

Coronavirus (COVID-19): top PR tips on dealing with positive cases within your school

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The spread of coronavirus across the UK has created an epidemic of reactions. But when it comes to schools, it is imperative you remain calm and organised in order to communicate effectively with your community.

Being prepared in your risk communications will have positive effects on your community relations and can help to ensure correct procedures are followed at all times, thereby minimising the risks of transmission.

This article outlines some useful tips to ensure you can deal with media attention surrounding coronavirus – in particular, when you have positive cases within the school.

Create a team

Put together a case-response team to ensure that all cases are dealt with consistently and effectively. Consider having the following roles within your team:

- Marketing officer – or a member of the SLT with marketing responsibility
- Headteacher
- School liaison officer
- Chief operations officer/SBM

Keeping the team small will ensure communication is kept clear and consistent and that cases are managed effectively and in a timely manner. Depending on who is involved in the case, you may also wish to include HR (for cases involving staff) or the head of year (for cases involving pupils).

Make sure that your team meets on a weekly basis to monitor the situation closely and to remain compliant with any government updates.

Liaise with the government and LAs

Your team needs to be in contact with your LA and other relevant government authorities. You need to ensure that at least one person within the team is tasked with monitoring any guidance

relating to schools and relaying this information accordingly across the team. The team can then put together a plan, if required.

Sign up to DfE and LA email updates, check reputable news sources regularly and make yourself known to the Director of Education within your LA. Having a relationship with this person will ensure that you have someone to go to should you need to seek reassurance, or additional support with a case or regulation.

Be transparent and consistent

Be open and honest with your community – especially internally. Try to share as much information as possible to ensure everyone understands what the situation is. If you decide to close the school, or send home a bubble to isolate, then these decisions may not be met with popularity. It is critical, however, to share with your community the logic and evidence behind the decisions, while paying due regard at all times for privacy and the confidentiality of individuals.

When you put together your communications plan, you need to ensure you stick to it and that it is consistent across the board. There is a great deal of uncertainty at the current time surrounding school operations, so if you initiate a plan, for instance, to send out a message every Friday, ensure you stick to it. Even if you have nothing to report on for that week, let parents know this. Having consistent, constant and transparent messaging will make parents feel reassured that the school is handling the situation competently. It also allows parents to get in contact should they have any concerns; these can then be dealt with the moment they arise to help minimise any issues or negative backlash.

Maintain internal communications

It must be a priority to ensure that a clear plan is communicated to all staff within the school. Staff need to understand what is expected of them in the event of a positive case within the school, and the steps they should take. Staff within the school, both teaching and support, will all have different points of contact with parents – there needs to be a strict and clear procedure in place if a positive coronavirus result is reported to the school.

This information needs to be clearly passed on to the case-response team and then addressed accordingly. Staff need to understand what information they should pass on to parents upon receiving notification of a positive case in the school community, and also what information to ascertain in order to inform the case-response team of the situation.

As with your community, you need to be consistent with your internal communications. Consider having a daily bulletin sent out to all staff updating them on procedures, positive cases, and staff expectations.

Receiving a positive test result can create panic amongst pupils and staff and this needs to be managed to reduce anxiety and incorrect information being disseminated.

What to do if there is a positive case

You need to put together a solid plan that is consistent and adhered to at all times. A plan could include the steps laid out in the exemplar list below:

- Case-response team has a meeting to discuss the situation and impact of possible infection.
- Identify close contacts who may need to self-isolate in conjunction with the relevant authorities – support bubble, entire year, certain members of staff, or even the entire school.
- Inform all internal staff that there has been a positive case within the school and the actions that are to take place following this.
- Send out a letter to parents who will be directly affected by the positive case; for instance, if their child now must self-isolate. Include information on the incident, and the steps that are being taken by the school to minimise risk to the community. If their child must self-isolate, be clear on the expectations, when they can safely return to school, and what to do if their child also tests positive. Give them a point of contact if they wish to discuss any issues further.
- Send out a letter to all other parents in the school that are not directly affected by the results. Inform them that there has been a positive case and explain the actions you have taken as a consequence. Reassure parents that this decision has been made in line with government and LA guidance and that they can get in touch with a point of contact if they wish to discuss any issues further.
- At all times, the privacy and confidentiality of individuals who test positive should be maintained. This is extremely sensitive information and all efforts from staff should be taken to ensure the identity of the student remains confidential.

What to do if there is media attention

In the unlikely situation that there is media attention on your school due to a coronavirus outbreak, then you need to ensure you are prepared to deal with any questions. Do not shy away from the media. It is imperative that they receive accurate information from the school, and that the school has an opportunity to give a supporting statement.

The case-response team should deal with all media and press enquires and, as with all other stakeholders within the school, a clear and consistent communications plan should be devised. It is highly unlikely that you will receive negative press; however, if you do not have a clear and concise communications plan and set of procedures in place, then this may reflect poorly on the school.

Support your community's emotional wellbeing

This is an extremely uncertain and difficult time for many families. People are having to quarantine, miss key events, and go months without seeing their loved ones – all of which are major stress factors. Supporting the emotional wellbeing of your staff and pupils should be paramount to the school. This could involve providing counselling for staff, issuing messaging around how to manage your emotions, and providing tips for talking to children about coronavirus.

Ensuring staff understand their responsibilities with remote learning is a major aspect of how you can support their emotional wellbeing. If they do not feel confident with this manner of teaching, then it will only add further to their stress.

Ensure pupils are given reassuring messaging during assemblies, tutor times and other key points of the school day. Let them know that the school is taking procedures extremely seriously to ensure their safety is maintained at all times. It is also important staff and pupils are given opportunities to discuss any concerns they may have with a trusted authority figure.

Make sure you share the positive! Use social media and your website to share uplifting stories and keep your communities connected. Little stories of how people are developing, how much more independent pupils are becoming and how teachers are doing amazing things should be applauded and regularly communicated.

What's next?

Take a look at some of the other resources on TheSchoolBus to help you implement and manage the tips in this article.

- Our [Letter to Parents Informing Them of a Confirmed Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Case in School](#) can help you communicate calmly and effectively with members of the school community.
- Our [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Parent Handbook](#) and [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Staff Handbook](#) can help ensure you keep your school community informed of your infection control measures and the support structures in place.
- Our [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Staff Wellbeing Survey](#) can assist you in ensuring you are effectively supporting staff wellbeing during this challenging time.

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