

How ACPS Communicates in Emergency or Crisis Situations



The Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) Office of Communications communicates with families in a timely manner about emergency or crisis situations. This information can help families understand when and how to expect communications from ACPS in specific situations.

How Does ACPS Communicate in Emergency or Crisis Situations?

Depending on the circumstances, there are times when we communicate with all families within the school division; all families at a school; all families in a specific grade or classroom at a school; or only the families of students involved in a situation.

- Messages may come from the superintendent, a department leader or a school principal.
- These communications are typically sent via email and text messages, often using the ParentSquare platform to ensure it reaches all families and is in their preferred language.
- Depending on the situation, information may also be shared through other communication channels such as social media, web pop-up messages and communication to local news outlets.

How and with Whom Does ACPS Communicate in Emergency or Crisis Situations?

- The families of students specifically affected by a situation –i.e. a bus accident–are always informed as soon as possible about the situation and its resolution.
- Families of students involved in an altercation, policy violation or other incident pertaining to safety are notified directly by school administration. These situations are not always communicated to other families, depending on threat assessment and student privacy considerations.

Factors considered in ACPS emergency or crisis communications include:



Whether there is a potential threat to safety which may impact students.



If there is a disruption to normal operations that could affect families.



Student privacy and law enforcement investigations.



Whether a threat is school-specific or division-wide (in regards to whomever receives the communication).

If the following are present, then families can expect to receive communications from ACPS:



There is a potential risk or threat to the safety and security of students and staff.



Their child may be impacted by a situation in the classroom, school or bus or in the nearby vicinity.



There is a change to normal operations that will affect families, particularly with bus pick-up, drop-off and dismissal.

What Information is Included in ACPS Emergency or Crisis Communications?

- Information and input for emergency or crisis communications comes from the departments and schools involved—including the ACPS Office of Safety and Security Services—and any external entities that may be providing assistance such as the Alexandria Police Department, the Alexandria Fire Department, Dominion Energy and others as needed.
- Messages are reviewed by the principal and senior leaders and are approved by the superintendent before distribution via ACPS communication channels.
- Messages typically explain the situation, the current status, an approximate time frame and continuous updates to families, as needed.
- If a school is in “lockdown,” “secure the building,” or “evacuation” status, families from that school will be notified as quickly as possible and will be updated when normal operations resume.
- Some examples of the most common emergency situations that ACPS typically communicates about to families include:
 - Bus delays of 15 minutes or more.
 - Power, phone line or internet services outages and water shut-offs/floods.
 - Inclement weather creating the need for school cancellation or delays or cancellation of an event on school grounds.
 - Bus accidents or breakdowns, especially when students are on board.
 - Fire alarms, incidents and building evacuations.
 - “Secure the building” status of a school or building due to nearby police activity or another potential threat
- Communications for less commonly occurring emergency situations that would be shared with families in a specific classroom, grade or school include:
 - “Lockdown” or “secure the building” status due to a threat.
 - Discovery of a real or toy weapon at school.
 - Any observed patterns of social media pranks or threats targeting school buildings and/or students and staff.

What is Not Included in Emergency or Crisis Communications to Families?

- Student information – ACPS is legally bound to protect student privacy and will not share information that can identify an individual student or students. Please visit the web page for more information on the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#).
- Any information that could potentially impede ongoing law enforcement investigations.
- Information is not sent to all families in ACPS or a school if a situation is not considered to be a safety threat beyond a certain classroom, bus or grade level, but only to the families of students in the identified classroom, grade or bus.
- If there is no safety threat or major disruption to normal operations for a school—for example, in the case of an individual’s medical emergency or in the event of a fight or injury on school grounds that only affects the people involved, then no information will be provided to families other than to those of the individuals involved.

Our Communications Response Process



Examples of ACPS Communications in Specific Situations*

Examples of Situations	Examples of Who Receives ACPS Communications in Specific Situations						How the ACPS Communications are Sent						
	Families from the bus or buses involved	Families at affected school	All ACPS families	Families of the students involved in the situation	Families from one classroom	Families of one grade level	Email and text via ParentSquare	Web pop-up message	Social media	Local news outlets	School admins will contact the identified families	If secondary students: message in Canvas	Activity or alleged activity that could be considered a crime, per the law, is reported to law enforcement
FACILITIES AND OPERATIONS													
School division closure, delay or school event cancellation due to inclement weather		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓			
Bus accident or breakdown	✓						✓						
Power, phone lines or internet service outages and water shut-offs/floods		✓	✓ <i>If the outage affects the transportation office.</i>				✓	✓	✓				
Building evacuation due to fire alarm, gas leak or other facility issue affecting its operations		✓					✓	✓	✓				
“Lockdown” or “secure the building” status at a school		✓					✓ <i>Initial message and at least one update are sent.</i>	✓	✓	✓			
STUDENTS & STAFF													
Physical altercations				✓							✓ <i>If there is significant law enforcement intervention, then information will be communicated to all families at the school.</i>		
Discovery of a real or toy weapon on school grounds or on a school bus	✓	✓ <i>If applicable to entire school.</i>			✓	✓	✓						✓ <i>Depending on the situation</i>
Student or staff death		✓ <i>Only if permission is granted by the family of the deceased student or staff member. The cause/manner of death is not shared.</i>					✓			✓ <i>The message to families will be shared upon request.</i>		✓	
Reported criminal activity (i.e. sexual misconduct/assault; specific weapon types)				✓							✓		✓
Substance abuse/Overdose*				✓ <i>Specifics will not be shared with anyone else, in accordance with the <u>Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)</u> and <u>Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)</u>.</i>						✓ <i>Please note that this information is never shared with news outlets; any news reports are done without information from ACPS.</i>			

*Note: this list of examples is not exhaustive. It is intended to give families an understanding of when to expect communications from ACPS in specific situations.