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Overcoming communication hurdles for rural schools

Dealing with internet/mobile coverage issues

Parents with limited internet and mobile access can be a real challenge for a lot of rural schools. In New Zealand, 89.5% of the population use the internet. This ranks us in the top 10 internet users in the world, yet only 76.5% of rural areas have access to the internet and 1.6% of households have no form of telecommunications at all. There are government initiatives in place to increase this statistic, but in the meantime this causes challenges for schools communication methods.

This isn't so much of an issue when the message is not time sensitive, but if there is an emergency or cancellation; parents could miss out on information due to limited internet or mobile coverage.

Because this issue is unique to rural schools, it requires a different approach to communications than their urban counterparts. Here are some useful suggestions.

Multiple channels

Sending an email and a text message at the same time is one way to increase the likelihood that parents receive the message as they may only have instant access to one and not the other. The best practice would be to use the text message to direct parents to the email. Here is an example of good multiple channel communication.

Subject: Mackenzie College closed due to snow

Dear XXX
Due to the snow we have closed Mackenzie College for the day (Monday 15 June 2015) as student safety is paramount to us.
At this stage we will be closed for today only but if the snow continues we may have to revaluate this.

MACCOL closed due to snow Mon15/06/2015. Check website or email for further information. Susan Willis Principal

Read receipts

Read receipts, or delivery reports, are bounce back messages that the sender receives when the email or text has been opened by the recipient. These can be set up through your email provider or cell phone and is a good way of tracking messages.

You can see who is actually receiving them and then decide whether or not you need to follow up. For example, an emergency closure might require texts to be sent to all parents and if you have a group that haven't opened the message, you can follow up with phone calls to ensure they don't miss out on the message.

These are easy to set up and can be turned on and off so you aren't receiving hundreds of bounce backs for items like newsletters.

Additional contact information

When you collect the parents' contact information it could help to add a couple of fields. Finding out a) what the preferred method of contact is and b) whether or not they have internet access/mobile coverage, will help cut out a lot of guess work when getting an important message through.

Once you know the preferred method of contact and whether or not they have internet access, you can tailor your lists to ensure optimum communication receivership.

As a rule, keeping parent contact information as up to date as possible is very important. Doing regular checks/reminders is a good way to ensure your message is reaching who it needs to, when it needs to.

Communicating urgency

Getting parents to understand the urgency of a message can sometimes be difficult and is something that many schools struggle with.

Check that you use the right keywords and format messages in a clear unambiguous way. Ensuring that all procedures have been communicated to parents will help in understanding the urgency of a message. If they know to expect a text message in the event of a cancellation, they will be prepared for an urgent message when they receive it. Also ensuring parents know the acronyms can help. For example would they be aware that MACCOL stands for Mackenzie College? Below are some checklists you can use when formatting an urgent message either via text message or email. For detailed information about this check out our guide on Getting through to Parents.

CHECKLISTS

TEXT MESSAGING

- ✔ Include the school acronym (e.g. MACCOL for Mackenzie College to identify the school)
- ✔ State what they need to know first (what the issue is and what day it occurs, e.g. School closed due to snow today Tues 01/06/2015)
- ✔ Outline action required from the parents (e.g. please do not enter school grounds due to building damage)
- ✔ Keep it short and under 160 characters
- ✔ Does the parent need to respond? How do you want them to do this?
- ✔ Sign-off with the person and their position that this text message has come from.

EMAIL

- ✔ Include the school name in the subject heading
- ✔ Have a short but appropriate subject heading (e.g. MacKenzie College Closed Today 1st June Due to Snow)
- ✔ State what they need to know first (what is the issue here and what day are we referring to, e.g. School closed due to snow Tuesday 1st June)
- ✔ Outline what action is required from the parent (e.g. please do not enter school grounds as snow has caused damage to buildings)
- ✔ Keep it short and to the point
- ✔ Include an option of where more information can be found, if appropriate (e.g. more information on the cancellation can be found on our website)
- ✔ Sign-off with the person and their position that this email has come from.