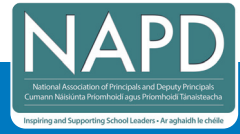




The Very Useful Guide



NAPD Communication Guidance

INTRODUCTION - WHY IT IS VITAL FOR YOUR SCHOOL TO HAVE A COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Positive, appropriate and respectful communication is critical in every school as it establishes trust and confidence. In order to ensure that each member of the school community understands his/her own role in ensuring appropriate communication, it is essential for a school to put in place a communications policy, following consultation with the entire school community. Such a policy also ensures that a consistent approach is adopted by the school. The policy should be accessible by staff, parents and students.

All adults in the school community, including the principal, the Senior Management Team (SMT), staff, board members and parents have a responsibility to ensure that their behaviour models the behaviour, which is expected of students. It is important to ensure consistency between what is said and what is done as failure to follow through on goals or promises undermines credibility.

Given the importance of appropriate and positive communication in the school community, NAPD has developed this Communications Guidance document to assist our members in preparing a communications policy. This Guidance aims to support principals and deputy principal/principals in achieving positive communication between all stakeholders within the school community, outlines best practice and provides practical assistance in dealing with challenges which may be encountered.

RATIONALE

In developing a communications policy, the school's mission statement should be referenced.

WHAT DOES GOOD COMMUNICATION LOOK LIKE?

Good communications are essential for the efficient running of any organisation and especially that of a school. Modelling good communication is a necessary leadership function as all others in a school model their communication techniques on how they see the schools leaders communicate. Good verbal communication is an essential leadership skill and good listening is as essential if not more so than speaking ability. Knowing when to speak and when to listen is a skill which all good school leaders possess. It is also necessary to use appropriate vocabulary with those with whom you are communicating and it is important to tailor the words we use to the level of comprehension of the individual to whom we speak to. (Speak clearly and make it easy to understand). Always be conscious of tone and body language.

When using written communication we must be clear and make what we are looking to communicate accessible to our target audience. One very simple example in the case of a schools code of behaviour is to make sure that the language used in the code is easy to understand to all of the student body. We must also be conscious that school notices and communications may need to be sent out in a variety of different languages depending on the mother tongue of the parents. Technology is our friend in this area so long as we use reputable translation software. Information must be disseminated and collected appropriately, mindful of legislation and individual sensitivities and used in such a way as to promote quality relationships which lead to high quality learning and teaching.

From the initial welcome at the front door, the visual staff presence, the quality of visual displays, social media presence and interactions with other media forms, conduct of meetings, etc., there should be a sense of integrity, trustworthiness, confidence and professionalism, a warmth in interpersonal relationships and a strong sense of leadership. Good communications will convey a shared loyalty to and sense of pride in the school's vision and mission statements which makes these living documents that guide the actions and behaviour of all in the school community.

Success is to be celebrated, difficulties and challenges managed and clear guidelines devised and agreed in relation to the areas considered below. Ongoing regular discussions and reviews of the quality of communications should be considered by the entire school community.



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Good communication has many aspects:

- **Active listening:** involves paying close attention to what the other person is saying, asking clarifying questions, and rephrasing what the person says to ensure understanding. Knowing when to speak and when to listen is a skill which all good school leaders possess. It is also necessary to use appropriate vocabulary with those with whom you are communicating.
- **Non-verbal communication:** body language, eye contact, hand gestures, and tone of voice all colour the message and can often signal how a person is feeling.
- **Clear and concise:** think about what you say rather than ramble.
- **Empathy:** Even when you disagree, it is important to understand and respect the other person's point of view.
- **Open-minded:** Be open to listening to and understanding the other person's point of view, rather than simply getting your message especially when you disagree with someone.
- **Respectful:** the ability to effectively assert your own views and fully listen to the views of others. The focus should be on collaboration, using everyone's strengths to achieve common goals.
- **Feedback:** being able to *both* give and receive constructive feedback.
- **Picking the correct communication medium:** whether in person, via phone or email, in groups or teams, etc. – the medium you choose to convey your message is as important as the message itself. It is essential, that all written communications are clear and that what is communicated is accessible to the target audience.
- **Dealing with heated conversations:** being prepared to quickly reduce stress in the moment, in order to safely take stock of any strong emotions you are experiencing, regulate your feelings, and behave appropriately. The important thing is that your words and body language demonstrate that you value the conflict and the person involved. That *does not* mean you agree with their point. It *does* mean that you are listening and adapting what you think based on their contribution.

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

One of the most important skills that a principal has or will need to develop, is that of a good and effective communicator. The attitude of the principal permeates the entire school. Internal communication is just as important as external communications. Elements of good practice for internal communication include being a good role model for clear and consistent communication and matching words and actions, this is part of developing integrity as a leader. The Principal must be committed to open, two-way communication as well as face-to-face communication. While it may seem easier to send an email rather than speaking with a person directly, this creates difficulties in the long run when the meeting should have taken face to face. It is also important to communicate with empathy and to communicate bad news as effectively as good news. Overall, it is important to see communication as an essential leadership capability, not as a set of techniques.

Principals are encouraged to lead by exemplifying a courteous and professional attitude and by promoting regular, transparent and open communication. It is important to treat staff, parents, students and external agencies with the same mutual respect and dignity. Principals should encourage collaboration with staff, parents and students in open two-way communication so that all parties are working together to develop the full potential of students. It is important to identify and address areas of conflict early and in a constructive manner. Principals should develop a relationship with the community by ensuring it is kept informed through the use of periodic newsletters etc.

COMMUNICATIONS WITH STAFF (Internal and external communication)

It is essential that there is a clear and efficient method of both internal and external communication with staff. Poor communication or the lack of communication with staff especially in relation to changes which may or may not affect them is often the cause of friction or conflict. Staff involvement or input into decision making in areas which affect them is good practice.

An attribute of good communication and positive staff working relations is the manner by which decisions are made within schools. In order to create positive working relationships and foster collaborative decisions making, the school should facilitate a mechanism for constructive staff input for the staff voice be heard (Staff Advisory Committee). Regular, transparent and open communication should take place between school leadership and staff. As part of this process, staff should feel comfortable to raise issues with the principal, deputy principal/principals and/or the senior management team. Each party should be open to listening to and addressing differing views in a constructive manner.

A system for communicating general updates and information should also be in place e.g. a notice board in the school staffroom which should be regularly updated and used solely for the purpose of this communication.



Letters should be sent to teachers at their home address. Emails and the relevant school management systems should be used for circulating minutes of staff meetings and various correspondence but should never become a substitute for regular face to face communication. The principal or deputy principal/principals usually send reminders or notifications of emergencies, such as school closures through text. It is good practice to update teacher contact details each year and include a tick box for them to indicate that it is acceptable to use these details to communicate with them in both normal and emergency situations. It is also advisable to have an designated emergency contact for each teacher on file.

Staff should be encouraged to participate in meetings and communicate/collaborate regularly with colleagues, parents and students in a positive, transparent, professional and respectful manner so that all parties are working together to develop the full potential of students. Staff should act as ambassadors for the school in all communications on its behalf, having ensured that the communications are authorised and appropriate. Staff should deal with challenges in a constructive and respectful manner having consulted the principal and/or the SMT.

STAFF MEETINGS

Regular staff meetings are vital to ensure the school's development and there must be at least one per term¹. Staff should be made aware of the agenda beforehand and given the opportunity to contribute items to the agenda. Following the meeting all decisions should be communicated clearly to staff, and at the next staff meeting, minutes should be agreed and a report on any follow up actions given. The chair of the meeting should encourage open and constructive discussion. Staff meetings are not an opportunity to raise individual staff grievances, which should be dealt with in accordance with the appropriate procedure. The use of a *Staff Advisory Committee* is an efficient method of dealing with issues of concern raised by staff and communicated to the school leadership team via the members of the Staff Advisory Committee. This allows issues to be aired, discussed and in most cases resolved in advance of a full staff meeting.

STAFFROOM

It is important to create a positive environment in the staff room. Having a regular physical presence in the staffroom facilitates the principal in building relationships with staff and provides the principal and deputy principal/principals with an opportunity to interact in a less formal way with staff members, than is the case with a formal staff meeting. It also allows the principal or to see whether any interpersonal staff issues are beginning to arise, as well as putting in place strategies to deal with same before matters become entrenched. If the principal and deputy principal/principals does not maintain a regular presence in the staff room, negative voices can prevail and the atmosphere can become one of disharmony.

MEETINGS WITH TEACHERS

Individual meetings with teachers should be a regular feature of school life as this provides the principal with an opportunity to see how staff are and allows for mutual feedback, which is part of the reason why face to face meetings are so important. These positive affirmation meetings should be planned with a view to facilitating each teacher to realise their full potential. If meetings occur regularly, a meeting with the principal becomes normalised and should be less of a concern for staff members. It is never ideal that the only time a principal meets with a staff member is if the staff member is perceived to be 'in trouble'. It is good practice to have an induction programme for teachers new to the school which will include training in communication. Droichead is an essential and powerful teacher induction programme.

<https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/FAQs/Droichead-2017/>

OTHER POLICIES

The school should ensure that staff are familiar with all relevant school policies and particularly the school's Child Protection Policy, Data Protection Policy, Acceptable Use Policy and Social Media Policy, and must ensure that all school policies are in developed in accordance with requirements set out in statute, Department of Education and Skills ('DES') Circulars and Teaching Council Guidelines, (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018. School leaders should also make sure that the staff are familiar with grievance procedures and the Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers.

¹ In accordance with Circular M58/04, there must be 1 staff meeting per term held in half in and half out. The additional 33 hours in the Croke Park Agreement may be used to remove the half in element of these staff meetings as well as for further meetings.



COMMUNICATIONS WITH PARENTS

Communication with parents is an essential part of each teacher and school leaders skill set. Good positive confident communication skills are essential. Initial teacher education courses have for some time included elective modules on how to communicate effectively with parents. Investing in CPD for staff on how to communicate effectively with parents and with their peers is a very effective method of reducing the possible need for conflict resolution into the future. A great deal of conflict is as a result of poor communication. It is important to communicate positive messages to parents in order to create a positive communication channel.

It is important that the school's communication policy lets parents know that the school encourages, promotes and facilitates open communication between the school and parents. It is equally important that the schools communication policy outlines what constitutes appropriate communication between parents and school, including the appropriate forms of communication, whether a parent needs to book an appointment in advance of any meeting etc.

Schools need to outline clearly the acceptable mechanisms for communication with the school and appropriate and reasonable time frames in which communications can be made and responded to. Arrangement for emergency communication should also be communicated to the parents.

The school's communications policy should set out the communications which parents should expect to receive throughout the school year, for example, a welcome letter, communications in relation to school closures, school calendar, parent/teacher meetings, when updates are provided etc. The policy should also outline how crisis situations will be dealt with e.g. unexpected school closures, etc.

LETTERS TO PARENTS

Letters should be framed in as conciliatory a way as possible with the child's welfare at the centre in order to maximise the possibility for a positive outcome and resolution to what may at times be difficult issues. In addition, the language of the letter should be comprehensible and the tone must be respectful and appropriate.

It is important for each school to consider who may communicate with parents, what method is used to do this, what information can and cannot be provided in order to ensure compliance with GDPR/privacy obligations and what oversight the principal and deputy principal/principals will have in relation to this.

COMMUNICATION BY EMAIL

Emails are an important part of communication, however, it is important to determine what information is to be communicated in this way, who is to do the communicating, to whom the communications are to be sent and what the expected response times are. Ideally, emails and phone message are responded to within 24 hours, even if this is a holding response. However, it is important not to rush responses that require time to think/consult about and a holding response can be sent, which indicates that the email/message will be responded to within a given timeframe.

It is important to ensure that the appropriate measures are in place to ensure that the principal and or deputy principal/principals have oversight of school communications with parents, as well as ensuring that correct email addresses are used. Parents should be encouraged to provide their own email addresses rather than work emails addresses. It is good practice to validate these email addresses annually and update where and when necessary.

The use of email usually covers sending reminders, policies, registration, newsletters and a variety of announcements. Where challenging situations arise, it is generally preferable to send a letter rather than an email, due to the instantaneous nature of email. By sending letters, rather than emails, it affords the reader and writer the opportunity to carefully reflect on what they are communicating. It also allows time to elapse between correspondence, which should avoid unnecessary escalations.

NOTIFICATIONS AND ALERTS

Important emergency information and critical reminders need to be communicated through a system that provides SMS, voicemail and email. These systems usually allow preferences to be customised. It is important that schools do not overuse such systems as while it is an extremely useful means of communication, it can become annoying and possibly ignored if used inappropriately, which can defeat the purpose.

NEWSLETTERS

It is important to consult with the school community regarding the most appropriate means of communicating news about the school and its events, this usually involves a range of options as not everyone may have access to email. To get the intended audience to read the news, it is best to make it brief, to the point, and customised, taking into account the amount of



information people are dealing with. A newsletter provides the means to convey important messages about the school's vision, values, strategies and plans. It is important to establish and adhere to a regular publication timetable and ensure that the school has appropriate permission to use any photos of students/other content.

SCHOOL EVENTS

School events are a great communication opportunities. Thus, it is important to make events as culturally reflective as possible. They are a good opportunity to personally meet and greet as many parents and community members as possible. It is important not to speak for too long and to keep the focus on the students achievements and the school's current goals. It is also important to ensure that students feel included and rewarded for their effort and achievement.

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Parents should be reminded that school staff are always prepared to listen and it is the policy of the school to resolve difficulties at an early stage in the interests of the students and of all concerned. When an issue arises, parents should be provided with the school's complaints procedure, which should be in accordance with nationally agreed procedures.

Parents should be asked, in the first instance, to arrange to meet the student's class teacher at a mutually convenient time to discuss concerns regarding the student. Teachers should be available to speak to parents and to help solve problems relating to students and their progress in school.

It is imperative that staff ensure that parents are listened to and treated with empathy. Matters tend to escalate when parents feel that their concerns have not been listened to or taken seriously. It is also important to ensure that accurate notes of meetings are taken and agreed with the parents, where possible. Mutual respect and empathetic and positive communication is the expectation for all such meetings.

COMMUNICATION WITH SEPARATED PARENTS

In cases where a student's parents are going through or have been through separation, it is important to communicate with all parties in a sensitive and appropriate manner, with the primary focus being the welfare of the student.

It is important for school management to operate on the assumption, unless there is evidence to the contrary, that both parents are entitled to be informed directly about significant issues relating to the student and that both are also entitled to records in relation to educational progress. If parents request separate parent teacher meetings, these should be facilitated. In addition, a new partner does not necessarily have any right to be at such meetings unless the other parent of the student consents to this.

If one parent asserts that another parent does not have a right to communication from the school, the parent should be informed that the other parent will have to be informed of this and that the other parent will have to be given an opportunity to respond. Given that some family law matters are 'in camera', care has to be exercised regarding what information is sought from parents e.g. all that may be necessary is an extract from a court order rather than a full copy of the order.

Great care has to be exercised when dealing with Data Access Requests. It is to be remembered that the student is the data subject and depending on the age of the student and taking other factors into consideration, it is possible that the data may be provided to the student rather than the parents. In view of the potential complications which arise in these types of matters, school should seek advice when dealing with data access requests.

PARENTS ENGAGING IN INAPPROPRIATE/UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR/H&S ISSUES

The communications policy should contain a link to the school's policy which deals with parents who engage in inappropriate/unacceptable behaviour, including but not limited to threatening, aggressive, intimidating and/or violent behaviour. Unauthorised entry onto school property is a serious matter and is likely to be in breach of a school's Health and Safety policy.

Should such an issue arise, it is important to deal with same in accordance with the policy **[Insert School Hyperlink]** which deals with such issues including, communicating with the parent in a respectful, unambiguous and clear manner. This should be done by letter and should include the school's policy which will outline such issues as the procedures to be followed, including potentially indicating to the parent that they do not have authority to come onto school premises while the matter is being investigated, that the matter has been reported to the Gardai etc.

This policy should also outline practical security steps, for example, requirements for all visitors to report to reception, security doors to be in place, CCTV for perimeters etc.



COMMUNICATIONS WITH STUDENTS

Managing communications with students is vital as effective communication has a direct and indirect influence on student outcomes. Many problems, in and out of schools, can be directly traced to the effectiveness of the school's communications, whether information was communicated or not, what was communicated, how it was communicated, and who communicated it. Taking time to think about what to say will ensure the integrity and professionalism, of the school, and of the wider educational community is upheld. Communications with students takes place on both a collective and individual basis.

It is also important to outline in the Communications policy how students should communicate with each other and what is and is not acceptable behaviour, in particular regarding the use of social media. This part of the policy should have a link to the Code of Behaviour, the Anti-bullying Policy and the Acceptable Use Policy. The Policy should also outline how students should communicate with other students, other members of the school community, those who visit the school and those outside the school community.

MEETINGS WITH STUDENT GROUPS/STUDENT COUNCILS

It is important to listen to a broad range of views, both the positive and critical.

The Policy should contain a link to the establishment of the Student Council in the school as well as containing a link regarding the consultations which take place with students and parents in relation to the school plan.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Internet and Social Media Presence

- In consultation with the school community, the following matters should be considered:-
- Decide whether closed or public access channels are to be used and for whom;
- Choose platforms that are easy to use, for the school and for the audience(s);
- Be clear, concise, professional and safe in the content, for example, do not post images without the necessary consents;
- Ensure that the content enhances the school's key messages, values and beliefs;
- Have protocols in place to manage the content;
- Have more than one person responsible for producing content, moderating content and monitoring for inappropriate responses.

COMMUNICATIONS WHEN DEALING WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

A focus on good behaviour will reinforce good behaviour. It is important to make a point of trying to catch students being good and praise or reward them for this, placing the focus of attention in the classroom on the majority of students who have behaved well.

An appropriate response to challenging behaviour depends on the type of behaviour being exhibited by the student. Any response to challenging behaviour should be consistent, fair, and be the least disruptive response necessary to manage the behaviour. A considered proactive response is likely to be more effective than one which is merely reactive.

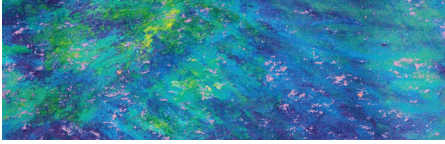
With face to face communication, it is important to listen carefully, treat the student with respect and not to interrupt. When dealing with behaviour issues, it is important to take notes and to make the student aware of this. In some instances, it will be necessary to have parents present and it should always be considered whether this is necessary.

It is vital to ensure that the School's Code of Behaviour, which should also incorporate its Anti-Bullying Policy, is communicated to the entire school community, is provided to parents when a student is being enrolled in the school and parents asked to sign up to it as required in the (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018. It is also important for schools to ensure that the Code of Behaviour is in conformity with the NEWB (as it then was) 2008 Guidelines.

[https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/guidelines_school_codes_eng.pdf] and that its Anti-Bullying Policy is in conformity with the DES 2013 Anti Bullying Procedures [<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Anti-Bullying-Procedures-for-Primary-and-Post-Primary-Schools.pdf>].

COMMUNICATIONS WITH STUDENTS WHO ARE OVER 18 YEARS

Staff should be able to strike a balance between respecting the students who are over the age of 18 while still treating them equally to their peers, who have yet to reach the age of 18. Once a student is over 18 years of age, any communications must be with him/her, rather than his/her parents. It is useful to try to encourage the student to involve his/her parents, particularly if dealing with challenging behavioural issues.



COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE WIDER COMMUNITY

It is important to consider what the purpose of the communication is before communicating. Generally, the purpose of strengthening partnerships and networks is to enhance student learning. When communicating with or receiving requests for comments from members of the media, the following process is to be followed:

The school designates a person to deal with all media requests, this is usually the Principal or Deputy Principal/Principals or a member of the SMT.

Staff are made aware that if they make any comment that this is being made on their own behalf and that they have no authority to comment on behalf of the school.

When a media request is received:-

- the person taking the call does not provide any comment and indicates that the request will be passed on to the appropriate person
- the request is forwarded to the designated person
- advice is sought as appropriate, this could be legal/PR advice

The value of good communication cannot be underestimated or its potential to promote and sustain high quality interpersonal relationships within our school and the wider community. It is a valuable organisational and life skill which if nurtured and developed will facilitate the smooth operation and growth of both the organisation and the individuals which make up the school community and indeed society. A clear communications policy developed by all stakeholders in the school community is vital for a schools operation and growth and has the capacity to reduce conflict and equip a school with a level of adaptability to change which is now a necessity in education for the future.