



A how-to guide for communicating with parents during the pandemic

Communicating with parents can sometimes be challenging even when you're communicating in a way that you're used to during times you're familiar with, said Kim Croyle, a school attorney for Bowles Rice LLP in Morgantown, W.Va. "I think it's even more complicated now," she said.

Before the pandemic, the preferable way to interact and communicate with parents was face-to-face, she said. "Face-to-face is so helpful because there are verbal and nonverbal cues, like inflection of voice, that you lose if you are only communicating through a written communication."

With the pandemic, meeting face-to-face has been prohibited or strongly curtailed in many instances. "We've been forced to communicate through circumstances outside of our control in a way that we're not at our best when we do," Croyle said.

Here are a few tips to help you and your staff communicate with parents during a pandemic.

- **Follow established best practices.** Use the same guidelines to communicate through a virtual platform or an email that you would use if the communication were in person, Croyle said. For example, the rules of FERPA apply whether you meet with a parent in a classroom or on a Zoom platform. Make sure not to have other people around if you are talking to a parent about personally identifiable student information that's not directory information.
- **Be mindful of parents' comfort level with technology.** Recognize that everybody's level of comfort in communicating virtually or electronically differs, Croyle said.

"You have some people who are very comfortable communicating that way, but a lot of parents aren't," she said. "Just like we recognize when we have parents that come into an IEP meeting who don't know the lingo and acronyms like a special education teacher might, a lot of parents don't have that comfort level with talking into a microphone, speaking into a camera on a computer, or even communicating by email. Some people are very self-conscious about that."

If you are working with parents who are hesitant, step back and do what you can to make them comfortable communicating with you, Croyle said.



- **Follow local and state policies.** School districts have different requirements for communication based on their individual acceptable technology use and code of conduct policies, Croyle said. Several counties across the country have policies regarding social media as well, she said. "We're being forced to communicate very differently," Croyle said. "Make sure you've looked at those policies and are complying with them."

Whether you're using your own cellphone or a district-issued computer, if you're talking about students' educational records or communicating with parents, you're going to be covered under and must comply with those policies, she said.

- **Keep personal communication separate.** Understand how to communicate as an educator, and when you can take that hat off and have your own personal communication, Croyle said. "You want to keep those separate," she said. "You don't want to comingle your personal communication and communication with parents when you have your educator hat on."

If there is litigation at some point in the future about whether you've provided services or violated FERPA, if you're always communicating with your district email address or platform, you'll be in a much better position than if you sometimes respond with your Gmail or your Hotmail account, she said.

"If you're in litigation [and] you've been communicating through Gmail, then all of your emails ... may be discoverable," she said. "There are probably things in your private email that you don't want the world to know."

September 29, 2020

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