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COVID-19 Best Practices & Innovations Brief: Effective Crisis Communication in Mississippi's K - 12 System

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6 MOST EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION METHODS

For Superintendents, the most successful communication methods were social media followed by text messages.

For Principals, the most successful were LMS followed by social media.

For Primary and Middle Grades Teachers, the most successful were text messages followed by voice calls.

For Middle/High School Teachers, the most successful were emails followed by text messages.

Effective Crisis Communication

The COVID-19 pandemic caused school closures across the United States between March and May 2020, affecting 48 states including Mississippi (Education Week, 2020). This unexpected crisis required schools to figure out quickly how to instruct students, in addition to furnishing the health, nutrition, and other social services normally provided, especially to low-income students. In the state of Mississippi, the majority of school districts shifted to some form of at home or online instruction, supported by educators. Successfully navigating these challenges required school districts to use a diverse set of skills in response to this crisis. A key component of this response was communication.

Effective crisis communication requires systems to get information *out* to stakeholders but must also provide for two-way communication to gather information *in* so that good choices can be made (Howat et al., 2012; Wooten & James, 2008). These methods of communication are best established in advance of an event and should include a mix of strategies (e.g., mass phone/text systems, listservs, informational web sites, and social media) to communicate effectively with the public (Gainey, 2009). Additionally, methods for dialogue – even asynchronous dialogue – are an important way for leaders to navigate potential tensions among schools or districts, faculty, students, parents, and communities (Gross, 2020).

This paper shares effective communications methods used during the COVID-19 response that were identified by Mississippi superintendents, principals, and teachers.

Best Practices in Mississippi at the District Level

As the lead administrative official for their school district, superintendents are responsible for identifying and establishing effective channels for communicating with students, families, and community members. Our findings revealed on average *a single school district tended to use a combination of six different communication methods* in an attempt to reach all their students and families. Every superintendent surveyed reported that information was regularly shared on their school district and individual school websites. **In terms of effectiveness, social media (43%) and automated text messaging (42%) were rated by those superintendents using them as their most successful medium**, followed by mass emails (29%) and automated phone calls (24%).

Legend: Social Media, Automated Voice Call, Automated Text, Mass Email, Postal Mail

Chart (Communication Methods Used): Social Media 98%, Automated Voice Call 92%, Automated Text 88%, Mass Email 84%, Postal Mail 58%
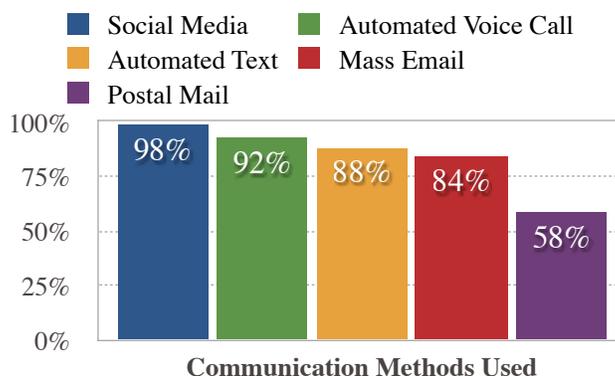
Best Practices in Mississippi at the School Level

Legend: School Website, LMS Tools, Automated Text, Social Media, Automated Calls, Mass Emails, Postal Mail

Chart (Communication Methods Used): School Website 99%, LMS Tools 99%, Automated Text 94%, Social Media 92%, Automated Calls 90%, Mass Emails 89%, Postal Mail 73%
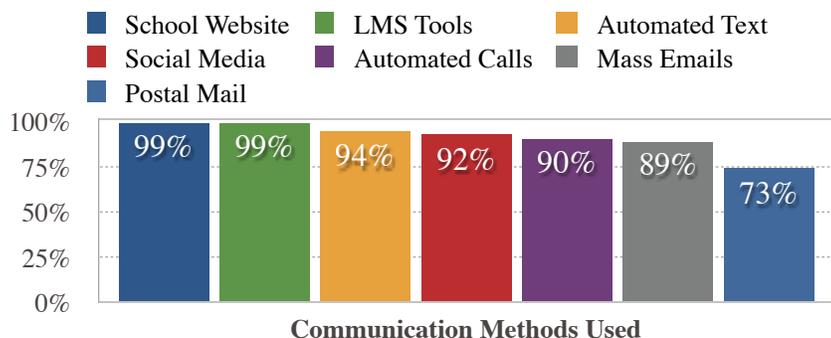
Principals shared multiple effective channels for communicating with their students, families, and community members during the COVID-19 pandemic. On average, *a single school tended to use a combination of seven different communication methods* in attempts to reach all the students and families who were participating in some format of online learning. Out of all the methods they had used, principals were asked to identify the two methods they felt had been most successful at meeting the communications challenge. **At the school level, using the school's LMS was seen as the most successful (49%), followed by social media posts (39%).** While all of the methods mentioned received at least one vote for most successful method, only automated voice calls (30%) and emails to families (12%) received noticeable as having been the most successful.

Best Practices in Mississippi at the Classroom Level

Primary Grades

Primary grades teachers reported using an average of three different communication methods to reach families, with text messaging dominating these efforts at 94%, followed by sending emails (74%) and making voice calls (70%). Only 14% used traditional mail methods while 25% reached out to families through social media such as Facebook or Twitter, and 34% offered to hold face-to-face meetings with their online families.

Middle Grades

Middle grades teachers also used an average of three different communication methods although they reported somewhat less use of text messaging than the primary grades teachers (89%), and instead made more use of emails (82%) and voice calls (75%). Middle grades teachers also relied less on traditional mail (11%) or social media (18%) than the primary teachers. Use of face-to-face meetings with online students' families was similar at 31%.

Primary & Middle Grades Teachers' Communication with Families

Legend: Primary Grades, Middle Grades

Text Messages: 94%, 89%; Individual Emails: 74%, 82%; Voice Calls: 70%, 75%; Postal Mail: 14%, 11%; Social Media: 25%, 18%; Face-to-Face Mtgs: 34%, 31%
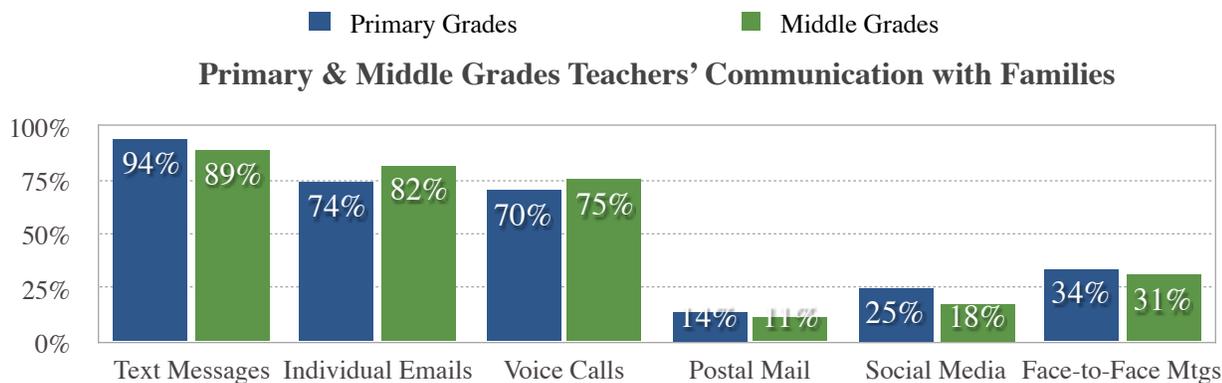
High School

To reach their online students, high school teachers used an average of three different methods. Emails sent through their school's LMS were almost universally relied upon (92%), while 66% of teachers reported they communicated with their students through social media. Voice calls to students were used by 36% of the teachers, while a text messaging service was used by 27% of teachers. Postal mail was sent by 8% of teachers, face-to-face conferences were held by 8% of the respondents and 4% reported using one-to-one video conferences with students.

Successful Methods of Communication

Both the primary and middle school teachers identified text messaging as being the most successful method for helping teachers to stay connected to their online students' families. Although these teachers had reported sending more emails than making voice calls, **both primary and middle grades teachers rated voice calls as more effective than emails for staying connected with families.**

Legend: LMS Emails, Social Media, Voice Calls, Text Messaging, Postal Mail, Face-to-Face Conferences

LMS Emails: 92%; Social Media: 66%; Voice Calls: 36%; Text Messaging: 27%; Postal Mail: 8%; Face-to-Face: 8%

High School Teachers' Communication with Students
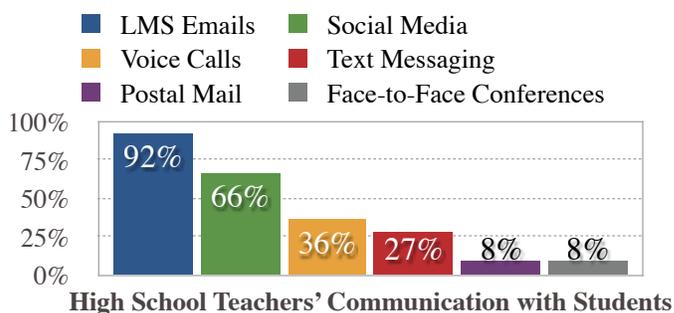
Although using social media posts to reach students was the second most popular communication among high school teachers, less than one percent of them identified it as the most effective. Instead, **high school teachers rated emails through the LMS and text messages through a service such as ReMIND most highly** for staying engaged with their students. In this way, the most effective communication tools for interacting with high school students differed from the most effective methods for engaging with primary and middle grades students' families.

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