

# Emergency Communications

A REFERENCE GUIDE FOR THE EMERGENCY  
COMMUNICATIONS REQUIREMENTS FROM HOUSE BILL 3584

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SCHOOL SAFETY AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT



**OREGON**  
School Safety  
and Emergency  
Management

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### **Summary of House Bill 3584**

When a school or district initiates a safety threat action (lockdown, secure/lockout, shelter-in-place or evacuation) the school or district shall provide an electronic communication, in culturally appropriate languages, to parents and guardians of students attending the school at which the action occurred, as expediently as possible and not later than 24 hours after the initiation of the safety threat action. The communication must include:

1. A general description of the issue that caused the safety threat action to be taken;
2. The duration of time that the safety threat action was taken from when the action was initiated until it concluded;
3. Actions taken by the school or district to resolve the situation that caused the safety threat action and actions taken to protect student safety; and
4. An explanation of how the situation was resolved.

### **Effective Messaging**

When there are safety threats within the school community, accurate and timely information must be sent out to provide clarity, transparency and to build trust within the community. Parents and guardians want to know what is going on with their child and they want to know you are working to keep them safe. Staff and the school community also want to know how you are keeping them safe. This is also the reason *to* communicate with them and an even greater reason to be honest with them.

Sending out the information which is accurate and accessible stops rumors and misinformation from being rapidly disseminated. Although not all information can or should be shared, the critical details to inform students, parents, staff, and the school community must be sent out as expediently as possible. Remember...We are always communicating, whether we are saying anything or not. It is just a matter of whether we are doing it well.

### **Before an incident:**

Make sure parents, staff and students know where and how to receive critical safety messaging. During school registration, make sure emergency contacts are updated and use opt out services, rather than opt in. Having the *entire* school community being able to receive emergency communications is imperative. You may have different communications for different things, let families know which are the official communication methods like FlashAlert or the district Facebook page.

## **Tips and Guidance for Messaging**

### Introduction/Notice (What was the incident, when and why?)

Don't waste time with preambles when communicating about an emergency or response to an emergency. People are opening a potentially alarming email and they want to know what happened first. Use simple language and keep your opening lines succinct (1-2 sentences):

Example:

- Lincoln Elementary conducted a Secure Drill at 12:30pm this afternoon in response to a police chase in the Oak Grove Neighborhood.
- MLK Middle School conducted an Evacuation Drill at 8:20am this morning in response to a suspected gas leak.
- Happy Valley High School conducted a Shelter In Place Drill, followed by an Evacuation Drill in response to the earthquake experienced at 9:06am this morning.

### Body of message: What Does This Mean?

When was the incident concluded and what was the outcome? Again, consider your audience. Families and the school community want to know if danger is still present and if they still need to worry. This is a two-parter: include how long the incident lasted—or when it ended—and what the outcome was or status is. This can be a short narrative, but should still be kept brief (2-4 sentences):

Example:

- The Secure! status was lifted at 2:30pm after Springfield Police confirmed that the suspect had been caught and the situation was safely resolved. Lincoln Elementary was in Secure! status for only two hours. No students were harmed during the response.
- The evacuation was concluded after 45 minutes when the Pine Valley Fire Department confirmed there was no gas leak. Students were returned to class. One student was treated by the school nurse for minor lacerations after falling in the parking lot. The family of that student has been notified.
- Students have been relocated to the High Plains Fairgrounds because the school grounds are unsafe for occupancy. Three students were escorted to the High Plains hospital for treatment of minor injuries and observation. The families of those students are being notified.

### Action Items (What should we do?):

This is a section that you should bulletize or otherwise call out. Eyes should be drawn to this section for quick reference. If you cannot have families show up to the front steps of the school because the school grounds are unsafe then you need to stress that information here. If they need to pick up their child at an alternate location,

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identify that location here and give instructions on what to expect. And if they do not need to do anything because no major disruption took place, then also call that out. If you have different groups of parents or guardians that need to do different things, then break this section down by group. Be specific but deliberate in this section:

Examples:

- An early release has been called in response to the wildfire smoke. **Parents and guardians who pick up their children from school should do so immediately. Students who take the bus are being sent home on the bus now.**
- Parents and guardians do not need to do anything in response to the gas leak which caused the evacuation this afternoon **Students will be released at the normal time of 3:15pm.**
- **All parents and guardians should go to the High Plains Fairgrounds and park in the North Parking Lot.** Emergency responders and school staff will be there to direct traffic and reunify you with your child as quickly as possible.

Rumor Control/Further Messaging:

If a particular rumor is floating around, now is the time to set the record straight. The blunt, fact-based messaging before this should be clear enough that this section should only be used if a particularly confusing or disruptive rumor is prevalent. This section can also be used to stress the school's values and commitment to safety. Reassure families and loved ones that you are keeping their children safe and doing your utmost to make it so. Quick and timely communication is important, so if you find yourself expanding this section unnecessarily, take a pause and reconsider. You can always follow up this initial notification with a message from the principal or superintendent.

Example:

- A rumor that is circulating on social media claims that a vehicle has crashed onto the Lincoln Elementary School property. That rumor is false. The police chase that occurred this afternoon did not cross over school property and did not endanger the students of Lincoln Elementary School. The school was put into Secure status only as a precautionary measure. Your child's safety is of the utmost importance to Lincoln Elementary teachers and staff and we will always enact preventative measures whenever possible to prevent harm.

Follow-Up:

Do you have a resource page that is updated regularly? Do you have contact information for a particular need or supporting resource? Do you need to direct the school community to other lines of communication, like Facebook or FlashAlert?

### Examples:

- Stay up to date on this and other unexpected events by bookmarking our homepage (link), following our Facebook page (link) and keeping your contact information updated with the front office (phone number).

### Final Considerations:

- Be honest! If your school is doing its part to mitigate trouble by conducting effective response then there is no reason to lie about the reality of the event. In most cases, parents and community members get upset when a school tries to downplay the real danger. Greater problems ensue when you have to explain a lie than when you have to explain lessons learned from a response situation.
- Avoid any speculation or breach of confidentiality. Sometimes we can be pressured from our community to reveal more information than the public is privy to, especially when it comes to juveniles, FERPA laws or ongoing police investigations. Stick to the facts, only disclose what you are allowed to.
- Consider all school community members: if you have multi-lingual families, have a plan in place to communicate the same timely information in their preferred language. It may be unreasonable to have a series of pre-translated messages that will meet every eventual situation. However, if you know ahead of time that you will have to translate a given message, have the capability in place to do so. Don't wait until the last minute to go searching for a translator.
- Stay calm and follow your procedures. Keep the safety of your students and staff first and inform your school community of what is going on. Rumors start because people are left in the dark.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms. If you have to explain it after using it, just explain it first. Be clear and concise.

### Messaging Template

Introduction/Notice (What was the incident, when and why?); 1-2 sentences:
What Does This Mean? (When was the incident concluded and what was the outcome?); 2-4 sentences:
Action Items (What should we do?); be deliberate and address specific groups if needed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Elementary students should...</li><li>• Bus Riders should...</li></ul>
Rumor Control/Further Messaging:
Follow-Up; necessary contact information.