



**National Center
for School Safety**



School Safety Communications Planning Guide



SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC HEALTH
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Contributors

Angie Zill, MS
Research Communications
& Operations Manager
National Center for School Safety

Brent Allen Miller, MA, PMP
Training Manager
National Center for School Safety

Kiera Dressler, MSW Candidate
Research Assistant
National Center for School Safety

Erin Wyatt
Marketing Communications Specialist
National Center for School Safety

Allison Schreiber, MAIR
School Safety Specialist
National Center for School Safety

About the National Center for School Safety

The National Center for School Safety (NCSS) is a Bureau of Justice Assistance-funded training and technical assistance center at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. As a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional center focused on improving school safety and preventing school violence, the NCSS team is composed of national leaders in criminal justice, education, social work, and public health with expertise in school safety research and practice. NCSS provides comprehensive and accessible support to Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grantees and the school safety community nationwide to address today's school safety challenges. NCSS serves as the national training and technical assistance provider for the STOP School Violence Program.

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National Center for School Safety

University of Michigan
School of Public Health
1415 Washington Heights
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104
nc2s.org

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Introduction

This guide is meant to be a quick-start to help you as school leaders plan and share school safety-related initiatives and news with your communities. You will find helpful tips, resources, and worksheets throughout this guide. As you develop, implement, and assess your comprehensive school safety communications plans, you can refer back to this guide for actionable steps and activities.

This guide addresses how to:

- » Create a Communications Strategy
- » Take Stock of Your Resources
- » Identify Your Core Audience
- » Choose Your Communication Method
- » Craft Your Message
- » Use Inclusive Language & Ensure Accessibility
- » Navigate Incorrect Information Sharing
- » Assess: Is It Working?



Additional Resources and References are included at the end.

Communicating your school safety plans is important, because clear, accessible, and specific information shared in a timely manner will help build and maintain trust with your community. You can shape the narrative around your school's efforts and activities by proactively and strategically communicating. Early communications planning will empower your team to understand and take charge of their responsibilities, as well as help you identify gaps in your emergency planning and prepare you and your team to respond in crisis situations. School safety communications planning will lead to more organized, efficient processes.

You can start developing processes by defining your plan and goals, assigning ownership of tasks to specific staff, ensuring follow-through on action items, assessing what worked well and what did not, and using that to inform your continuing activities. You should know or seek to understand the best methods to reach your audience and spend effort and resources there. Getting your communications plan started does not require innovation, specialized support, or expensive tools. No matter what resources you have available or where you are in your communications process, this guide will help empower you to feel confident in taking action to share your school safety plans.

Create a Communications Strategy

A communications strategy can be defined as “a [plan] for communicating information related to a specific issue, event, situation, or audience ... [that serves] as the blueprints for communicating with the public, stakeholders, or even colleagues” and does not have to be formally documented.^[1] This guide takes a broad view and focuses on the overall framework of a communications strategy, helping you formulate school safety goals, outcomes, activities, and outputs.

Who Should be Involved?

As you begin to think about your communications strategy, you should consider who to involve in the process. Pull together a group of people who represent many voices in your school community, and make sure that relevant partners and leaders are consulted. You may want to ask a group of people (including youth representatives when possible) to review ideas or drafts as you go and before finalizing a version. Try to balance gathering broad and important feedback with moving forward toward completion.

Identify SMART Goals^[2]

Once you have pulled together a group of people to provide support, you should begin thinking about your communications goals. A good tool that sets you up to successfully achieve your goals is the SMART method. You should develop goals that are:

S Specific	Concrete, detailed, and well defined so that you know where you are going and what to expect when you arrive
M Measurable	Numbers and quantities provide means of measurement and comparison
A Achievable	Feasible and easy to put into action
R Realistic	Considers constraints such as resources, personnel, cost, and time frame
T Time-Bound	A time frame helps to set boundaries around the goal

For example, one of your goals may be:
Share safety tips and updates with parents throughout the school year.

Putting this through the **SMART** method, you can better define it by asking the following questions:

S Specific

What type of safety tips and updates should be shared? How much time and effort will you put into this project? Who will be in charge of writing and sharing these tips and updates? How will they be shared (and what method or methods will help you reach the most parents)?

M Measurable

How will you measure how many parents read the safety tips and updates? How will you know if tips and updates are useful and well-received?

A Achievable

Are the scope and timeline feasible? Will this be easy to put in place?

R Realistic

With the resources you have available, is implementing this project possible? Does the staff member responsible for this project have enough time to successfully carry it out? Do the costs of this project fit your budget?

T Time-Bound

How often would you like to share tips and updates? Within what time frame do you plan to do this?

A resulting **SMART goal** could be:

[Staff member or team] will share safety tips and updates related to before- and after-school transportation, reporting suspicious behavior, and safe routes to and from school via Twitter once per week on Tuesdays at 7am from the first week of school to the last.

This goal is specific, measurable (see the “Measure Success through Outputs” section below for more), achievable, realistic, and time-bound.

Quick Tip

Go through the SMART goal process for up to five key communications goals. Resist the urge to create too many goals or goals that are not possible to be achieved in your current circumstances.

Define Outcomes

Once you have identified SMART goals, you can use those to define outcomes. An outcome results from a goal being achieved and describes the purpose of the goal. It can be thought of as answering the question, “Why do you want to achieve this goal?”

For example, using the SMART goal you created above, the **outcomes** might be to:

Raise parent-guardian awareness of school safety practices and current events, increase parent-guardian engagement with and use of the school’s Twitter platform, and help the community regularly prioritize school safety.

Plan & Implement Activities

Now that you have identified your SMART goals and outcomes, you need to plan how to achieve the former to realize the latter. What activities do you need to implement to work toward your goals and reach your outcomes?

Using the SMART goal and outcome examples from above, you might identify the following

- » *Gather current school safety events and updates to share.*
- » *Research relevant school safety tips from reputable sources to share.*
- » *Write one tip per week.*
- » *Include interactive components to tweets like asking questions to generate comments when relevant.*
- » *Schedule a tweet on Twitter by Monday at 4pm weekly.*
- » *Monitor and track engagement (likes, re-tweets, and the number of comments).*

Think of your activities as duties or responsibilities. They are the action steps that need to be completed to help you achieve your goals. A project management tool or timeline can help you manage tasks and stay on track.

Once you know what activities need to be completed, create a **schedule** for completing them. This schedule should include all activities, their durations, and dependencies (i.e., what should be completed first; what can be completed concurrently). You can use this schedule to help assess your organizational capacity for the work that needs to be done. Ask yourself:

- » Who has time to dedicate to these tasks?
- » Who are the best messengers to share information with the intended audience?

After you have a sense of what activities need to be completed, develop realistic role descriptions that spell out responsibilities for your team. Also consider how your team’s progress will be measured and celebrated.

Quick Tip

Several options for project management tools include:

- » [Asana](#)
- » [ClickUp](#)
- » [Jira](#)
- » [Trello](#)
- » [Wrike](#)

Measure Success Through Outputs

To analyze whether you have successfully reached your outcomes, you should measure and monitor outputs. Outputs (not to be confused with [outcomes](#)) are measurable items, such as numerical metrics. They answer the question “How will you measure the success of an outcome?” Measuring may be a continuous process for ongoing communications or a long-term project, or it may be more static, such as collecting responses to a one-time survey. To learn more about measuring success, review [“Assess: Is it Working?”](#)

Continuing with your SMART goal and outcome example above, you might identify these **outputs**:

- » *Number of tweet viewers (average weekly, average monthly, cumulative number)*
- » *Number of retweets (average weekly, average monthly, cumulative number)*
- » *Number of comments (average weekly, average monthly, cumulative number)*
- » *Responses to an end-of-year survey sent to parents via email and Twitter to gauge awareness and effectiveness of weekly school safety tips and updates*

At this point, you have identified goals, defined outcomes, thought through a plan to implement your action items, and determined the metrics (outputs) needed to measure success. Now that you have a basic framework for your communications strategy, you should [“Take Stock of Your Resources.”](#) Then you may begin to consider your audience and messaging as you work toward implementing your plan.



Take Stock of Your Resources

After you have identified your communication goals, you can start taking stock of the resources you have—and those you do not have—to move from your high-level goals to progressively more detailed action items.

The following groups of questions can help you pinpoint exactly what resources you have available.

Budget

- » How much money is available to dedicate to your communications efforts?
- » Are you anticipating more funding in the near future, or are the financial resources you have now all that there is?
- » Do you have wiggle room for unanticipated costs? How much?

Personnel

- » What skills do those in charge of your communications efforts need to have? Think about **technical skills** (digital design; social media technology), **communication skills** (putting parents at ease during an in-person information session; ensuring the team has the latest information), and **leadership skills** (whether they are a designated leader or not, ensure this is someone people look to for guidance and who can lead during a crisis).
- » Who on your team has these skills? If no one has these skills, is there someone you can train? Or does it make more sense to hire new staff?
- » What are the specific tasks you need your team to complete? Are these tasks documented (such as in job descriptions or task lists)?
- » What is the process for onboarding personnel who are new to the team? What happens when someone leaves the team but the tasks still need to get done?

Strategic Partners

- » Which organizations or services do you work with the most (parent groups, after-school programs, healthcare providers)?
- » What groups are served by your partners? Is there overlap in who you serve?
- » Which partners could help you share information? How?
- » How are your partners affected by your school safety programming? How can you tailor your communications to address this?
- » Who on your team should your partners contact with questions, ideas, or concerns?

Technology

- » What technology do you already have access to? How can you leverage it to achieve your communications goals?
- » What technologies have you identified as being useful but do you not have access to yet? Are there free or low-cost options available?
- » Are you planning to distribute communications virtually, in print, or both? Do you have the technology required to do this?

Your context will influence how you answer and address these questions. For example, if you have a limited budget, a small team of only one or a few people, no strategic partners, and access to only free technologies, the way to work toward achieving your goals will be different than a team with more flexibility in funding, several committed staff members, a handful of community partners, and subscriptions to proprietary software.

Teams with more constraints must be more creative with how they leverage the resources they have access to in order to achieve their goals. For example, suppose your school district or local government distributes a quarterly print newsletter to everyone in the community. In that case, you might consider asking district leaders for space in the newsletter to include the message you would like to convey.

Another consideration as you plan and allocate funds to resources is how you can best reach those you intend to reach. This group is called your core audience. To learn how to “Identify Your Core Audience,” read on.

Identify Your Core Audience

Identifying your audience is a crucial part of a marketing or messaging strategy. Not only will defining it help you build and gain momentum with your communication methods, but it will help ensure success in the long run.

Additionally, identifying your core audience will:

- » Allow you to communicate more effectively and develop engaging messaging
- » Help you determine methods through which to communicate (social media, newsletters, etc.)
- » Ensure that time and resources are spent on relevant groups
- » Help you focus your content strategy
- » Prevent you from overlooking groups you intend to reach
- » Be crucial in times of disasters/emergencies



Your core audience is not “everyone.” To be effective, you must narrow your focus to groups that would benefit from or have an interest in the information you are disseminating. To help you identify your core audience, follow these steps:

- 1. Make a list of those you want to reach.** Take time to think through every part of your community: local organizations, parent-guardians, students, former students, out-of-district students, retirees, school administrators, public safety professionals, and so on.
- 2. Consider your existing audience,** if you have one. If you already have a social media presence, who are the users engaging with your content (liking, sharing, commenting)? If you send out newsletters via an email marketing platform such as Mailchimp, which subscribers are consistently opening and clicking on emails? Who are the people filling seats at school board meetings?
- 3. Search Facebook for local community Groups or Pages, or browse the NextDoor app.** Conversations about schools are happening organically and constantly on platforms such as these and may provide additional insight into your core audience.

Once you have an idea of who your core audience is, identify what might get in the way of reaching them. Ask yourself:

- » What barriers might there be to reaching certain audiences? Do some of my audience groups not have access to the internet or transportation? Are they in a remote area that may cause access difficulties?
- » What communication barriers might you encounter? How many people in your community are visual- or hearing- impaired or speak a different language than you? How many adults in your community struggle with illiteracy?
- » Is there equal and full representation in the photos and graphics you plan to use? If not, how can you prevent the marginalization of groups that are not readily represented?

In order to move forward with a strong communications strategy, you must not only have a core audience but know them as well. Knowing your core audience will help you choose the best communication method to reach them. You can learn more by reading the section “Choose Your Communication Method.”

Choose Your Communication Method

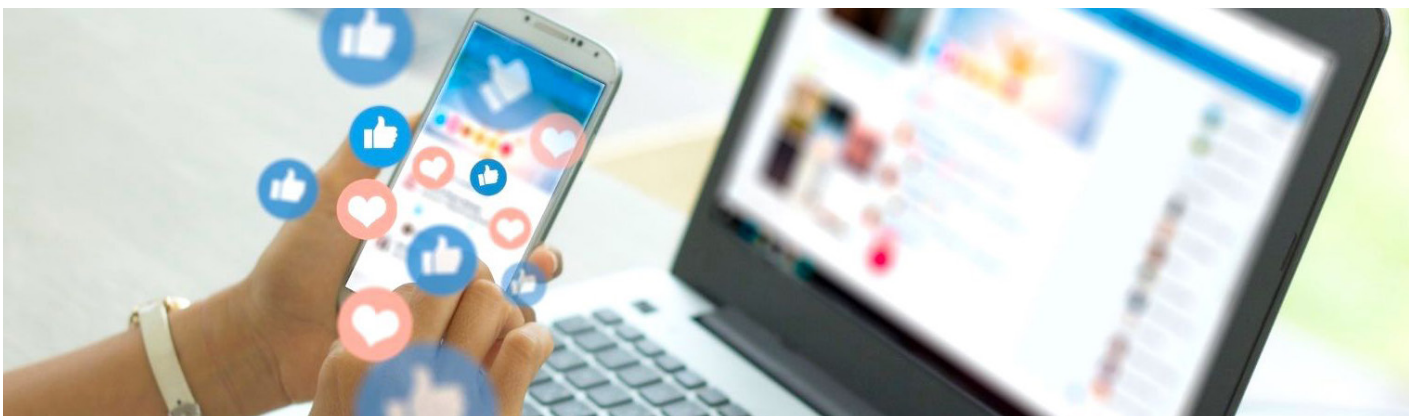
After identifying your core audience, your next step will be to determine the most effective methods for communicating with each group within. While it may seem like the obvious answer, creating an online presence for your school or community is not sufficient by itself. It is important to recognize and acknowledge that many in your core audience may not utilize social media or even have access to the internet.

These types of barriers exist in every form of communication, so it is best to choose upwards of three avenues in order to reach the largest audience possible. Some methods to explore and considerations for each include:

Social Media

- » Determine which platforms your core audience already utilizes. Go where they are. For example, older adults, parents, and teachers often utilize Facebook, while school-aged audiences may largely be found on Instagram and Snapchat.
- » Look at the capabilities of each. If you want your content to be shareable and discussion-based, Facebook is best suited for that purpose. If your content is largely informational graphics and short clips used to spread information, use Instagram. If you want to give up-to-the-minute updates, Twitter may be best.
- » Determine which combination of platforms would be most effective and suit your purposes best based on the level of effort, personnel, and resources needed. Do not overextend your team or commit to a platform that is too time-consuming to construct and maintain.
- » Review pages or accounts that already exist. Consider which to keep and rebrand for your purposes. Identify and remove those which are redundant, inactive, or hold no value.
- » Determine how to overcome barriers outlined in [“Identify Your Core Audience”](#) for each platform. Consider identifying those who can help translate your messaging so it can be more inclusive. Look into including subtitles and captions for those hard of hearing, and alt text for those with vision impairments.
- » Review the pros and cons of social media:

Pros:	Cons:
Communication is fast, easy, and allows the use of varied media	Communications can be scrutinized, misinterpreted, and/or taken out of context
The cost is very low, and it requires limited personnel or resources	It alienates those who do not utilize social media, do not have internet access, or face other technology-related barriers.
In case of an emergency, social media can have the quickest and farthest reach	
It provides an informal place for the community to learn and engage with the school and each other	





Build Your Voice and Online Presence

There are a few strategic considerations to take into account when building or improving your online presence. In the [“Choose Your Communication Method”](#) section, you learned how to define your purpose on social media and determine which platforms to use. Further considerations include:

- » **Determining the “voice” of your social media accounts**, unified across all platforms. This [Hootsuite blog post](#) can help you define your voice.
- » **How to maintain your social media and its day-to-day operations.** Consider utilizing a social media management platform such as [Hootsuite](#), where you can draft, edit and publish your posts to multiple platforms. Also answer:
 - » Who will be responsible for engaging with those online and responding to comments and messages?
 - » How often will you post?
- » **The importance of creating a social media calendar** and planning content and strategies.
- » **Creating an emergency plan.** In the event of an emergency, your school should have one in place for exactly who is responsible for communicating information through various methods, what that language might be, and the overall protocol associated with communication during a crisis. This person will support leadership and relieve some of the burden from them in these situations. You can read more about creating a [crisis response communications plan](#) later in this guide.
- » **Determining brand standards**, such as your logo and profile pictures (ensuring they are accurate and of the best quality), specific and custom hashtags, font choice, graphics, and colors.
- » **Assigning a social media manager to oversee content planning and implementation.** This team member can help ensure goals are met and messages are communicated effectively.
- » **Social media promotion**, such as how to get the word out about your new platforms. This could involve featuring links on various school web pages and in printed or digital newsletters, adding links to employees’ email signatures, passing out informational cards at conferences, and making announcements on digital signage.

Printed Materials

- » Determine what this communication method will look like for your purposes. Will you be proactive in printing newsletters with updates, reminders, and other information, or reactive—printing to address sudden/unexpected changes or issues?
- » Review what personnel and materials you will need in order to print materials, as well as estimates of the overall cost. For instance, you might require design software; assistance in collecting, writing, translating, and editing messaging; funds to cover the cost of printing; and processes for creating mailing lists and distributing materials.
- » Consider opportunities to partner or collaborate with other businesses or organizations to help spread information. Can your local newspaper feature items for you, either in print or online? Are there nearby restaurants, coffee spots, or offices that will allow you to leave your prints close to points of foot traffic? Can you make a list of local community message (bulletin) boards you can pin the papers to?
- » Review the pros and cons of print:

Quick Tip

Always promote the school's social media accounts by including the information somewhere on printed materials.

Pros:

Printed materials allow you to communicate directly with those who do not utilize social media.

They are a more “static” form of communication in that people often hold onto printed materials for a time; therefore, the information is around for longer and is appealing to those who prefer tangible forms of communication.

Printed communications provide space for all pertinent information to be shared.

Cons:

Communication via print is slow and time-consuming.

Information can often be “outdated” by the time it is released.

Printing can be a costly option that does not make room for edits, updates, or immediate dialogue.



Media

- » Ask yourself what instances would be best to utilize local media: press releases, emergencies, advertising local events or school safety news, etc.
- » If you have not already, build relationships with the local news and radio stations. When needed, you may be able to collaborate with them and benefit from their large audiences and ability to share information quickly.
- » Determine or designate who from the school will be responsible for contacting and working with the local media. Develop a protocol for crafting messaging (see [“Craft Your Message”](#) for more).
- » Use the [“Press Release Template”](#) to customize a news release announcing your STOP grant funding. You can use this template to create future news releases for major project milestones or metrics.
- » Consider the pros and cons:

Pros:	Cons:
Media channels typically reach a broader audience and generate more visibility.	Media comments and responses can be difficult to monitor within your internal team.
They may convey the importance of your message.	Also, you may not be able to guarantee that a media channel will be able to share every item you would like shared.





Press Release Template

[Your Name]

For Immediate Release: [Today's Date]

[Your Organization]

[Phone Number]

[Email@Address]

[Your Organization] Receives \$[Funding Amount] in Funding from the [BJA's STOP School Violence/ COPS Office School Violence Prevention Program/ OJJDP's Enhancing School Capacity To Address Youth] Grant

[Your city, State Abbreviation]. Today [Your Organization] announced that they received federal funding for a 3-year school safety initiative. The [Bureau of Justice Assistance/ Office of Community Oriented Policing/ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention] awarded \$[Funding Amount] to fund [specific funded areas of your grant, such as mental health support or security cameras] to enhance and support the safety of the school community.

[Your Organization]'s Superintendent [Name of Superintendent] said "[insert quote here about receiving funds]." The grant award period runs through September 30, 20[xx]. [Superintendent/ other Administrator] plans to begin this initiative immediately by [list the first few actions planned, such as hiring a program manager, securing quotes from a few reputable suppliers, etc.]. "[Optional: insert another quote here]."

About [Your Organization]: [Brief description of your organization, including items such as its founding date, the areas it covers or population it serves, its mission, etc.]

Learn more at [Your Organization's URL]. For questions, contact [Contact Name] at [Email@Address].



In-Person Events & Face-to-Face

- » Identify what might work best when it comes to in-person communication. Is it staff meetings, school board meetings, assemblies, or parent-teacher conferences? Consider your intended audience.
- » Think through everything that in-person meetings entail, including meeting spaces, scheduling, attendees, speakers, facilitators, sound systems, agendas, and so on.
- » Consider how to make these gatherings safe spaces where people feel free to respectfully share their thoughts. What will you do if a conflict arises?
- » Meeting with people face-to-face is a great way to disseminate information, but it is an equally valuable way to listen. Consider holding informal focus groups to solicit community feedback on school improvement initiatives. Simply listening to others can provide powerful insights into how your school messaging is perceived, understood, and valued by those in your community.
- » Become familiar with the pros and cons:

Pros:

This can sometimes be the most accessible form of communication for those who do not have access to the internet or who are not adept with technology.

It is also sometimes easier to convey the tone of your message when sharing it in person.

You also often have the opportunity to answer questions and respond to comments.

Cons:

In-person events often take more planning and set-up/clean-up time.

They also require a physical location that will accommodate the group.

If a threat or crisis (such as a medical emergency, severe weather, etc.) arises, you must have an emergency response plan prepared.

Email

- » A majority of people in your community are likely to have email addresses, even if they do not utilize social media. Therefore, communication via email is a very easy and effective way to reach your core audience.
- » Consider how you will utilize this option (newsletters, simply written emails, etc.) and who your core audience is (i.e. parents, students, staff, alumni, etc.).
- » Will you be sending communications out weekly or as needed? What email address will be used to send these communications?
- » Who from your team will be responsible for creating messaging, and who will monitor responses and questions?
- » Understand the pros and cons:

Pros:

Email communications are a quick, mass form of messaging.

You may be able to easily build a large email subscriber list to distribute to.

Cons:

People may get inundated with emails and may not open or read your important messages, especially if you send too many emails.

Communication goes both ways. Regardless of what platforms or methods you use, always make sure that there is some way that you or your school can be contacted, so the community can follow up, ask questions, and share concerns or feedback. This might include providing and **monitoring**:

- » A telephone number to an answering machine at the school
- » Direct messaging on social media platforms
- » The comment sections on social media posts (enabling the comments feature)
- » A physical mailing address

Choosing the best method of communication is vital to reaching your core audience, and maintaining open lines of communication helps strengthen and solidify the connections you build with your audience.



Craft Your Message

Your message includes the content that you convey to your core audience and the way you convey it. This message is dependent on your organization's voice, communication method used, resources available, and audience. You should tie the message you select to your strategic goals. Your message can be very brief (as in a social media post) or longer (as in a press release, blog post, or article).

This section focuses on creating a brief message that gets at the main idea you want to convey. You can use a similar process to convey multiple messages in longer communications. First, decide what point you want to get across, and then follow the strategies below to refine and share your message.

Select One Message to Convey

Your audience will generally only remember one thing from your message; therefore, it is especially important to choose what that point is going to be.

Start with an outcome you identified earlier, such as:

Raise parent awareness of our school safety practices and current events, increase parent engagement with and use of our Twitter platform, and help the community regularly prioritize school safety.

Then, come up with a brief message that works in support of that outcome:

To all parent-guardians and families of students in our school district, we are prepared for a variety of emergencies that we hope never occur but that we believe it is important to be ready for. Our school has several school safety plans in place to address a variety of scenarios, such as a lockdown, weather emergency, or health emergency. Each plan includes important information for everyone in our school community, such as principals, teachers, staff, students, first responders, and parents. To read our plans and learn more about what you can expect during each of these kinds of emergencies, please visit the Safety page on our website by clicking here. If you have questions, please contact [staff member or team] at [phone number or email address] and they will get back to you shortly.

Quick Tip

You can use the subject of an email or the headers in your newsletter to reflect your most important point(s).

Make Your Message Concise

Use one or all of the following strategies to trim down your message to its core communications components:

“Half-life” Your Message^[3]

One exercise you can use to help prioritize your communication is to “half-life” your message. The point of this exercise is to pare down your message. Before you complete the exercise, be sure to define your goals, your intended audience, and your overall message.

1. The first step is to talk for 60 seconds about your message. (You may want to record yourself to capture and review your words during each step.)
2. Then, force yourself to cut it in half and talk for only 30 seconds.
3. Then do it again for just 15 seconds.
4. To streamline your message even further, you could cut your message down to 8 seconds.

Whatever message you are left with after doing this exercise should be your core message.

For example, if you take the message used previously and “half-life” it, you are left with the following:

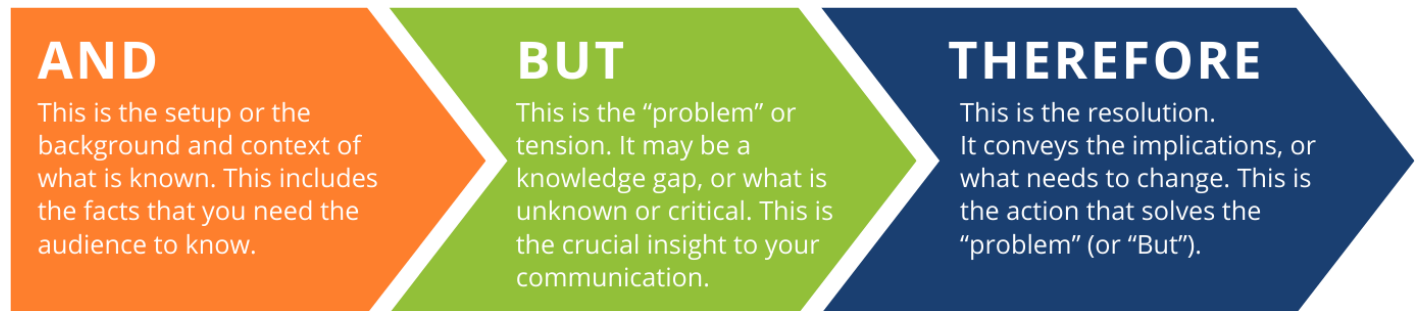
Parent-guardians and families in our school district: our school has several school safety plans in place to address a variety of scenarios, such as a lockdown, weather emergency, or health emergency. Each plan includes important information for everyone in our school community. To learn more, please visit the Safety page on our website by clicking here. If you have questions, please contact [staff member or team] at [phone number or email address] and they will get back to you shortly.

Then, if you “half-life” the message again, you get:

Parents-guardians and families! We’ve developed several school safety plans to address a variety of emergency scenarios. Each plan includes important information for you. To learn more, please visit the Safety page on our website. Questions? Please ask [staff member or team] at [phone number or email address].

And, But, Therefore...^[4]

Organizing your message as a story can improve your audience's retention of it. This works because narratives revolve around tension, and this captures peoples' interest. The "And, But, Therefore (ABT)" story structure can help you do that.

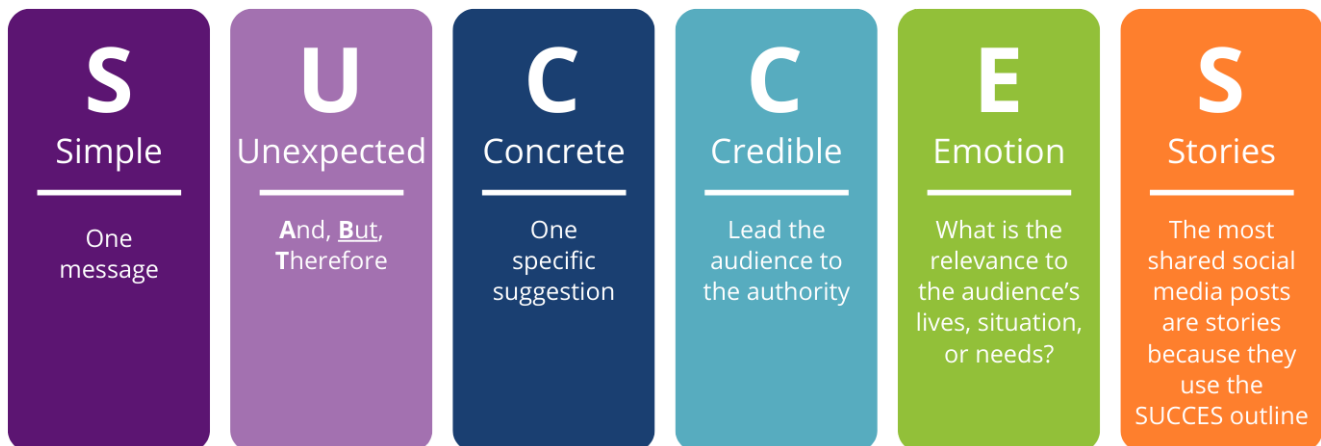


For example:

Emergencies can occur at school.

- » **And** we are prepared.
- » **But** not everyone is aware of our emergency plans or how they can help.
- » **Therefore**, you should read our safety plans on our website in order to understand what to expect.

SUCCES: Principle for Memorable Messages^{[5],[6]}



- » Stories from non-authorities can be especially effective (e.g., the student who shares their story of experiencing an emergency situation at school)
- » Except in an emergency, do not tell the whole story in social media posts; instead, connect people to the story by creating a knowledge gap that makes people want to hear what happens (e.g., "Do you know what to do if an emergency occurs at school? Learn more @ [website]").

After working through the steps outlined in this section, you should be left with a message that's clear, concise, and catchy.

For example:

Do you know what to do during a school emergency? We've created plans with important information for families. Learn more and ask questions on our Safety page.

Use Inclusive Language & Ensure Accessibility

The language you use in your communications should reflect and speak to the needs of your audience. Always aim to ensure that the information you are disseminating is culturally responsive, accessible, and available. The information in your message should represent the people in the community that the message is trying to reach.

Below is a list of questions to ask when checking your communications:^[7]

- » Are there words, phrases, or images that could be offensive or stereotypic of the cultural or religious traditions, practices, or beliefs of the intended audience?
- » Are there words, phrases, or images that may be confusing, misleading, or have a different meaning for the intended audience?
- » Are there images that do not reflect the look or lifestyle of the intended audience, or the places where they live, work, or worship?
- » Are the toll-free numbers or reference web pages, when applicable, included in the document in the language of the intended audience?
- » Are resources such as teletypewriters or chat functions available? Many social media platforms provide options for closed captioning, alternate text, etc., and many websites offer free services to facilitate (like providing alternate text for images) or to check accessibility (such as [WebAIM's contrast checker](#)).

Materials should be translated into the preferred language of the intended audience, and a native speaker should review once the material has been translated.

The Preferred Terms for Select Population Groups & Communities resource from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides terms that represent a shift toward non-stigmatizing language.^[8]

For example:

When referring to people who are experiencing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) but a condition has not been diagnosed or the symptoms may not reach a clinical threshold, consider using phrases such as "People experiencing mental distress" or "Persons experiencing persistent high stress or anxiety." Never use words like "crazy" in your communications to describe those experiencing mental distress.

Along with carefully examining your language and images for accessibility and inclusiveness, you should also be prepared to back up shared items with credible sources. There are a lot of non-credible sources that spread incorrect information, so you may want to think through your response to this type of sharing.

Navigate Incorrect Information Sharing

Types of Incorrect Information: Misinformation & Disinformation

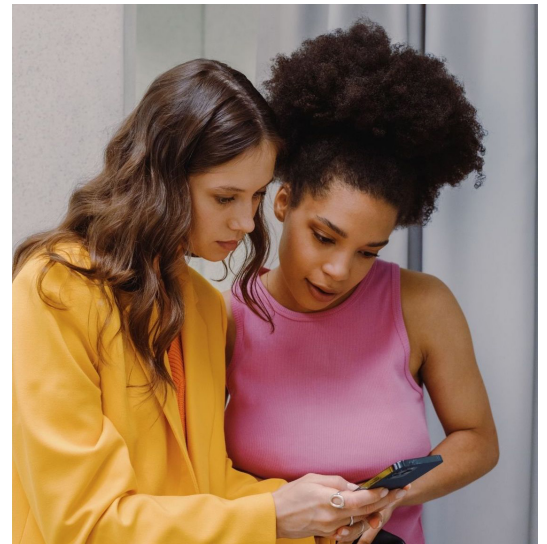
Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information spread via TV, radio, podcasts, and social media. Disinformation is false information that is intentionally created to be harmful and malicious. Uncorroborated rumors, gossip, and conspiracy theories are considered part of disinformation. Both forms of deception are shared widely, and most often, the person sharing has no idea of the inaccuracies. Anyone can be susceptible to it. You may find that rectifying misinformation is not an easy task, because once people hear something they tend to believe it, even after they receive and accept a correction.

As a school safety leader, you may be faced with widespread misinformation and polarized public opinions. These often leave your local school boards, administrators, teachers, and parents with mixed messages that make it difficult to discern the truth. According to a [2018 MIT Sloan study](#), false information is 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth, causing it to reach more people faster than the truth.^[9]

Preventing and Reacting to Incorrect Information

You can help prevent incorrect information sharing and create a positive school climate by initiating preemptive conversations about misinformation and disinformation. Students and families are vulnerable to these types of incorrect information, so it is important to discuss these issues in your school and the community.

One way to be prepared to respond appropriately to incorrect information is to create a **crisis response communications plan**. You can use preplanned and scripted messages to prevent or stop the spread of inaccuracies on social media platforms.



For example, if you know there will be many emergency vehicles in your high school parking lot for a drill, post a social media message ahead of time saying, “If you notice any emergency vehicles in our parking lot, please know that the county SWAT team is training in our auxiliary gym today.” This will prevent people from posting and spreading their - often incorrect - speculations on social media.

To successfully plan your crisis response communications, you can create sample social media posts and graphics for future announcements. Try to think broadly of all the scenarios you may need to respond to (ie: inclement weather, law enforcement presence at your school, violent events, trainings and drills, etc.). Use the [“Craft Your Message”](#) section to help pinpoint your core messages for these communications.

Key Points to Consider When Developing a Crisis Response Communications Plan Include:

- » **Be prepared to deal with pushback from the community.** Students, parents, staff, and the community often feel disenfranchised as a result of decisions that have affected them. You should be prepared to listen to their concerns via electronic newsletters, emails, mobile apps, and social media, as well as at board meetings, community meetings, through feedback surveys, and during focus groups. You can demonstrate through communication and action that you are responsive to community concerns.
- » **Develop or strengthen a Key Communicator Network.**^[13] Your Key Communicator Network should consist of a group of trusted individuals who are active in the community. They might be local business owners, retirees, parents, or other citizens who care about your school community. Key Communicators become knowledgeable and trusted partners that share school-related information. To remain credible, Key Communicators need to receive up-to-date information from your school’s leadership, since they serve as unofficial spokespeople for the district. They should inform your school of any rumors circulating in the community. An effective way for you to do this is to have informal meetings and closed Facebook groups with the superintendent to discuss district initiatives. The goal of a Key Communicator Network is to build relationships in the community with citizens who will advocate for the school district.
- » **Prioritize ongoing social media training in your community.** Your school should provide students and families with basic information on media and information literacy to help counter the spread of incorrect information. The Stanford Education Research Group revealed in a [2016 research study](#) that a significant number of students cannot discern the difference between a factual news story and misinformation.^[12] The study concluded that current educational approaches to digital literacy are insufficient. Dr. Sam Wineburg, founder of the [Stanford History Education Group](#) (SHEG) stated, “By accepting these websites and videos at face value, students are making it too easy for bad actors to undermine faith in the democratic process. Thriving democracies need citizens who can evaluate and access reliable information.” Ongoing training could look like community meetings, classroom instruction for students, and use of resources and tools that help determine the factual nature of stories. You can use the [“Resources to Help Students & Families Evaluate the Truth Online”](#) as a handout for students and families in your school community.

Quick Tip

You can reference these resources for more information on creating a complete emergency operations plan for your school: [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) and [Sample School Emergency Operations Plan](#).^{[10],[11]}

Now that you are prepared to defend against incorrect information, you can step back and revisit your communications strategy. Remind yourself of your goals, the activities you plan to implement, and the outputs you would like to measure.

Resources to Help Students & Families Evaluate the Truth Online

This list of resources will help you fact-check stories you read in the media and online. Each tool below will help you determine who is producing the information and the reliability of the source. This means figuring out the truth from exaggerations and fabrications. There are many other tools and programs available for you to use to navigate this process; these are just a select few.

1. [Lateral Reading](#) - To be a good fact-checker, you can learn to read “laterally” across many connected sites instead of digging deep into the site at hand. This requires opening many tabs in a browser and putting together different pieces of information in order to get a realistic picture of what you are investigating. The truth is more likely to be found in the network of links and commentaries rather than on the site itself.^[14]
2. [Process, Expertise, Aim](#) - Incorrect information is often handpicked to elevate news to mislead, alarm, or scare readers. Fact-checkers must be able to check for accuracy and fact verification.^[15] Ask yourself:
 - a. Who is writing the article, and what type of expertise do they have in the field?
 - b. Is the person giving advice a researcher, someone with professional knowledge, or an average citizen with strong opinions?
 - c. What is this author, media source, or publication attempting to accomplish?
3. [Quick Techniques to Identify an Unfamiliar Site’s Worldview](#) - The best way to gauge whether a newspaper and/or website is reputable is to search for all references to the site. It is important to look for sites you can trust to determine the purpose behind an article. Fact-checkers need to find out who administers a site.^[16] This can be done by using [ICANN WHOIS](#). This is an organization that coordinates the central registry for internet resources as well as the contact details. Other fact-checking websites include [Factcheck.org](#), [Politifact](#), or [Snopes](#).
4. [Check, Please! Starter Course](#) - This course, created by author Michael Caldwell, is meant to help older students and adults develop web literacy and fact-finding skills. It contains five 30-minute sessions.^[17] Teachers may use the course materials and customize them for their students by following the [Teacher’s Notes](#).

Assess: Is It Working?

In order to assess if your methods of communication are working, you will need to first determine how you measure that success and what you consider “successful.” Remember that these measures of success (or outputs) should be tied to the outcomes you identified in your communications strategy (see [“Create Your Communications Strategy”](#) for details).

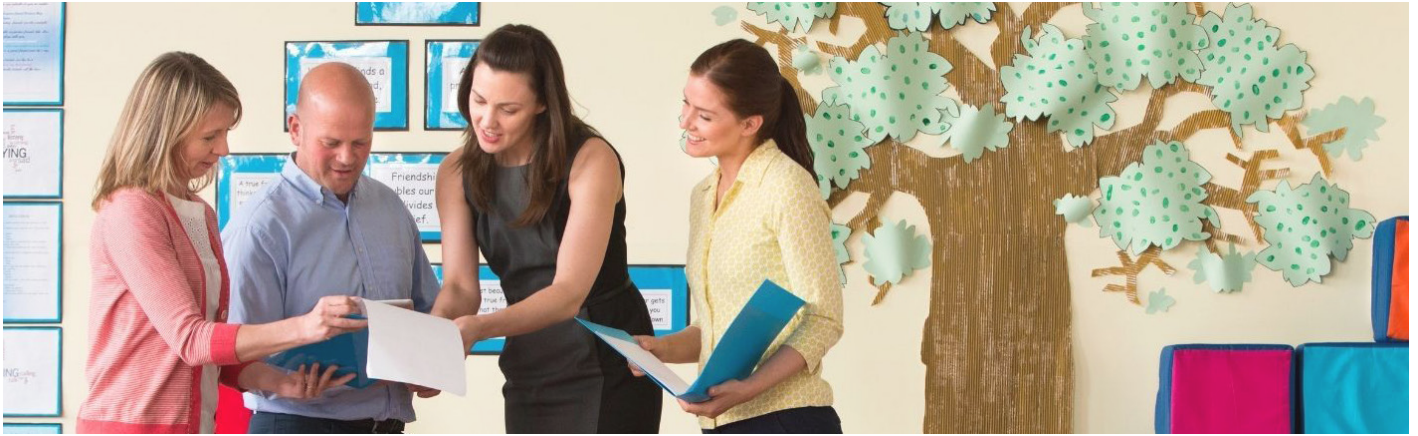
Consider which of these metrics your success might be measured by:

- » Post/page engagement and growth on social media
 - » Number of likes, shares, comments, retweets, follows, mentions
- » The number of views your content receives in a short amount of time on social media
- » Analytics on your platforms (measuring the length of time spent on certain pages, regions reached, etc.)
- » Your core audience taking action by sending emails, leaving voice messages, or attending gatherings you promoted
- » Customer service: your ability to keep up with online engagement and returning phone calls, messages, etc.

Most digital platforms provide analytics that will help you measure the effectiveness of your online efforts ([Mailchimp](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and so on). Through them, you may assess what content is “successful,” what type of content sees the most engagement, what regions you are reaching, the demographics of those viewing the content, and more. It is extremely important to examine these and to look at the performance of your accounts in order to know what is working and what is not. Monitoring and measuring this information should be a continual process, but the regularity of doing so is up to you.

In addition, you can speak with members of your school community and gather their feedback. This will provide you with valuable insights into the success of your communication efforts. For instance, do they find the “voice” of your messaging to be off-putting? Is your message clear and easy to understand? Is it accessible to those with impairments or who do not speak the predominant language? Are your pamphlets reaching the hands of those intended to read them, and are your emails landing in mailboxes or in spam folders? Do parents and community members feel heard at your meetings? Do you hold meetings often enough?

Success does not happen overnight. Your efforts may have to change and adapt as you go along until you find the right fit and rhythm of communication that best suits your community’s needs. Communications planning is an ongoing process that is vital to your school safety efforts. Additionally, if something is not working despite every effort, you can pivot and explore new methods for reaching your core audience.



Additional Resources

[School Communication Planning Guide, Campus Suite](#)

Free Resources

Stock Images: Each has their own usage and licensing requirements

- » [pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)
- » [Pixabay.com](https://www.pixabay.com)
- » [Stocksnap.io](https://www.stocksnap.io)
- » [vecteezy.com/free-photos](https://www.vecteezy.com/free-photos)
- » [reshot.com](https://www.reshot.com)

Vectors, Icons

- » [flaticon.com](https://www.flaticon.com)
- » [vecteezy.com/free-vector/icons](https://www.vecteezy.com/free-vector/icons)

Creative Market

- » Sign up and receive six freebies every week, ranging from graphics, templates, fonts

Social Media Websites & Guides for Schools

- » [Social Media Best Practices for Schools](#)
- » [4 Social Media Platforms Your District Should be Using in 2022](#)
- » [The Metrics Behind Social Media Success for the Schools](#)
- » [Educational Leaders' Effective Communication](#)

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