren't already part of your school communication system, they may not receive standard alerts from the district. On ParentSquare, consider creating a group that includes these members.



Clarify roles and responsibilities

Every team member should know:

- **Who communicates:** Identify a primary and backup spokesperson for both district- and building-level events. Clearly naming these roles helps avoid confusion about who is responsible for sending out communications.
- **What to communicate:** Define what information can be shared and what must be verified.
- **Where to communicate:** List official channels such as ParentSquare, your website, social media, or local media outlets.
- **When to communicate:** Establish clear approval and timing protocols.

 **ParentSquare tip:** Designate pre-approved message templates and contacts in your ParentSquare message library. When time is short, one click can alert families and staff across all channels.

Preparing for the Unexpected

Plan ahead

Effective crisis communication starts with clear procedures and aligned decision-making. Before an event occurs:

- Review your district's emergency response plan to ensure communication and escalation protocols are built in, with clear criteria for when and how to activate crisis procedures.
- Keep team contacts, templates, and procedures updated annually.
- Establish relationships with local first responders and media before you need them.

“The ability to **send out Smart Alerts**, manage forms and permission slips, and even schedule appointments with **just a few clicks** has made our communication smoother than ever before. The feedback from parents has been overwhelmingly positive—they appreciate **feeling in the loop and engaged with the school's community.**”

— Megan Bird, Assistant Principal, Scottsdale Unified School District (AZ)

Build your go kit

Just as teachers have classroom go bags, communication leaders should have them too. A fully stocked communications “go kit” helps you stay operational from anywhere.

Your crisis comms go kit may include:

- Laptop or tablet
- Mobile phone with hotspot
- Portable battery chargers and cords
- Contact list (district leaders, media, key partners) - digital/hard copies
- Crisis plan - digital/hard copies
- Pre-scripted ParentSquare messages
- Water, snacks, and spare clothes for long days

Pro tip: Review and refresh your crisis comms go kit at the start of every semester.

Prepare for common scenarios

Not every crisis situation will look the same, but communication expectations remain constant. Plan for scenarios like:

- Power or internet outages
- Weather-related closures
- Active threats or lockdowns
- Transportation or field trip incidents
- Cyberattacks or data breaches
- Student or staff medical emergencies
- Misinformation spreading online

Pro tip: Holding regular drills helps staff and families become familiar with the process in the event of an unexpected situation. Communicate drills ahead of time to avoid confusion, and remember to add “[TEST]” or “[DRILL]” to drill alerts.



Set clear expectations for staff and families

Preparation doesn't end with your crisis communications team. The most effective plans include clear expectations for everyone—staff, families, and community partners.

For staff

Provide a concise internal reference document each semester that outlines:

- How and when urgent messages will be sent
- Where to find official updates
- Their role in reunification or student supervision
- Site-specific safety procedures for fire, weather, lockdown, or evacuation

Make this document easy to access, review it with your staff regularly, and align it with your district's overall safety plan.

For families


Create a public-facing “Urgent Response Guide” that explains what families can expect before, during, and after a crisis. This should include:

- How the district will contact them (text, call, email, or ParentSquare post)
- What types of information will be shared and when
- How to update contact information
- What happens after an event (reunification, next steps, counseling resources)

Share this guide at the start of every school year via handbooks, newsletters, and your website.

“The platform’s one-stop-shop approach to communication **keeps everyone informed** about news, events, and activities. The **Smart Alerts** feature ensures **important information is never missed**, enhancing our collaborative engagement across the district.”

— Kellie Goral, Executive Director of Public Relations and Marketing, Hampton City Public Schools (VA)

 **ParentSquare tip:** Make sure every family receives every message. Use ParentSquare’s contactability tools to identify who isn’t receiving notifications, address missing or incorrect contact details, and close communication gaps before a crisis ever occurs.

Communicating During and After a Crisis




During a crisis

In a crisis, clarity and empathy matter most. Your goal should always be to deliver verified information quickly, calmly, and consistently.

Best practices

Families want reassurance, not speculation. Here's how to communicate with clarity and care.


- Communicate early and often, even if details are limited.
- Stick to verified facts and avoid speculation.
- Keep tone compassionate and confident.
- Use plain language and avoid acronyms or jargon.
- Keep communications accessible by sharing in multiple languages and formats (text, email, app, or voice).
- Centralize updates in one trusted place (district website or ParentSquare feed).

 **ParentSquare tip:** In cases involving loss or personal tragedy, it's important to communicate with empathy while respecting privacy. ParentSquare provides flexibility to manage who receives notifications, helping ensure messages reach the right audiences at the right time.

Districts can:

- Create a confidential group that includes the full community except the affected family.
- Temporarily pause notifications for specific parents or staff members.
- Use Auto Notices to exclude certain families from community-wide messages.

ParentSquare helps schools handle sensitive communications thoughtfully and respectfully—so every message is both timely and compassionate.




When every second matters, flexibility, clarity, and speed are everything.

ParentSquare’s **Smart Alerts and Urgent Alerts** empower districts to communicate critical information instantly and accurately across every channel, in 190+ languages.

- Smart Alerts are ideal for time-sensitive updates such as school closures, early dismissals, or transportation delays.
 - ▶ Send to specific schools, routes, or groups.
 - ▶ Use pre-set templates with automatic translations.
 - ▶ Broadcast across text, voice, email, app, and web, with smart failover so messages always reach families.
- Urgent Alerts are designed for true emergencies such as threats, lockdowns, or natural disasters.
 - ▶ Send district-wide messages in seconds from any device.
 - ▶ Translate automatically into recipients’ preferred languages, with the option to edit before sending.

Choose from prerecorded messages or write short text-to-speech updates for rapid delivery.

Don’t forget! You can create and send posts and alerts directly from the app on your cell phone—a feature that district leaders have called a “lifesaver” when they don’t have power, internet access, or are away from their computers.

 **ParentSquare tip:** Creating an Alerts library with pre-written messages can help simplify communication in a crisis. When you have thoughtful, situation-specific communications already prepared, that’s one less step you need to think about when you’re handling an unexpected situation. Review messages every semester to keep them current and aligned with your response plans.

“Smart Alerts and Urgent Alerts have helped us get critical information out to families quickly and efficiently.”

— Anthony Johnson, Chief Communications Officer, Clarksville Montgomery County School System (TN)

Sample messages for urgent situations

Here are quick examples you can personalize for your school or district:

Text message

[District Name] schools will be [closed / moving to eLearning] [today / tomorrow, full date] due to [urgent situation].

Voice message

This is [District Name] calling with an important update. All schools will be [closed / moving to eLearning] [today / tomorrow, full date] due to [urgent situation]. Please check your email or ParentSquare post for additional information.

Email message

Subject: Update from [District Name]

Dear Parents and Guardians,

All [District Name] schools will be [closed / utilizing eLearning] [today / tomorrow, full date] due to [urgent situation].

[Preschool and before/after-school programs] will be [closed / open at normal time].

No meals will be served. Evening activities are [proceeding as normal / canceled] unless otherwise noted.

Classes will resume on [date], unless otherwise notified.

Sincerely,

[District Name] Administration

ParentSquare Smart Alert example

Urgent Alert x

Choose from Message Library

Weather closure

Create new message

Recipients
Lincoln Unified School District

Who should receive this?
This alert will be sent as text, call, and email if present to all selected recipient groups and emergency contacts by default.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Staff	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Parents
<input type="checkbox"/> Students	<input type="checkbox"/> Guests

Include social networks

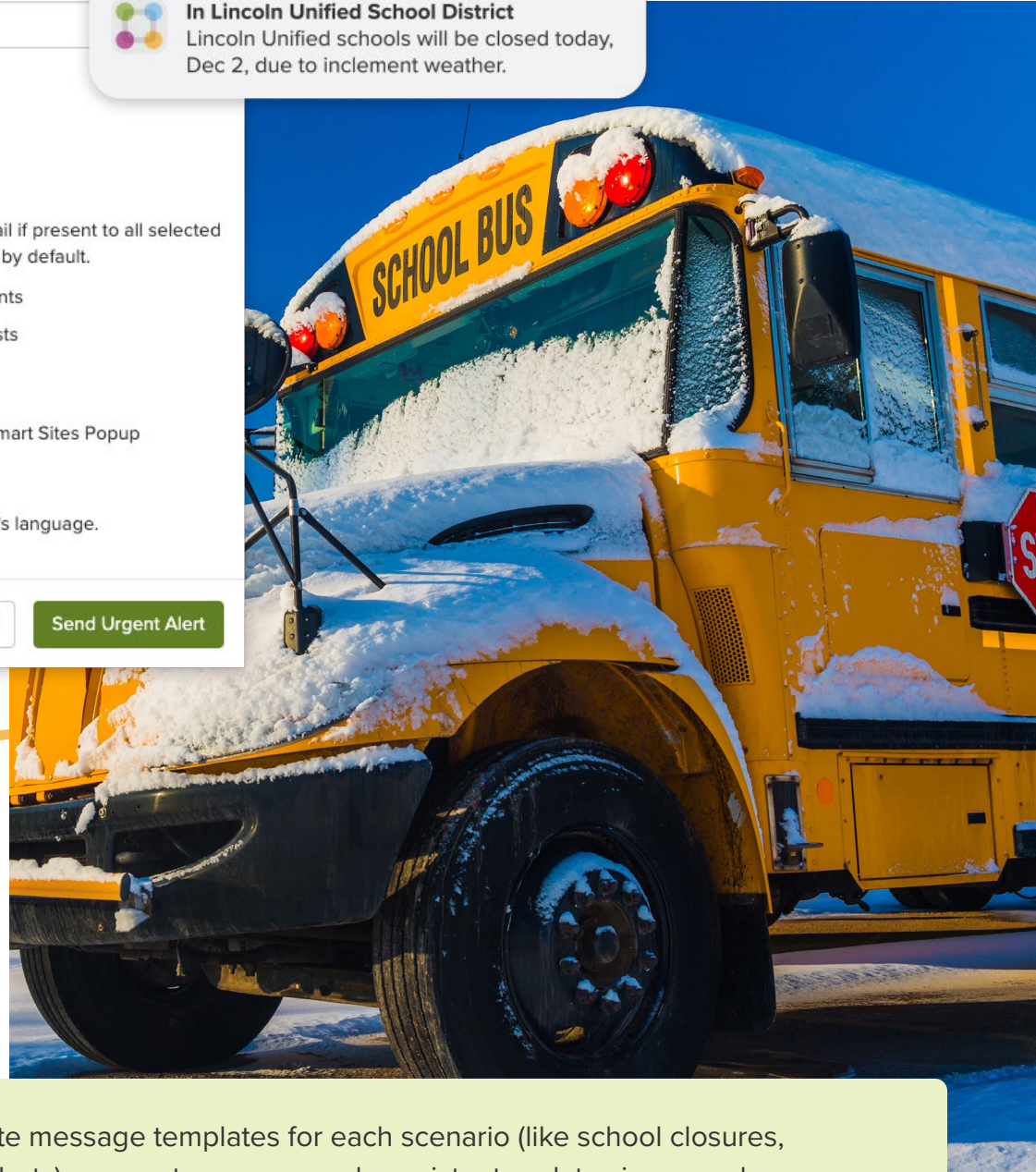
<input type="checkbox"/> Facebook	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Smart Sites Popup
<input type="checkbox"/> X/Twitter	

Automatically translate to the recipient's language.

Cancel
Send Urgent Alert

New Alert now

In Lincoln Unified School District
Lincoln Unified schools will be closed today, Dec 2, due to inclement weather.



ParentSquare tip: Create message templates for each scenario (like school closures, lockdowns, and weather alerts) so your team can send consistent updates in seconds across text, email, app, or voice messaging.

After a crisis

Once the immediate situation has stabilized, communication shifts from urgent updates to ongoing reassurance and recovery.

1. Continue the conversation

Keep families informed about next steps such as counseling services, reopening plans, or investigations. Follow up personally with affected families or staff. Consistent communication builds trust during recovery.

2. Debrief and evaluate


Gather your crisis communications team to review:

- What went well?
- What could be improved?
- Were messages timely, accurate, and clear?

Pro tip: Document key learnings within 24-48 hours while details are fresh.

3. Support your team

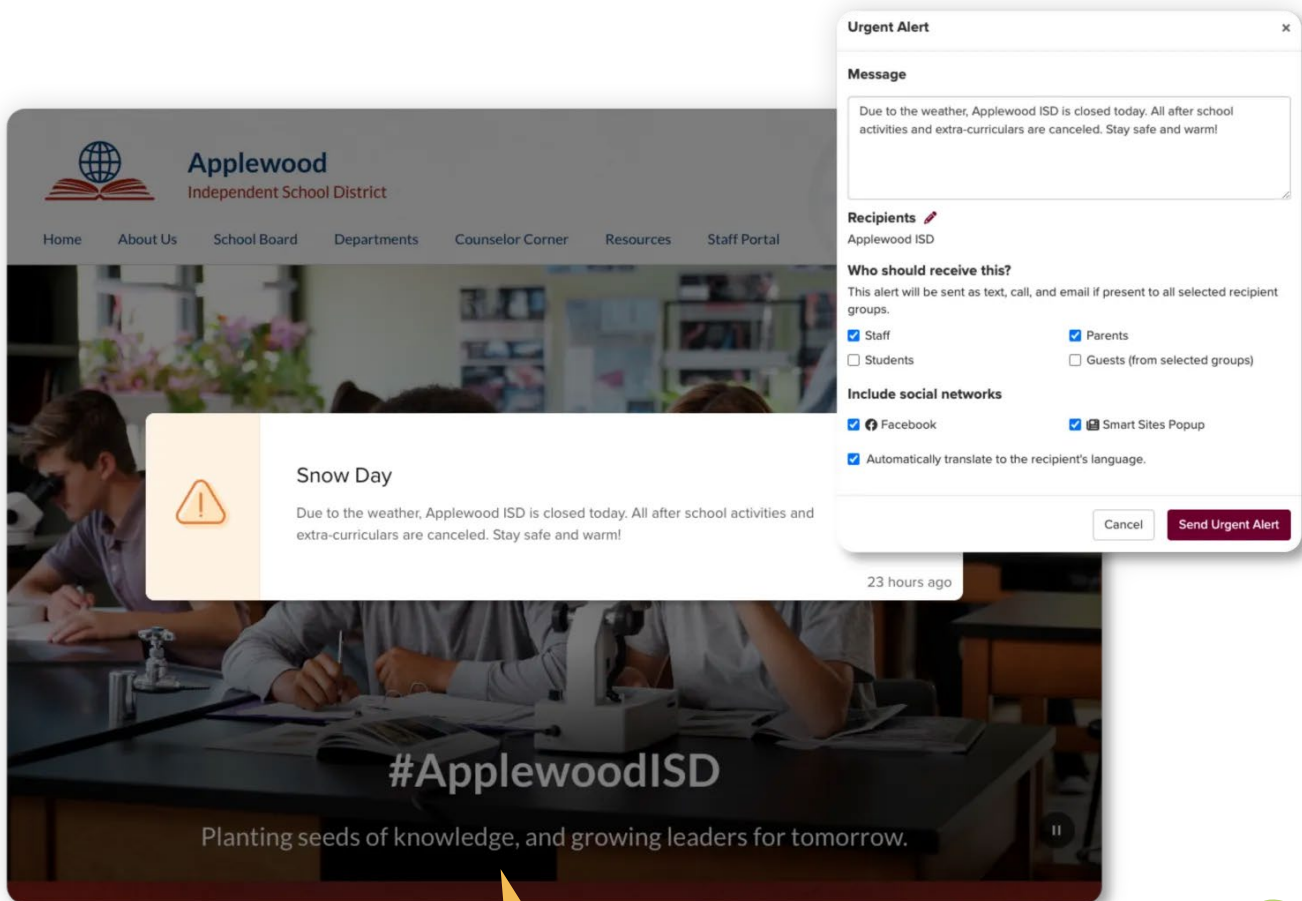
Crisis response is emotionally exhausting. Encourage mental health breaks and debriefing for communications staff and administrators. Remember, empathy begins inside your organization.

 **ParentSquare tip:** Review your communication analytics to understand reach and engagement. Identify which channels worked best for each audience.



ParentSquare Smart Sites

Use your district website as part of your crisis communication plan. With Smart Sites, you can automatically display urgent alerts as banner notifications on your website so families and community members see critical updates even if they miss a message.



★ **Bonus Resource: downloadable Crisis Communication Message Templates**

Stronger Communication, Supported Schools



Every second counts in a crisis, and effective communication is the thread that connects it all. With preparation, clear protocols, and the right technology, districts can help protect students, reassure families, and maintain public trust, even in the most difficult moments.

ParentSquare makes timely communication flexible, reliable, and easy, helping districts reach every family with confidence, no matter what the day brings.

Schedule a demo today at parentsquare.com/demo-signup
or call **(888) 996-4156**.

About ParentSquare



ParentSquare is the trusted leader in school-home engagement, helping K-12 districts nationwide reach every family with an award-winning, all-in-one communication platform. Reaching over 20 million students nationwide, ParentSquare helps districts consolidate disconnected tools and outdated communication systems with personalized messaging, websites, forms, payments, and more—in one easy-to-use platform. With powerful features for achieving 100% contactability, two-way translation into 190+ languages, and purpose-built AI enhancements, ParentSquare empowers districts to invite every family to be involved in their student's education, no matter their home language or the device they use.

Recognized for growth and innovation by Inc. 5000, GSV 150, and more, ParentSquare was founded in 2011 in Santa Barbara, California. Learn more at parentsquare.com.