

COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS & KEY MESSAGES:

Addressing COVID-19 Positive Cases in Schools

1. *Lean on public health officials.*

- There is a need to balance transparency with what is permissible information to share.
- We have an obligation to be responsive, even at times when the response is that we cannot share information. Media tip: Reporters work on tight deadlines. We should **try to avoid** a media report which ends with, “We reached out to the district and have not received a response.”
- HIPPA, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, is a 1996 Federal law that restricts access to individuals' private medical information.
- As noted in the [NCDHHS Reference Guide for Presumptive, Confirmed, or Confirmed Cases of COVID-19 \(K-12\)](#), schools must follow privacy requirements outlined in [NCGS §130A-143](#).
- Do not divulge personally identifiable health information or information that can inadvertently lead to identification. For example: a student or staff member tests positive and is ordered to quarantine, resulting in their absence from school. Releasing information that there is a positive case in the school, in this example, will likely lead to positive identification, even if the individual's name was never released. This is the same rationale for why we do not report state testing results if the sample size is too low.
- Provide assurances that there are procedures to ensure those directly exposed to an individual who has tested positive are contacted by health department officials.
- Continue to promote your ongoing collaboration and partnership with local public health officials. This is a great opportunity to build relationships and community credibility.
- Keep everyone in the loop! Because principals are [required by law](#) to report suspected cases to local public health officials, develop and communicate an internal process to ensure district officials are also notified of these reports. A clear internal communication process will lessen the chance of any surprises.
- Sample messaging:
 - *Principals are required by law to report suspected cases of any communicable disease, including COVID-19 to local public health officials.*
 - *We appreciate our public health partners who are leading the charge on contact tracing and notification for any individuals who have been in direct contact with individuals who have tested positive.*
 - *We work closely with our public health partners who are leading our community's efforts to keep all citizens safe and healthy.*
 - *We are following all public health protocols.*
 - *We respect and are required to maintain privacy of our students' and staff members' medical records.*
 - *Just like when you go to the doctor, the medical information about our staff members and students is private.*
 - *Sharing this information will compromise the privacy of the student/staff member.*

2. Know and understand your publicly reported metrics.

- It is okay to confirm NCDHHS's publicly reported metrics.
- As part of required reporting, local health department officials are submitting COVID information to NCDHHS which is then reported through a comprehensive online dashboard. One section of the dashboard is an accounting of [outbreaks and clusters](#). This particular section includes a variety of settings including child care facilities and schools. According to the NCDHHS website, the [COVID-19 Ongoing Clusters in Child Care and School Settings Report](#) will be updated every Tuesday and Friday by 4:00 p.m.
- Even if asked about specific cases that you know you cannot comment on, lean on a response you can always depend on: *"I can confirm..."*
- Sample messaging:
 - *I can confirm, based on the DHHS report, that we currently have...*
 - *We respect and are required to maintain privacy of our students' and staff members' medical records.*

3. Your response - not the actual event - shapes public perception.

- Do not miss the opportunity to discuss all the measures being taken to ensure the health and safety of students and staff.
- Praise staff: personalize messages of thanks and use social media to highlight this great work.
- As much as possible, try to let the public see what is happening behind the school walls. Use social media, video, testimonials, etc. to illuminate the great work.
- Sample messaging:
 - *We know we, like schools across the world, may experience positive cases of COVID-19 connected with our communities. We are committed to doing everything we can to minimize any potential exposure to COVID-19 (include district/school specific strategies, information.)*
 - *We are aggressively addressing cleaning and disinfection for example (include district/school specific information.)*
 - *We are working closely with families and staff to ensure we are promoting all recommended prevention strategies for example (include district/school specific information.)*

4. Seize every opportunity to educate and set expectations for all stakeholders.

- Establish guidelines with your local media outlets. Consider communicating what they can expect you will routinely share and what you will not. Remember, local media do not always know our communications and privacy rules. We have a responsibility to educate them.
- Communicate HOW, WHEN, and WHERE you will post updates.
- Sample messaging:
 - *We must continue to be vigilant in our personal responsibility to help reduce the spread of this virus.*

- *We really appreciate our families doing everything they can to help us keep our doors open -wearing masks, washing hands, and maintaining social distancing.*
- *We are depending on our families to keep children at home if they are experiencing symptoms or have been exposed to an individual with symptoms or who is confirmed positive. We will provide remote learning opportunities for your child.*
- *When everyone plays their part, it increases the chances that we can continue to serve students in our schools.*
- *We're committed to ensuring educators and families understand their roles, what to expect, and how to support their students.*
- *We are following all public health guidance and appreciate the leadership of our public health officials (mention director by names if possible.)*

5. Explicitly share your advocacy and support for students, staff, and families.

- Educating and supporting students are what districts and schools do best. These are the stories we need to tell and where we should always land. Try to wrap any message back to impact on the education and support of students.
- Ensure you have healthy **internal communications systems**; every staff member is an ambassador for districts and schools. Make sure they are equipped with accurate and timely information.
- Sample messaging:
 - *We truly want and need our students to be with us in our school buildings, and when we must temporarily close doors for deep cleaning or quarantine, we share your frustrations that our students cannot be physically present at their school campuses.*
 - *The safety and well-being of all students and staff are our highest priority, for example...*
 - *Access to technology and materials for all students is critical to our plan, for example...*
 - *If you have immediate concerns or needs, please reach out to (A SPECIFIC PERSON) so we can understand how to help.*