

# Guidance

## for Cell Phone-Free Education Pursuant to Executive Order 33

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September 16, 2024



# Introduction

On July 9, 2024, Governor Glenn Youngkin issued [Executive Order 33](#) (“EO33”) establishing cell phone-free education in public schools to promote the health and safety of Virginia’s K-12 students. EO33 states the following:

- The necessity of implementing cell phone-free education in Virginia’s K-12 public schools is increasingly evident. Parents, public health professionals, educators, and other stakeholders across the Commonwealth are expressing concern over the alarming mental health crisis and chronic health conditions affecting adolescents, such as depression and anxiety, driven in part by extensive social media usage and widespread cell phone possession among children. Cell phone-free education will significantly reduce the amount of time students can be on phones without parental supervision.
- Therefore, creating a cell phone-free education environment in public schools is not only a prudent measure, but an essential one to promote a healthier and more focused educational environment where every child is free to learn.

To address these concerns, EO33 outlined a series of actions to be taken by the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Virginia Department of Education, and the State Health Commissioner, including the development of draft guidance for public school divisions to adopt policies and procedures establishing cell phone-free education. The draft guidance reflected the voices of Virginians that took part in nine public listening sessions (one in-person listening session in each of eight Superintendent Regions and one virtual listening session) with over 600 attendees, 11 additional stakeholder group conversations with community and faith leaders, parent organizations, school board, superintendent, principals, and school nurse associations, as well as nearly 1,500 submitted online comments in July and August of 2024 with 77% strongly in favor of the cell phone-free instructional time.

This draft guidance was available for review and feedback through September 15, 2024. Overall, the department received nearly 6,000 public comments and feedback during engagements, including 21 stakeholder convenings and public Commonwealth Conversations with over 1,160 Virginians. These comments reinforced the importance of “bell-to-bell” Cell Phone-Free education helped teachers focus on learning and not discipline, ensured students submitted authentic work, and allowed students to develop critical communication skills. Families also chimed in that they wanted their students to focus on learning and not get caught up in the drama that social media often causes during instructional hours.

Of the concerns raised, one common theme was around medical needs – specifically use of phone-based apps for health monitoring - and the department partnered with school nurses, pediatricians and the Virginia Department of Health to address practices for exceptions in the Guidance recognizing students with medical needs may require a medical exemption to the bell-to-bell policy included in their Individualized Education Plan, 504 plan, and/or individualized health care plans.

Second, many students wrote in asking to use their phones during lunch hours. However, research shows receive [more than 200 notifications a day](#) on their smartphones and [two-thirds of U.S. students](#) report being distracted by using digital devices. It is essential that students have the opportunity to develop face-to-face conversations and develop critical in-person communication skills during unstructured school hours.

Third, it became very apparent there are general gaps in parent, teacher and school communication resulting in parents feeling like they must communicate directly with their child for both emergency and non-emergency situations. Specifically, concerns focused on the ability for a parent to contact their child in a school-based emergency including during or immediately after lockdowns. The guidance has a clear section on communicating with parents during school-based and family-based emergency situations as well as non-emergency parent communications protocols. The enhanced guidance also includes a new Appendix section on School-Based Emergencies to support principals and superintendents with best practices.

Polling was also released by the [Washington Post-Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University poll](#) on Friday, September 13 showing that 69% of Virginia parents of school-aged children support cell phone-free education, including during lunch and class breaks. This aligns with the overall broad, bi-partisan feedback the department received during the months of July through September.

With this final guidance, every school division and local school board should review existing policies and/or work to create or revise policies that adhere with the following minimum guidance no later than January 1, 2025. Communities are invited and encouraged to have community conversations and consider broadening their policies and protocols.

## Definitions

*“Bell-to-Bell”* means from when the first bell rings at the start of the school day to begin instructional time until the dismissal bell rings at the end of the academic school day. “Bell-to-bell” includes lunch and time in between class periods.

*“Cell Phone-Free Education”* means the age-appropriate elimination or restriction of cell phones and other personal electronic communication devices in public schools.

*“Cell Phone”* means a personal device capable of making calls, transmitting pictures or video, or sending or receiving messages through electronic means. The definition of cell phone is inclusive of a non-smart phone that is limited to making phone calls or text messages, a smart phone that encompasses the above features, and other future personal electronic communication devices with the abovementioned characteristics.

*“Instructional time”* means any structured or unstructured learning experiences that occur from when the first bell rings at the start of the school day until the dismissal bell rings at the end of the academic school day.

*“Personal Electronic Communication Device”* means any personal device capable of connecting to a smart phone, the internet, a cellular or Wi-Fi network, or directly connects to another similar device. Personal electronic communication devices may include some wearable devices such as

smart watches, as well as personal headphones, laptops, tablets, and other future personal electronic communication devices with the abovementioned characteristics.

“Stored” means a cell phone or personal electronic communication device not being carried on the student’s person, including not in the student’s pocket. Options school divisions could choose to define as storage options include, but are not limited to, in the student’s backpack, in the student’s locker, in a locked pouch, or in a designated place in the classroom.

## What is “cell phone-free” education?

The Commonwealth has put in place best-in-class computer science standards and has revised its math standards to include data analysis practices throughout a student’s academic career. Virginia is also one of the first states in the nation to work to equip our students for the coming opportunities and challenges of Artificial Intelligence. The EO33 guidance is specific to students’ use of cell phones and personal electronic communication devices and should not discourage the appropriate use of school-issued technologies aligned with the Commonwealth’s education standards.

Executive Order 33 requires that the Department provide detailed age-appropriate restrictions or elimination of cell phones during “instructional time” in Virginia public schools. During listening sessions, stakeholders determined the definition of K-12 instructional time as “bell-to-bell” was age appropriate for all grade bands. Therefore, instructional time is consistent throughout the guidance, and cell phone access and use time varies outside of bell-to-bell by age-appropriate measures.

Cell phone-free education requires different expectations at elementary (K-5), middle (6-8) and high school.

### In Elementary Schools (K-5), cell phone-free education is:

1. Cell phones and personal electronic communication devices will **not be used by elementary students** within the school building or on school grounds.
2. If a parent decides that an elementary student should bring a cell phone or personal electronic communication device to school, the device **must** be turned off and stored away from the student during the school day.
3. School divisions **must** make policies that determine cell phone and personal electronic communication device use on school buses where elementary students are present.
4. Students **must** use school-based communication tools and platforms (whether in the office, classroom, or other centralized location) to communicate non-emergency needs with parents.
5. Parents and educators **should** use school-based communication tools and channels to communicate emergencies and non-emergencies during bell-to-bell instructional time. It is encouraged to have a school official available to support the student in the event of communication involving a family emergency.

**Note:** If an elementary school houses students in grades other than K-5, the elementary definition of cell phone-free education is applicable for all grade levels within the elementary school.

Each public school system **must** establish clear procedures for off-site events or activities, including all school-sponsored events and/or field trips, transportation- including daily bus transit, multiple instructional settings, and other non-building specific instructional opportunities that do not occur on the elementary school campus.

### **In Middle Schools (Grade 6-8), cell phone-free education is:**

1. Middle school students shall not have a cell phone or personal electronic communication device **during the bell-to-bell school day.**
2. If cell phones or personal electronic communication devices are brought to school, they **must** be stored and turned off **during bell-to-bell school day.**
3. Specifically for time periods outside of the bell-to-bell school day, school divisions **must** make local policies that determine appropriate cell phone and personal electronic communication device use by middle school students, including before and after school, on school buses, within the school building, and on school grounds.
4. Students **must** use school-based communication tools and platforms (whether in the office, classroom, or other centralized location) to communicate non-emergency needs with parents.
5. Parents **should** use school-based communication tools and channels to communicate emergencies and non-emergencies. It is encouraged to have a school official available to support the student in the event of communication involving a family emergency.
6. Educators and all co-curricular and extra-curricular sponsors **must** use non-social media-based app for communications with students regarding activity and athletic scheduling information during school hours.
7. Schools **should** give middle school students developmentally appropriate guidance and support on the appropriate use of school-issued technology devices, educational apps, and educational tools for academic (both classroom and homework assignments) and for educational research purposes.

**Note:** Some Virginia middle schools house grades other than 6-8, and the middle school definition of cell phone-free education is applicable for those middle schools. If a middle school student travels to a different campus during the school day, they must adhere to that school building's policy and procedures for cell phones and personal electronic communication devices.

Each school system must establish procedures for off-site events and activities, including all school-sponsored events and/or field trips, transportation- including daily bus transport, athletic participants, multiple instructional settings, and other non-building specific instructional opportunities that do not occur on the middle school campus.

### **In High Schools (Grade 9-12), cell phone-free education is:**

1. High school students shall not have a cell phone or personal electronic communication device **during the bell-to-bell school day.**
2. If cell phones or personal electronic communication devices are brought to school, they **must** also be stored and off **during the bell-to-bell school day.**

3. Outside of the bell-to-bell instructional time, cell phones and personal electronic communication devices **may** be used on a high school campus **before or after school**.
4. During bell-to-bell instructional time, students **must** use school-based communication tools and platforms (whether in the office, classroom, or other centralized location) to communicate non-emergency needs with parents.
5. Parents **should** use school-based communication tools and channels to communicate emergencies during bell-to-bell instructional time.
6. Educators and all co-curricular and extra-curricular sponsors **must** use non-social media-based apps to communicate activity and athletic scheduling information with students during school hours.
7. Schools **should** give high school students developmentally appropriate guidance and support on the appropriate use of school-issued technology devices, educational apps and educational tools for academic (both classroom and homework assignments) and for educational research purposes.

**Note:** If a high school student travels to a different campus or facility during the school day, they must adhere to that building's policy and procedures for cell phones and personal electronic communication devices.

Each school system must establish procedures for off-site events including all school-sponsored events and/or field trips, transportation- including daily bus transport, athletic participants, multiple instructional settings, and other non-building specific instructional opportunities that do not occur on the high school campus.

## Exemptions to “Cell Phone-Free Education”

Policies developed by school divisions should include allowable exemptions to the minimum standards for cell phone-free education when such exemptions are necessary to comply with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act). Viable alternatives to using a cell phone or personal electronic communication device should be explored and implemented in collaboration with the student's family.

Allowable exemptions for cell phones and personal electronic communication device must be written into 504, IEP and/or individualized health care plans. All individualized health care plans that include cell phone or personal electronic communication device usage must be approved by the School Nurse Coordinator, Director of Student Services, or Superintendent's designee.

If a student with a disability or an EL student with a documented language barrier is determined to require access to technology to ensure the provision of a free and appropriate public education, IEP, Limited English Proficiency plan, or 504 teams should collaborate to consider [appropriate identification and use of assistive technology](#) to support a student's unique needs. Public schools must consider students' IEPs and 504 plans when creating policies regarding cell phone and personal electronic communication device access, usage, and storage protocols, and should provide school-based devices for assistive technology where appropriate. When making these decisions, [consideration](#) should be given to the [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act](#)

(HIPPA) and any potential implications that would bring unnecessary attention to impacted students.

## Emergency Communications

As required by [§ 22.1-279.8](#), each school must have crisis and contingency plans for school-based emergencies that include written procedures and training for employees, students, and other staff during crisis and emergency situations. These localized emergency plans ensure that training occurs for staff and that students participate in practice drills. Moreover, [Section 22.1-279.8](#) of the Code of Virginia outlines the responsibilities for local school boards regarding school safety, training, and crisis planning. These locally developed plans are annually reviewed by local emergency management officials and certified by local school boards; and then, the training and safety drills are executed for all staff.

These ***school-based emergency plans*** outline required safety planning in a crisis or emergency situations and must be reviewed, revised, and adopted annually. School divisions should use the best practices outlined by the current [DCJS Division Guide for Crisis Management Planning](#) which is available on the VDOE website. In addition, the VDOE website provides multiple best practice resources that school divisions should use when designing their yearly crisis and contingency plans. These best practices include staff training, student drills, and parent re-unification and communication plans, as well as also ensuring that parents of students who are directly impacted or critically injured are contacted directly versus through a mass communication or recording.

School divisions must publicly share (1) how school-based personnel are trained to manage crisis and emergency situations, (2) re-unification plans, and (3) family notification processes during crisis situations. Public schools should notify parents at the start of the school year about any updates to the annual crisis emergency plan and clearly outline the communications plan for parent notification should a school-based emergency or crisis occur, including any relevant or timely follow-up information regarding a school-based emergency event.

School divisions must be clear in protocols whether or not students can access their stored cell phone and/or personal electronic communication device during a school-based emergency and communicate this policy clearly to parents and students.

Not only should training and communications plans be updated for cell phone situations, but school leaders should actively work to build better communication pathways for families. School divisions should consider having regular updates about school in multiple print and digital platforms. Schools should encourage teachers to have more communication about their classroom and build strong two-way communication with parents. It is essential that parents trust and feel comfortable reaching out to their child's teacher(s) and school leadership.

Adults in the school should lead by example and have clear boundaries around their own use of cell phones for emergency or crisis communication purposes only. In the event of an emergency, it is important for adults to have access to a cell phone or classroom phone to coordinate crisis notification and emergency safety plans. School divisions need to establish clear protocols and

publish these protocols for the means and methods that will be utilized to communicate with students, staff, and families during a school-based crisis or emergency event.

**Family-based emergencies** should be communicated directly with the front office of their child's school. Based on criteria developed by the local school division, schools should clearly define a family-based emergency in all documents and communicate this definition and family-based emergency protocol with parents. Such options could include, but are not limited to, a direct live-family line that operates during school hours for family-based emergencies to ensure a family can reach an adult quickly and talk through how their child will be notified and supported.

Schools should treat family emergencies with urgency and ensure that students have the information and the support needed to manage a family-based emergency. Each school should share their family-based emergency school plan procedures at opening school meetings, new student orientation and posted on the website. These plans should also include **non-emergency family protocols** for changes in schedules, pick up/drop off, or forgotten items that need to be delivered to the school. For example, schools may set up a dedicated monitored email to which families could correspond with the school where all non-emergency, but timely, updates are shared that are monitored by staff throughout the day.

## Local School Division Policy Considerations

A local school division's governing board must review the EO33 guidance and determine if revisions to existing cell phone and personal electronic communication device policies are needed. If a school division does not have a plan or needs to make revisions, the local school division should involve stakeholders, especially parents and teachers, in developing new local school division policy and procedures or revising current policies and procedures to at minimum meet this guidance. Surveys and public comment forums may be effective means of engaging stakeholders, as well as public meetings.

School leaders must put in practices and procedures that allow teachers to focus on classroom instruction and not manage cell phone usage class to class.

School divisions are encouraged to use this guidance as the floor for their work and to utilize resources and research on mental and physical health effects to our youth and their academic learning to inform community conversations. Culture change on youth cell phone and social media use can begin at the school but requires a broader community discussion and shift in use, including at home. Parents matter and have a responsibility in this discussion to help share in the efforts to keep their kids safe from the mental health issues that come from their child's overuse of cell phones and social media.

A comprehensive policy development process should also include educational programs for students, parents, and educators about the need for and benefits of cell phone-free education and strategies for managing the use of cell phones and personal electronic communication devices outside of school hours.

A list of family, community and school-based resources including specific protocols for exclusionary needs, safety and implementation will continue [to be available on the VDOE Website.](#)



School divisions are expected to review their existing policies and, if necessary, adopt and implement age-appropriate policies and procedures aligned with the guidance on the bell-to-bell cell phone policies by **January 1, 2025**. School divisions may adopt policies that are more comprehensive than the guidance.

The VDOE and its partner agencies expect to conduct a review process at the end of the 2024-2025 school year to measure the guidance's impact and consider opportunities for refinement and improvement

# **Appendix: School Safety Considerations for Virginia Public Schools**

## School Safety Considerations for Virginia Public Schools

Virginia has a long history of being proactive on school safety and has taken a strong stance in ensuring that evidence-based practices are put into place in our schools. Per [§ 22.1-279.8](#), school division and school building leaders must review, revise, and adopt annually emergency procedures and contingency plans in alignment with the best practices outlined in the [DCJS Division Guide for Crisis Management](#).

Each school must submit a copy of its school safety audit to the relevant school division superintendent and the superintendent must submit and certify all such school safety audits to the DCJS Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety. Each school board must ensure that every school it supervises develops a written school crisis, emergency management, and medical emergency response plan, consistent with the definition provided in this section, and includes the chief law-enforcement officer, the fire chief, the chief of the emergency medical services agency, the executive director of the relevant regional emergency medical services council, and the emergency management official of the locality, or their designees, in the development of such plans.

These plans must be readily familiar to school leaders, and principals and school leaders must be able to clearly articulate the protocols in place should a school-based emergency occur. The department recommends that school division and school staff practice these plans in simulations throughout the year. Regular practice ensures that school leaders and school staff will be prepared during an emergency situation.

The local school board and the chief law-enforcement officer, the fire chief, the chief of the emergency medical services agency, the executive director of the relevant regional emergency medical services council, and the emergency management official of the locality, or their designees, must annually review the written school crisis, emergency management, and medical emergency response plans.

School leaders must work in close collaboration with their division leadership and local first responders and emergency planning officials to create crisis and contingency plans for school-based emergencies that incorporate Cell Phone-Free Education. School leaders and divisions should create structures for ongoing and consistent communication in and throughout a school-based emergency with local emergency officials with regular meetings to discuss school emergency planning.

School divisions must publicly share (1) how school-based personnel are trained to manage crisis and emergency situations, (2) re-unification plans, and (3) family notification processes during and through school-based crisis situations.

- These communications should be distributed using processes most regularly used by the school, including email, telephone, website, and social media posting.
- Communication should avoid jargon to the greatest extent possible and written with families in mind.

- Schools must also ensure that families who do not have access to the internet or electronic devices will also need this information. As such, distribution of this information through the US Postal Service should be considered on an annual basis.

As school divisions update these plans, division and school leaders must review their communication practices to ensure their communication procedures reassure families and community members during any emergency situations.

## Student Threats

While Virginia provides the national model for ensuring that students who may exhibit threatening behavior and may result in a danger to school be identified and supported, schools and school divisions must continue to review and enhance practices to ensure preparedness.

The [Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines](#) (CSTAG), developed in 2001 by the University of Virginia and known as the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines until 2018, is an evidence-based model for schools to use in conducting threat assessments of students. This model has been rigorously evaluated in controlled studies and large-scale implementation studies involving thousands of schools in multiple states. In 2013 this model became the only threat assessment model to be recognized as an evidence-based practice by the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices.

### ***Additional Considerations for School Safety:***

- Schools must notify parents at the start of the school year about any updates to the annual crisis emergency plan and clearly outline the communications plan for parent notification should a school-based emergency or crisis occur, including any relevant or timely follow-up information regarding a school-based emergency event.
- Crisis plans should be revised to ensure that student use of cell phones is not a component of an emergency plan.
- Crisis plans should clearly outline the dangers of student cell phone use and should incorporate that discussion in safety drills so that educators can remind students of the importance of focusing on the adult and following their safety instructions.
- School wide drills must be completed per the minimum criteria outlined in the Code of Virginia ([Fire drills](#), [Tornado drills](#), [Lock-down drills](#)). Schools should consider conducting drills at a more frequent interval to ensure that all stakeholders are well-prepared for emergencies.
- Schools must ensure that training occurs for staff and that students also participate in practice drills.
- School safety training and discussions related to crisis planning should be a part of each school's meetings with faculty to ensure clarity of established crisis processes.
- As part of school safety drills, school teams and division teams should also conduct scenario driven, tabletop exercises at least two times a year to evaluate crisis plans. These

scenarios should involve Cell Phone-Free Education instructions and incorporate emergency plans that communicate safety drills for students that do not have their cell phone.

- Parent re-unification and communications plans should be incorporated into the school and school division's crisis planning process, ensuring that parents of students who are directly impacted or critically injured are contacted directly versus through a mass communication system or recording.
  - Schools should have backup documents in hard copy with student and parent contact information in case electronic access is not available during a crisis.
  - Each teacher, administrator, and school health official (nurse) should have a portable, hard copy that is regularly updated and can be used to contact families in an emergency.
  - This communication should be made through mechanisms used regularly by the school. Consideration must be given to families who do not have electronic access via the internet.

### ***Safety Resource Links***

[Virginia Educators Guide for Planning and Conducting School Emergency Drills](#)

[DCJS Division Guide for Crisis Management Planning](#)

[UVA Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines](#)

#### School-based Emergency Communications Strategies

School divisions must be thoughtful in their planning for how to communicate with families and their community during a school-based crisis. When a crisis occurs, too often communications take a back seat during the emergency. This is a failure to successfully plan and implement the planning. But in an emergency, planning, accompanied with pre-designed communication templates, sets the protocols and standardizes the process on how to consistently communicate to families and the larger school community throughout the emergency- a vital part of emergency response.

A comprehensive emergency response plan requires significant forethought and clearly outlines communication plans and strategies. School divisions should decide before a crisis occurs:

- **Who is going to be responsible for communicating during the crisis?**
  - Parents prefer to hear from their own school, but if the event is occurring at the school, consider that it is unlikely that school leaders will be well-positioned during the crisis to communicate with families. They may be focused solely on the safety of the students in the building. If that is the case, who at the central office or in division administration will be responsible for maintaining communications with families during and after any school-based crisis?
  - This needs to be decided as part of a school emergency plan before the school-based crisis occurs.

- **How are school leaders going to communicate during and throughout the crisis?**
  - What are the best ways to communicate directly to school families and community?
    - What communications channels and outlets will be used? Is there a need to differentiate between channels depending on the type of crisis and in what combination?

Options could include:

      - Text messages or push alert
      - Automated phone calls
      - Email
      - Division or school website
      - Parent-focused social media such as Facebook/Instagram/Twitter
      - School-based parent app such Parent Square or ClassDojo
      - Local media outlets
  - As part of the planning and coordination with local law enforcement agencies, schools should consider having a procedure in place to activate the local reverse 911 system to ensure that notification goes to the entire community, not only the designated family members.
  - Consider where the school’s families typically learn new information. Is there a local website or community message board (e.g. Nextdoor) that would be a place families would seek out information? If so, include it in the communication channels being used.
  - Also consider who in the school organization has the passwords or login credentials for each option. The time to be trying to remember a particular account login or password is not during the crisis.
  - Emergency conditions can result in power outages, cell phone network overloads, or other conditions that may limit the choice of technologies. Be prepared to choose lower-tech methods to support communication efforts if necessary.
  - This all needs to be decided as part of a school emergency plan before the crisis occurs.
- **To whom is the communication aimed?**
  - Depending on what communication channels are chosen, schools may be able to differentiate their audience. Every issue may not require communicating to the entire division’s parents. Think of the different scenarios that may occur and decide for each to whom the school wants to communicate directly. Options could include:

- All the families in the division
  - All the families at that school
  - All the families from that bus or buses
  - Families at that grade level in the school
  - Families in that particular classroom
- This needs to be decided as part of a school emergency plan before the crisis occurs.
- Once it is decided **Who is going to be responsible, How** and **To Whom** school leaders want to communicate, build the contact lists needed to communicate effectively during the crisis.
  - In addition to collecting and sorting the individual contact information for families, consider factors such as:
    - When will this information be collected this information and how often do should these lists be updated?
      - Who is going to be responsible for making sure the lists are updated, including adding newly enrolled families to these lists during the school year?
    - Does this information need to re-verified with families during the school year?
      - The start of the second semester is a natural point of the school year to re-verify family contact information. Families' preferred phone numbers and emails may change during the school year. Be proactive about making sure schools have the best way to contact their families.
    - Where is this contact information going to be stored?
      - Assuming that this family contact information is stored in a database or in a preset communication channel, who has access to these lists? Will they need to retrieve this information from the database to communicate, and if so, does the individual(s) responsible for communicating during the crisis have the necessary credentials to access the list?
      - If not storing this information in a central database, where is it being stored and who will have access to it during the emergency? A contact list stored at an individual school or with an individual staff member likely may be inaccessible during a crisis. Consider multiple access options to ensure someone not managing the emergency can access the contact list.
  - This needs to be decided as part of a school emergency plan before the crisis occurs.
- **Who will be the communicator?**

- Decide who is best to communicate consistently and clearly in an emergency situation. It could be the division superintendent, the principal, or a division spokesperson.
  - Different emergency situations may call for different voices.
  - If the principal is not available to be the primary communicator to school families, they may be available after the school-based emergency to assume that role.
- This needs to be decided as part of a school emergency plan before the crisis occurs.

As part of planning, consider how often the school will communicate during an emergency. Time to communicate during a school-based emergency is limited, and often the urgency of the situation takes priority over the ability to know every detail of the emergency in real-time. Therefore, a school and school division should identify the communications liaison in emergency situations. This is true for the communicator as well as for the families receiving the information.

### ***Emergency communications considerations:***

- Match the speed and frequency of the emergency to how quickly and often school leaders communicate to their audience to the level of the emergency situation. E.g. Lock downs and school shooter situations should have communications as frequent as every ten minutes.
- Eliminate delays in communications by creating message templates and identifying and establishing activation criteria to guide when and to whom school leaders communicate.
- Overcommunicate with school families during an emergency situation. Provide correct, comprehensive, relevant, and specific messaging. Err on the side of overcommunicating when dealing with conflicting or uncertain situations.
- Be as accurate and specific in school leader communications as possible. If something is unclear or uncertain regarding the emergency, do not fear admitting that to be the case. Be transparent with the current situation as it can help reduce misinformation from being spread about the situation.
- Do not withhold information unnecessarily. Withholding information serves to inspire distrust, encourage conspiracy theories, and forces people to seek information from other less reliable sources.
- Once the school emergency plan is in place, share the emergency plans and procedures with parents and the community. Being proactive in sharing these procedures before an emergency occurs helps to build confidence that the school division and school will respond appropriately and helps parents know what to anticipate should an emergency occur.



Alexandria City Public Schools has created a suite of resources that discuss how to handle different kinds of emergencies including:

- Securing The Building
- Evacuation
- Lockdown
- Shelter In Place

#### [Emergency Management Video Series - Alexandria City Public Schools](#)

Alexandria City Public Schools has created a model for informing parents how to expect to receive communications during and following an emergency. [The information they have published for parents is clear, concise and comprehensive.](#) They have also accounted for their diverse student and family population and published the information in [Español](#), [Amharic አማርኛ](#), [Arabic بالعربية](#), and [Dari دری](#) to assist their non-English language families and help them have confidence in the division in case of an emergency.

Another model example is Harrisonburg City Schools, who has set up and informed parents of a color-code system for situational awareness of any school-based emergency situation.



We have also developed enhanced communication procedures in the event of a school safety incident. We will be using a color-coded alert system to notify staff and families. If there is an incident at your child’s school, you will be notified of the incident color code and instructed to visit our website where we will post additional information as it becomes available. During an incident, please refrain from coming to the school so that emergency personnel can safely access the campus. For your reference, the color code alerts are listed below and will also be available at the link provided during an incident.

- Code Red: Everyone behind locked doors, lights off, quiet
- Code Orange: Everyone behind locked doors, instruction continues
- Code Yellow: Everyone inside the building
- Code Green: All clear, back to normal operations

In case of a school-based emergency, school divisions and public schools need to communicate with parents during every situation. Too often parents do not learn about an incident until hours or even days after the emergency event. School divisions and schools need clear communication plans and strategies in their comprehensive emergency response plans, and they need to follow those plans consistently **every time** there is an emergency situation.

Communications needs to be a priority in these situations, and the time to think about how to communicate is not when the emergency occurs. These plans and strategies need to be considered in advance, and division and school leadership need to understand exactly what they should do to communicate clearly and effectively with parents.

In these school-based emergency situations, parents want to know if their child is safe and where they can reunite with their child. Communicating with parents and the school community during and through the school-based emergency **must** be a top priority when these situations occur.

## Sample Communications Examples and Model Templates

A number of school divisions have excellent examples of communications and communication templates that can serve as models in preparations for school-based emergency situations. We appreciate these school divisions sharing their examples.

### *Washington County Public Schools Threat Communications Examples*

#### Initial Message in Online Threat Situation

Good morning Wallace Middle School Families --

We wanted to make you aware that we have received information that rumors have been circulating on social media about a potential school threat. At this time, those rumors are not believed to be credible. Out of an abundance of caution, we will have an increased law enforcement presence and operating on a Safety First Protocol. In addition to the Washington County Sheriff's Office, the U.S. Marshals Service are investigating the threat.

#### Follow Up Message

We wanted to provide you with an update on the increased safety and security at High Point Elementary School, E.B. Stanley Middle School, Wallace Middle School and John S. Battle High School this morning. We are blessed to live in a community where safety is a top priority, and we are incredibly grateful for our law enforcement partners who provided a quick response. Through the great collaboration of the Washington County Sheriff's Office, U.S. Marshals Service, Virginia State Police and the Abingdon Police Department, a suspect has been identified behind the threats posted to social media and is in custody. We have determined that the threat was never credible, however all agencies involved treated it as if it were. We will continue to work with our law enforcement agencies to ensure the safety and security of our students and staff. We would also like to thank the staff members at our schools for their work to keep students calm and safe as the investigation was ongoing. Be sure to extend your thanks to our staff and law enforcement agencies involved next time you have a chance.

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#### Other Washington County Public Schools Example

Good afternoon WCPS Families and Staff,

Washington County Public Schools is aware of the reported TikTok post circulating this week that references a threat to schools. It appears this is part of a viral trend that has affected schools and school divisions both locally and nationwide.

We have been in contact with our great law enforcement partners around the clock, as these threats and social media posts were investigated. We do not believe there is a credible threat to school safety.

We take these threats very seriously, as the safety and well-being of our students and staff is our top priority. We encourage anyone who sees or hears anything that could represent a potential school safety issue to immediately notify a teacher, staff member, or administrator immediately. We thank our students that did report the social media posts this week. Thank you to our law

enforcement agencies and staff for the critical role they played and continue to play in ensuring the safety and security of our school division.

## ***Alexandria City Public Schools Emergency Communications Examples***

Alexandria City Public Schools has templates prepared for various emergency situations. Some examples include:

### **Active Shooter Threat**

**Subject:** Active Shooter at [school] on [date]

There is an active shooter threat at [school] on [date]. For the safety and security of our students and staff, [school] is currently on [lockdown status](#) due to this active shooter threat. The Alexandria Police Department (APD) is currently at the school working with the school administration and school security to provide safety and determine next steps. More details to follow when the threat assessment is complete.

As always, during an emergency situation, we ask that you not call or text your child. The first priority for staff is to address the threat and ensure that all students are safe. Phone calls can distract from this priority and may potentially alert an intruder to the location of a student. The ACPS Office of Communications will communicate with families as soon as possible.

The safety and security of our students and staff is the most important priority.

We will continue to communicate via text, email, and the school website at [\[www.acps.k12.va.us/school\]](#) to provide the most up-to-date information.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

## Altercation at School

**Subject:** [School] Students Involved in Altercation on School Grounds on [date]

At [time] on [date], students at [school] were involved in an altercation on school grounds. School administrators and building security quickly intervened to bring control to the situation and assure the safety of all students and staff in the building. [Due to the nature of the altercation, the Alexandria Police Department (APD) was called.]

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) is committed to maintaining a safe and secure learning environment for all. When students are involved in altercations, on or off school grounds, ACPS will take immediate and appropriate action to ensure a safe learning environment for the entire student body and staff. Further, ACPS and school officials will address issues of student conduct and responsibility and, if necessary, involve the APD if the situation continues to escalate or poses an ongoing threat.

Updates will be sent as details of the altercation become available and actions are taken by ACPS and school administrators. [[www.acps.k12.va.us/school](http://www.acps.k12.va.us/school)]

Thank you.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

## Evacuation – Smell of Gas

**Subject:** [School name] students were briefly evacuated due to a report of the smell of gas

Dear [School Name] Staff and Families,

Students and staff were evacuated at about [time] today from [School Name] upon the report of a smell of gas in the building. The Alexandria Fire Department (AFD) has been notified to investigate this report and cleared the building for return by [time].

The evacuation was conducted in a safe and orderly manner and the school has resumed a normal operating schedule.

We appreciate the quick response and assistance of the AFD. The ACPS Office of Safety and Security has an emergency management video series available online in multiple languages to help stakeholders understand [the ACPS protocol for school evacuations](#).

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

## Evacuation – Fire Alarm

**Subject:** [School Name] briefly evacuated due to a false fire alarm. Normal operations have resumed

Dear [School Name] Families and Staff,

At approximately [Time] today, the fire alarm was activated at [School Name]. Students and staff evacuated the building in a safe and orderly manner as a precaution. The Alexandria Fire Department (AFD) responded and, upon investigation, determined that one of the pull stations had been activated, causing the alarm to sound.

After approximately [Time], students and staff were allowed to return to the building after the AFD cleared the facility, and normal operations resumed.

We appreciate the quick response and assistance of the AFD. The ACPS Office of Safety and Security has an emergency management video series available online in multiple languages to help stakeholders understand [the ACPS protocol for school evacuations](#).

Sincerely,

[Principal contact Information]

## Lockdown/Shelter-in-Place

**Subject:** Lockdown Status at [School Name]

Dear [School Name] Staff and Families,

For the safety and security of our students and staff at [School Name] is currently on **Lockdown Status** due to an anonymous threat. The Alexandria Police Department (APD) is currently at the school conducting a threat assessment to determine credibility. More details to follow when the threat assessment is complete.

As always, during an emergency situation, the first priority for staff is to address the threat and ensure that all students are safe. While we understand your obvious concern, phone calls can distract from this priority. The ACPS Office of Communications will communicate with families as soon as possible.

The safety and security of our students and staff is the most important priority.

We will continue to communicate via text, email and the school website at [Link to School Website] to provide the most up-to-date information.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

## Power Outage

**Subject:** Power outage at [school] today

There is a power outage at [school]. Dominion Energy is responding to the outage. The building is safe. Students and staff will remain in the building and the instructional day will continue. Teaching staff may need to modify instruction. Lunch service may also need to be modified as a hot lunch may not be available.

The safety of our students and staff is of utmost priority.

Thank you for your patience and understanding. We will continue to update families via text, email and the school website at [[www.acps.k12.va.us/school](http://www.acps.k12.va.us/school)] as more information becomes available.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

## Secure the Building

**Subject:** [School Name] was briefly placed in “secure the building” status today

Dear [School Name] Staff and Families,

At about [Time] today, [School Name] was placed in “secure the building” status for approximately [Time] due to [Incident Information]. The Alexandria Police Department was on site to investigate the situation and reported no threat to the school, which has now resumed normal operations.

The decision to secure [School Name] was taken out of an abundance of caution. “Secure the building” means that the school day continues on a normal schedule inside the school but no one is allowed to enter or leave the school while the building remains secured. An [Alexandria City Public Schools video](#) provides more information on what happens when a school is placed in “secure the building” status.

The safety and security of our students and staff are of utmost priority.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]



## Social Media Threat

**Subject:** Social Media Safety Threat to [school] on [date]

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) received a report at [time] about a threat posted on social media targeting [school]. We are working with the Alexandria Police Department (APD) to investigate the threat report. [School] is currently on “[Secure the Building](#)” status which means that the school day operates on normal status inside the building, but no one is allowed to enter or leave the school campus while the building remains secured.

Updates will be shared as more information becomes available. Thank you for your patience.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

## Threat Investigation

**Subject:** Safety Threat to [school] on [date]

[School] staff was informed at [time] on [date] about a threat to school safety [by a student] [by an individual] [by a group]. The Alexandria Police Department (APD) was notified and an investigation was immediately initiated. The individual has been identified and the threat has ended. APD has determined that the school will be safe for students and staff tomorrow. Please continue to send your child to school as usual tomorrow. ACPS will increase its security presence at the school as a precaution.

Please be assured that ACPS takes any threat to our schools or facilities very seriously and any threat to the school is always investigated. Safety is always a top priority at ACPS and we will always put the safety of our students and staff above everything else.

Children react in many different ways to incidents such as these. If your child shares with you that they feel nervous about attending school, please contact your school counselor. School counselors and the Student Support Team (SST) will be on hand to provide additional support for any student who needs it.

We will continue to communicate via text, twitter, email and the school website as more information becomes available. [www.acps.k12.va.us/school](http://www.acps.k12.va.us/school)


Thank you for your patience.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

## Chesapeake Public Schools Emergency Messaging Template

Chesapeake Public Schools has a well-designed [Crisis Communications Messaging Template](#) for tracking and helping develop emergency communications. The template can be modified for individual school division's needs.



### CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Level 2 Lockdown - (Name) School  
November 30, 2023

| Who  | Status         | Action/Task             |
|------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Name | In development | Text School Board       |
| Name | Under review   | Communications Advisory |
| Name | Under review   | PAS Message to Families |
| Name | N/A            | Press Release           |

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**Text School Board**

FYI: (NAME) School is currently in a Level 2 lockdown in response to the report of possible shots fired near the school building. We will provide additional updates as they become available.

Update: The lockdown was lifted after approximately 12 minutes after police determined there was no longer a threat in the area.

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**Communications Advisory**

TO: School Board, Cabinet, & Communications  
SEND VIA: Gmail from (email address)  
TIMING: Send on Oct 26, 2023 12:00 AM

Good afternoon,  
The PAS message below will be shared with the (school) community at 11:45 AM today.

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**Intermediate School: Level 2 Lockdown - November 30, 2023**

Good afternoon, this is (name) principal of (school), with an important message. This morning, the Chesapeake Police Department informed us that there were gunshots in the neighboring area. As a precaution, the school was placed in a Level 2 lockdown. During a level two lockdown, all students continue with their instruction indoors while classroom and exterior doors remain locked.

After approximately twelve minutes, the police gave us an all-clear, the lockdown was lifted, and we resumed our school day. Please know that safety is always our top priority.

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**PAS Message to Families**

**Intermediate School: Level 2 Lockdown - November 30, 2023**

Good afternoon, this is LC, principal of \_\_\_\_\_ Intermediate School, with an important message. This morning, the Chesapeake Police Department informed us that there were gunshots in the neighboring area. As a precaution, the school was placed in a Level 2 lockdown. During a level two lockdown, all students continue with their instruction indoors while classroom and exterior doors remain locked.

After approximately twelve minutes, the police gave us an all-clear, the lockdown was lifted, and we resumed our school day. Please know that safety is always our top priority.

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**Press Release**