

COVID-19 SCHOOL COMMUNICATION GUIDE: CMDHD/MMDHD/DHD#10

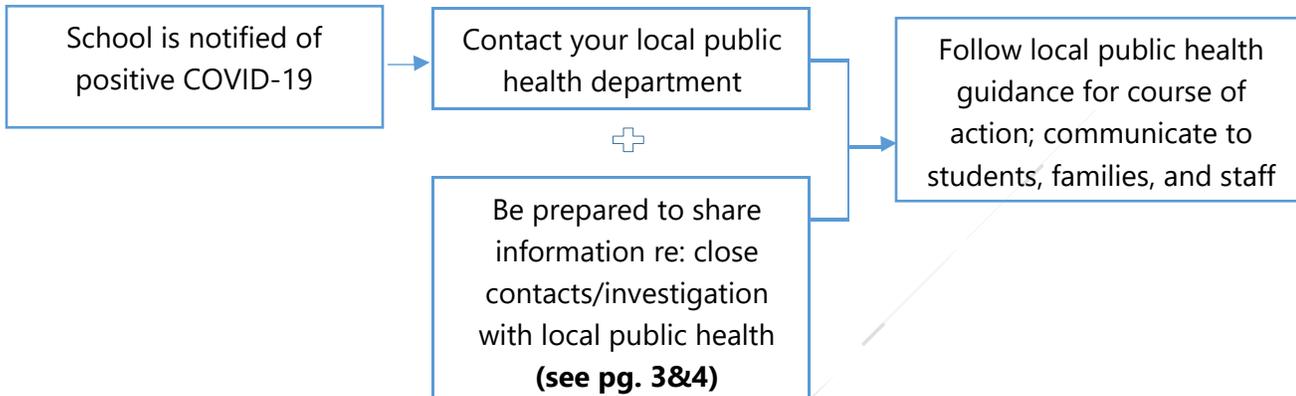
Adapted from

<https://www.cassiaschools.org/cms/lib/ID01906472/Centricity/Domain/4/SCHOOL%20COMMUNICATION%20GUIDE.pdf>

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The following communication plan is a guide for schools to use when communicating various activities and responses related to COVID-19. This is not all inclusive but gives a range of scenarios and templates to use through various response efforts for students, staff, and families.

General recommendations: Communication about cases should maintain confidentiality in accordance with the ADA, HIPAA, and FERPA and should include messages to counter potential stigma and discrimination. See pg. 10 for 10 Tips for COVID-19 Communications.



Roles and Responsibilities

Local Public Health Department	School
Contact investigation of positive case and contact tracing	Identify areas where there might have been close contacts and share information with local public health (see pg. 3) - Roster of potential close contacts with names of student(s), date of birth, address, and phone number (see pg. 4)
Contact notification and instruction	Ask students, families, and staff to follow instructions given by local public health
Recommend initial and additional courses of action	Follow and communicate recommendations
Provide letters to positive cases or close contacts indicating when they can safely return to school	Do not allow individuals back to school before the public health department letter indicates they can do so safely
Answer health-related questions	Answer school-related questions

Potential Courses of Action Based on Scenario*

*examples only, not intended to be inclusive

Scenario:	Objective of Communication	Templates
First exposure in the school regardless of risk level	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Notify all students and families in the building of confirmed case. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reassure that local public health is collaborating with the school to identify any students or staff that were in close contact; those identified will be contacted within 1-2 days by local public health. 2. Notify all employees of case in building per requirements of EO 175. 3. Provide instructions on remote learning to students going into quarantine and those with COVID-19 that are well. 4. Be prepared for media inquiries (can collaborate with local public health on messaging*). 	<p>Letter/Email for Positive Case (pg. 5)</p> <p>Phone Call Text (pg. 8)</p> <p>Media Talking Points (pg. 9)</p>
Ongoing exposure/outbreak – close contacts not identifiable and risk of spread is unknown or high: need to suspend in-person education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Notify all students and families in the building of confirmed case. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reassure that local public health is collaborating with the school to identify any students or staff that were in close contact; those identified will be contacted within 1-2 days by local public health. 2. Notify all employees of case in building per requirements of EO 175. 3. Provide instructions on remote learning to students going into quarantine and those with COVID-19 that are well. 4. Be prepared for media inquiries (can collaborate with local public health on messaging*). 	<p>Letter/Email for Short-Term Dismissal (pg. 6)</p> <p>Phone Call Text (pg. 8)</p> <p>Media Talking Points (pg. 9)</p>

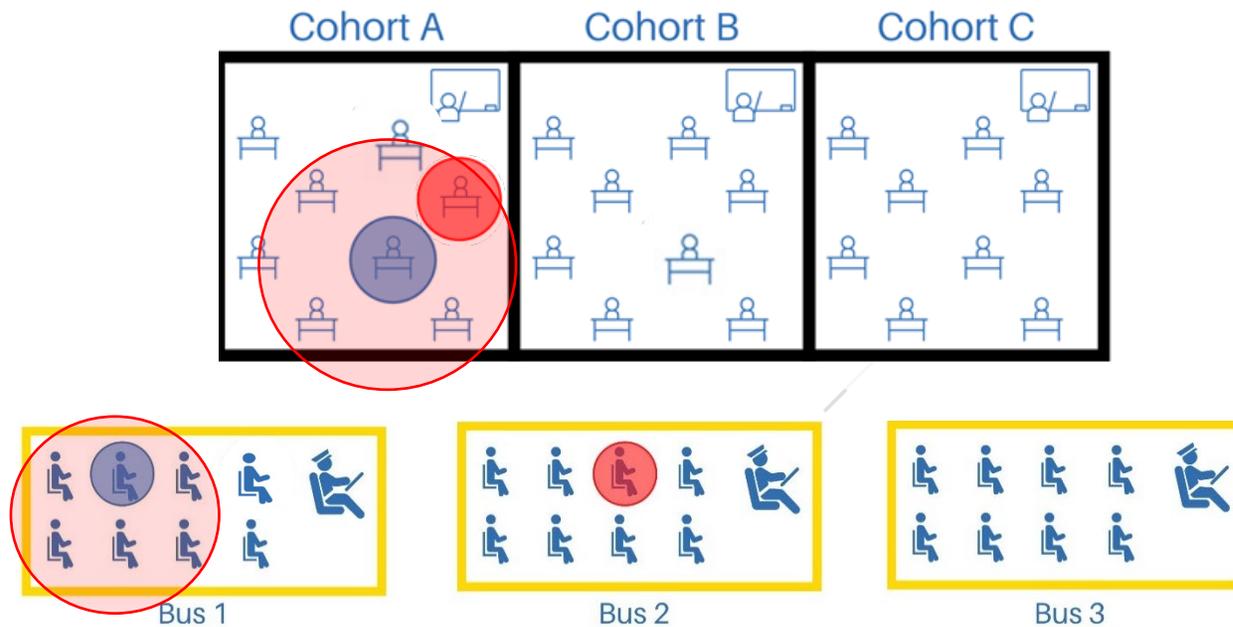
*Note: for public communications at the health departments, contact:

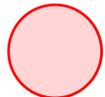
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School Based Examples of Contact Tracing



- Student  /  has COVID-19
- Close contacts will be assessed with the help of the local health department; it is likely that at a minimum, everyone in the  will be considered a close contact and need to be in quarantine.
-  is a close contact from the classroom and rode on bus 2 as .
- No one on bus 2 needs to be in quarantine since being a contact to a contact is not a risk (if  becomes infected with COVID-19, then further action will be taken.)

*Note: More than just distance determines a close contact; while at a MINIMUM those in those in the  are likely close contacts, anyone the student had contact with could be as well. Your health department can help you make these determinations.

Letter for Positive Case in School

XXXXX XX, 20XX

Dear Parent/Guardian,

A student or staff member that attends the [SCHOOL] with your child has been diagnosed with COVID-19. [HEALTH DEPARTMENT] is investigating the situation and is working with the school to identify the close contacts that will need to stay home in quarantine. You will be contacted by the health department if your child is a close contact. We would like to share information with you on COVID-19 and ask that you watch your child closely for symptoms.

The virus that causes COVID-19 is spread most commonly from person to person, through respiratory droplets made when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. It spreads easiest when people are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet for at least 15 minutes). You can also get COVID-19 by having direct physical contact with someone that is infected, like touching, hugging, or kissing, as well as sharing eating or drinking utensils. It may also be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. Once infected, illness begins within 2 to 14 days.

We ask that you help protect your family and your community from this disease by taking the following steps.

- Watch for symptoms of COVID-19 illness, which are fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, or diarrhea.
 - It is recommended you get tested for COVID-19 if you do get symptoms. You can call 2-1-1 or go to www.michigan.gov/coronavirustest for testing locations.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially before eating, after you have been in a public place, or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
 - If soap and water are not available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. Stay home if you are sick.
- Avoid gathering in groups, stay at least 2 arms' length (about 6 feet) apart from others, and stay out of crowded areas.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a cloth face cover when around others.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or the inside of your elbow when you cough or sneeze.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched often at least once a day.

More information can also be found at: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html.

Sincerely,

Letter for Short-Term Dismissal

XXXXX XX, 20XX

Dear Parents/Guardians:

[HEALTH DEPARTMENT] has been working with us and has identified an outbreak of COVID-19 illnesses at our school and are recommending a short-term dismissal of students and most staff. At this time, we are closing the school/transitioning to remote education until _____ to allow for _____ (e.g. staff and students to stay home and monitor symptoms for 14 days).

We understand how hard it is for families to make alternate arrangements on short notice and we appreciate your help in stopping the spread of the disease through this quick action.

[HEALTH DEPARTMENT] is investigating any newly reported case of COVID-19 and is working with the school to identify close contacts that will need to stay home in quarantine. You will be contacted by the health department if your child is a close contact. We would like to share information about COVID-19 with all parents and ask that you watch your child closely for symptoms.

The virus that causes COVID-19 is spread most commonly from person to person, through respiratory droplets made when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. It spreads easiest when people are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet for at least 15 minutes). You can also get COVID-19 by having direct physical contact with someone that is infected, like touching, hugging, or kissing, as well as sharing eating or drinking utensils. It may also be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. Once infected, illness begins within 2 to 14 days.

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 - It is recommended you get tested for COVID-19 if you do get symptoms. You can call 2-1-1 or go to www.mi.gov/coronoavirustest for testing locations.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially before eating, after you have been in a public place, or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
 - If soap and water are not available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
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- Cover your mouth and nose with a cloth face cover when around others.
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More information can also be found at: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov or www.mmdhd.org/novel-coronavirus/.

Sincerely,



Phone Call (Pre-Recorded Message)

This is Superintendent (name) from (name) school district.

Recently, we were notified (*a student or staff member that attends [SCHOOL] has tested positive for COVID-19/there is an outbreak of COVID-19 illnesses at our school*). The health department will contact you with further information if your child was in direct contact with an infected person. For those that need to be home in quarantine, we will be providing information to continue school at home.

If closing:

Due to number of people exposed and for the safety of our students, we have decided along with advice from the health department that the safest course of action is to move to remote education at this time. Students and staff can return to in person education on _____ . We will be in communication if there are any changes in this plan. We understand how hard it is for families to make the arrangements needed for remote education on short notice and we appreciate your help in stopping the spread of the disease through this quick action.

We continue to work closely with [Health Department] to respond to this situation and protect the health of our community by temporarily closing [INSERT name of school here].

We care about the health and safety of our community.

For more information, visit the homepage of our website at_____.

Media Talking Points for COVID-19 Events: For School Leaders to Customize

About the COVID-19 Scenario

- On X date, at X school located in X county, X number of individuals were confirmed positive for the COVID-19 virus.
- The individual(s) involved have been asked to stay home and self-isolate, as have any of those who were in close contact.
- The safety and well-being of our staff and students is our top priority.
- We have contacted the local health department and are working cooperatively and collaboratively with any additional direction given by them.

As a School District, we have initiated a Response Plan:

- We have notified staff, students and families of the event.
- We are undertaking additional cleaning and sanitation protocols throughout the school (or “affected places in” the school).
- We also continue to follow and maintain MDHHS and Michigan Department of Education guidelines; namely practicing handwashing, physical distancing to the degree we can, requiring people wear masks inside the building, and upholding cleaning and sanitizing protocols.

(Optional - When the school building closes temporarily, or students are asked to quarantine after being exposed or testing positive for COVID-19)

- While our school buildings have had to close for on-site instruction, learning has continued because of our dedicated teachers and school leaders.
- Throughout this crisis, we have come to recognize the importance of face-to-face interaction and look forward to students and teachers returning to school buildings as soon as it is safe for all students and teachers.
- Our goal is for students and staff to be able to return once it is safe to do so.
- Students will continue learning at home, online, and in their communities for (e.g. the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year)
- The school is working to address questions and decisions necessary to reopen school buildings safely, and we will engage parents, teachers, school leaders and policymakers throughout this process.
- We are working with our district and school leaders to make accommodations for vulnerable people.

10 Tips for COVID-19 Communications

From the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) Coronavirus Communication Crisis for Public Schools
<https://www.nspr.org/communicating-about-coronavirus-find-help-nspra-resources>

1. Communicate early and often.

As a school communicator, most crisis events you prepare for are single incidents such as a bomb threat, a violent incident on campus or a natural disaster. COVID-19 is different. The ongoing spread of the disease is a developing situation. Guidance from public health officials is constantly evolving, may seem contradictory at times and could go on for weeks and potentially even longer. Commit now to delivering regular updates to staff and families. Your goal should be to provide clear, factual information while maintaining a sense of calm. With information on this situation changing rapidly, maintaining that calm may require daily updates; consider delivering them on a dedicated webpage. Another daily to-do: Meet with the leadership team planning your school district's crisis response to get updates on the public health situation in your schools and community. Talk about what questions you have received—from families, employees, the media, etc.—in the last 24 hours and what decisions you know will be made that day. Develop an outline of topics to address in messaging with your school district stakeholders. Then spend time gathering information, reviewing updates from health officials and drafting your messages.

2. Let your local public health department take the lead.

Closely follow the guidance of public health authorities. They are the experts in keeping our communities safe during a disease outbreak. Share public health recommendations with your staff and community. When you get pressure and pushback on decisions like school closures, remind people that following the guidance of public health professionals is the best way to control the spread of the virus.

3. Don't be overly confident with reassuring messages.

It's tempting to say you are confident your schools are safe, but if someone in one of your school's tests positive for COVID-19, your credibility is blown. If people think you are overconfident, they will worry more. Express that you are concerned, be upfront about risks to individuals with compromised health, and encourage people to consult with their healthcare providers. People are more likely to stay calm if they see you are taking the situation seriously.

4. Be human.

Acknowledge that public schools are in uncharted waters, even after the H1N1 pandemic of 2009-2010. Assure people that though you may not have all the answers, you are doing your very best with the information you have, at a time when information is changing quickly. Thank people for their patience and partnership. Most people will appreciate that the district is facing tough decisions in uncertain circumstances.

5. Be flexible and adjust messaging.

This is new territory for many school communicators. Be patient with yourself and be prepared to adjust messages and decisions based on changing information. Yesterday's message may need to be updated today. Don't sweat it—take it day-by-day and remind your audience that the situation is evolving. As you post new information and materials online, just be sure your posts are dated, and the most recent updates are first so that it's clear which information is current.

6. Acknowledge, apologize and re-phrase when your communication is not clear.

Coronavirus communication is moving fast. Sometimes a message raises more questions than it answers or results in unintended consequences. If that occurs, apologize, reevaluate, and clarify. Acknowledgment of a misstep goes a long way to restoring public confidence in the school system.

7. Put coronavirus information front and center.

Sharing accurate information during a time of heightened concern is critical. Rumors and misinformation can distract from the facts that help contain the spread of a virus. Commit to being transparent with your community about COVID-19 cases in schools. Transparency builds trust, which is critical in a public health emergency.

8. Stay organized.

If there was ever a time to be organized, this is it. With so many moving parts, it is critical to stay on top of what you have communicated, when you communicated and to whom you communicated. Identify an organizational process and stick with it. Consider using spreadsheets, labeled email boxes and virtual or paper folders. You will thank yourself later that you kept track of everything.

9. Brush up on your health and science vocabulary.

Understand the difference between quarantine versus isolation and epidemic versus pandemic. Review and use the CDC's resource library. While public health officials should take the lead in discussing the new coronavirus disease, school communicators must understand the lingo so they can clearly articulate messages to their communities. (See below, "Words to Know.")

10. Lean on your fellow school PR professionals.

As school communicators, we are all in this together. Don't be shy to phone-a-friend, ask for help and reuse public resources shared by school public relations associations and practitioners.

WORDS TO KNOW

- **Coronavirus** – A large family of viruses that are common in people and many different species of animals.
- **COVID-19** – Abbreviation for the coronavirus disease 2019, a disease caused by a novel (or new) coronavirus that has not previously been seen in humans.
- **Social Distancing** – Measures intended to limit the movement of people in order to interrupt the transmission of infectious, contagious diseases.
- **Isolation** – Separates sick people with a contagious disease from people who are not sick.
- **Quarantine** – Separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick.
- **Community Spread** – When people have been infected with the virus in an area and some are not sure how or where they became infected.
- **Epidemic** – Affecting or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community, or region at the same time.
- **Pandemic** – Occurring over a wide geographic area and affecting an exceptionally high proportion of the population.

Sources: U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary