



Communications Now

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Collecting information about students at your school

Getting ready for a new school year will likely have you compiling all types of information that needs to be available to students and their families. As this preparation gets underway, you also need to think about what they need to tell you. Do you have some way to collect students' and families' contact information and emergency contact information? What about permission for the jurisdiction to release information? How do you get students' immunization status and health needs? Refer to FOIPP legislation and jurisdiction policy as you make these decisions.

Spring or early summer months are a good time to review what your school/jurisdiction has been doing and to revise an existing system or design a new one, if needed.

Provincial rules and jurisdiction policy with regard to health records and sharing information give specific guidelines for the type of information you can collect and/or share. Check with ASBA legal to make sure you've complied with these rules.

Here is a list of some information you may want to request from your students' families.

Parent/guardian contact information: You need this information about each student in order to be able to communicate regularly with a student's family about his or her progress. This information is very important in a crisis or a medical emergency. You will need:

- The name or names of whoever is responsible for each student, whether that is a parent, guardian, other family member.
- The primary language spoken in the home, especially if English is a second language or not spoken at all.
- Daytime and evening contact information for students and their families, including phone numbers, cell numbers and street addresses.
- E-mail addresses. It is helpful to have a personal home e-mail address that can be used for regular communication and a daytime e-mail address that can be used in case of emergency.

Child custody information: For each student, you need to know who it is permissible to contact. Be sure to find out if the child is in a joint-guardianship or a sole-guardianship family and whether there are any applicable court orders governing the rights of the guardian(s).

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Is the child living with foster parents? Do grandparents, other relatives, or other persons have custody of the child? Consider asking:

- Who is the student's legal guardian? Who should be contacted in event of emergency?
- To whom can the student be released? Make sure the child's school has copies of necessary court orders concerning the student, and confirm that any information you have on file is current.

Alternate emergency contact: This is the person to be contacted in the event of a situation that requires immediate response and you are unable to reach the primary care-giver. Information to have available might include:

- Name of contact
- Relationship of contact to the student (e.g. neighbour, relative, sibling)
- Language spoken by the contact
- Phone number and cell number
- E-mail address for emergency communication
- Whether or not the primary caregivers want you to release the child to this contact if primary caregivers are unable to respond to an emergency medical problem
- If caregivers work outside the home, ask for a contact name and phone number at their place of work and assure them it will be used only in emergency situations

Release of student information and/or photos:

What identifying data are families comfortable having released about their children? In the past, the main concern was the release of information to traditional media – television, radio and newspapers. The Internet and digital world of today have changed that situation. Today you must make sure your permission to release information applies to traditional outlets, as well as the school's Web site, photos taken by students and others using private cell phones and

digital cameras, and material used in student and jurisdiction publications and news releases.

Health information: Generally, families will want you to know about allergies and health conditions affecting their children. This may include:

- Immunization history
- Food and other allergies, specified by name, whether contact could be life-threatening, and the specific drugs a student takes for his or her allergies
- Conditions for which medications need to be administered during the school day

Write a letter explaining why you are collecting the information, how long you will keep it, how it can be updated and how you dispose of it. Include a deadline for the return of the information and permission form.

Make sure families sign and date the forms on which student information is submitted to the school. In the case of joint guardianship, both parents need to sign and date the form. If you communicate by e-mail, include a link to the form so that it can be completed online or printed and returned. Have some printed copies on hand in school offices for those who don't have computer access or who aren't able to complete it online.

Depending on your students' families, you may want all forms translated into other languages. Offer interpreters to help non-English speaking families. In the case of non-English speaking parents or caregivers, make sure they know they have a choice about what information they give.

Contributed by: Jackie Smith, communications consultant



How to write a user-friendly student handbook

Publishing a handbook outlining student rights and responsibilities is an annual ritual in Alberta schools. And while it is important parents and students know the rules, sometimes, publishing a long list of rules can pose communications hazards.

Parents may see the handbook as dictatorial and jump to the conclusion that the school is expecting the worst from students.

Here are some tips for making the handbook user friendly for students and parents.

- **Put yourself in your audience's shoes:** As you write your handbook, ask yourself how you would react if you were a parent reading the material. Emphasize your concern for student safety along with the list of rules and penalties for infractions.
- **Tone and intent are everything:** Include an introduction to your handbook that talks about your goal of providing the best possible atmosphere and setting for student learning.

Talk about legislation that pertains to student rights and behavior, and your intent to make sure all students have a safe learning environment. Invite parents and students to ask questions and visit with you about their concerns.
- **Provide user-friendly content:** Organize the content of your handbook under major subject headings and provide a table of contents that helps locate information about particular rules or rights of students.
- **Provide for a multicultural audience:** If you have parents whose primary language is not English, make sure you provide the publication in their primary language or arrange for translation and notify those parents about where the translation is available.

Make a presentation: Some schools set aside time at the beginning of the year for each teacher to review rights and responsibilities with students. It is also a good idea to cover the main points in the handbook at the open house or parent meeting.

This reinforces the importance of the handbook. Be sure to talk about the intent behind the publication; how the handbook relates to student safety and learning and why being familiar with the handbook is important.

- **Emphasize new content for students in upper grades:** Students who have seen many editions of the handbook may say, "I already know that" and ignore the latest edition.

Make sure they know about any changes in content such as rules about the use of cell phones, phone cameras, and instant messaging.
- **Repeat in small doses:** Communications research shows a message must be delivered many times and in many ways in order to be heard and understood by a large majority of the intended audience.

This means you will need to reinforce the information with frequent communications in school newsletters, on your Web site and in other communications with parents and students.

Keep in mind that delivering a lot of information at the same time can overwhelm people and cause them to ignore or retain little of what they are hearing or reading.

It is much more effective to talk about one rule at a time and explain it in simple language.

- **Continually invite questions.** Creating a two-way dialogue encourages better understanding. Encourage parents and their children to ask questions.

Contributed by: Gay Campbell, APR, C&M Communications and communications consultant



Using e-mail to prevent summer learning loss

Students can lose up to a month of learning over the summer holiday. Math computation skills and skills related to reading and writing, such as spelling, are especially vulnerable.

Using student and family e-mail connections established during the school year to suggest summer learning activities is an effective, low cost way to prevent this learning loss.

To make the most of those summer e-mails, review these netiquette do's and don'ts.

Do use a descriptive subject line: The subject line is important when busy readers are reviewing and prioritizing e-mail. Be specific. If it's a math exercise, include that information in the subject line.

Do be professional: Remember, this is an official "business" communication. Don't include anything in an e-mail that you would not want to see printed in the local newspaper.

Do use opening and closing salutations: An e-mail is an interpersonal communication, so be sure to use a salutation. There is nothing more impersonal than receiving a message that doesn't at least say "Hello" for an opening and "Regards," or something similar for a closing. Basic civility still applies, just as it should in any professional interaction.

Do use attachments: Keep an e-mail text to less than a half page. Any additional information should be included in an attachment. When sending an attachment, consider providing it in various formats such as PDF, MS Word and maybe a plain text document.

Do include *response not needed*: By making sure batch e-mails include the phrase *response not needed* you will eliminate unnecessary return e-mails thanking you for the information. However, make it plain how to respond should the recipients have comments, concerns or questions.

Don't use all capital letters: The use of all-caps is shunned on the Internet. It indicates SHOUTING.

Do check spelling, grammar and format: E-mail programs have a spell-checker. Use it. But also, carefully read what you are sending. Spell-check programs may see the right spelling but miss the wrong word.

Tip: Cutesy little smiles and similar symbols, known as "emoticons," should be used sparingly. The principle underlying professional business e-mails is: to send clear and concise communications with a minimum of clutter.

Tip: For better readability, break e-mails into short one, two or three sentence paragraphs with a blank line between paragraphs.

Contributed by: Margaret Petersen, APR, communications consultant



Keeping in touch with families over the summer

Once the school year ends, teachers and building administrators tend to put communications with students' families aside. Unfortunately, the contention that "nothing happens in the summer that families need to know," just isn't true. There are many things families want and need to know year round. Summer is no exception.

Here are six effective ways schools can keep in touch with families during the summer at no cost or very low cost. These communications also make sure families have access to resources they can use to support their children's learning during a long school break.

- **Close the loop on the school year:** Make sure the school and teacher Web sites are up to date and include all the end-of-school information families want and need to know.
- **Take time to make a personal connection:** If final grade reports are mailed, picked up at school by families, or sent home with students on the last day, ask teachers to include short personal notes to families letting them know that they enjoyed having their children in class and encouraging families to stay involved as their children move to new classes.

If the school is small enough, consider personal notes from the principal in addition to, or in place of, the notes from teachers.

- **Offer suggestions for summer learning:** Either in printed form or electronically, list appropriate learning activities for each grade level. Encourage families to use these ideas during the summer to sustain their children's skills in reading, writing, math, science, music and the arts. Encourage teachers to include this kind of information for families in their communications, too.

- **Keep Web sites current:** Encourage teachers to include learning activities for the students' next grade, and activities for incoming students to prepare for classes in the fall. Also include information about summer school and jurisdiction or community activities students and families may want to attend.
- **Make phone calls:** If your school has office staff during the summer, consider a mid-summer phone call to let families know when back-to-school information will be mailed or posted and when classroom assignments will be available. School research shows a personal phone call is preferred for learning information specific to individual children
- **Post back-to-school information:** Make sure this information, including school supply lists by grade level, is posted as soon as it's available. Use a broadcast e-mail to let families know where the information is available on the Web site or when they should look for it in the mail.

Consider printing inexpensive flyers, and make them available in local grocery stores, office supply stores, libraries, variety stores and anywhere else frequented by students' families.

If one of your goals is to have families participate more fully in their children's education, then don't let summer break slip away without considering all or at least some of these effective, no cost, or low cost ways to keep families in the loop and engaged.

Contributed by: Jeanne Magmer, APR, C&M Communications and communications consultant



Web links

Earth Day

Wednesday April 22

This year, on Earth Day, pledge to become a Green Hero, join the Save Trees Not Paper program and share your eco-friendly actions to win big prizes.

Take part in events all across the province. Ardrossan hosts and Owl Prowl, there are festivals in Calgary and Edmonton, and more to come as we approach the big day. Get ideas for your project and check the website often for event updates.

<http://www.earthday.ca/pub/index.php>

Who's a Hometown Hero?

Is there someone in your community you'd like to nominate for a Hometown Hero award for their service to the environment? Find out here if they meet the qualifications, link through to the nomination package and entry form, mail it or e-mail it in, and cross your fingers. Don't let community efforts go unheralded.

<http://www.earthday.ca/hometown/eligibility.php>

Eco Kids: a project of Earth Day

Canada's environmental destination for kids; read what other kids are doing, learn about the Top 10 challenges, and get the eco-fact of the day. Say, did you know...?

Project headings include Wildlife, The North, Water, Climate Change, Land Use, Waste, Energy, First Nations and Inuit

<http://www.ecokids.ca/pub/index.cfm>

Edmonton River Valley

Clean-Up Spring 2009

Sunday May 4, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Tires, shopping carts, automobile parts, empty containers of every size and description--and just plain garbage. It's in the river valley, ravines, wooded areas and parks. It's been lost, left, and blown there. Now that the snow is melting, it's blocking the view. This is your chance to become a collector.

Join other community minded citizens and spend a day getting Edmonton all spruced up and ready for summer. In Edmonton, Sunday, May 4th from 10am until 2pm at Louise McKinney Park (Shumka Stage) for a one-day clean up of litter in the river valley or a local green space.

<http://www.edmonton.ca/environmental/river-valley-clean-up.aspx>

Is there a spring clean-up in your town? Call your municipal government office to find out. Join in, or get one going. It's good clean fun.