

# SCHOOL LEADERSHIP WHITEPAPER



## SCHOOL EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION USING TEXT MESSAGING

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### INTRODUCTION

A well rehearsed emergency communication plan is vital for any crisis, and all schools, colleges and universities have some form of emergency procedures in place.

However, recent well publicised events around the world indicate that procedures for communication may need to be modernised.

The aim of this paper is help school leaders understand the options and implications of using text messaging as a proven, ubiquitous, easy to use, fast broadcast tool appropriate for use in the event of a lockdown or emergency.

It is important to stress that the paper is intended to complement not contravene or replace guidelines provided to schools by State Governments, District Education Authorities and Local Education Boards. Schools are advised to check with relevant authorities before modifying existing practices.

### COMMUNICATION IN AN EMERGENCY

A communication plan needs to be developed to:

- take command and control of the emergency
- ensure the most appropriate decisions are made to restore order
- ensure the safety of those immediately affected by the emergency
- avoid confusion and panic
- deal effectively with the inevitable scrutiny after the event

In developing the plan, leaders need to consider the following factors:

- What information is required by each person affected by the emergency?
- What is the sequence of communicating with all relevant persons?
- What is the most effective and efficient communication medium to deliver information in the time required?
- Is there an audit trail of critical communications?

Appendix 1 to this White Paper provides an example of a communication plan. This demonstrates how text messaging can be integrated with existing or new emergency communication systems.

## TEXT MESSAGING OPTION

Text messaging offers some very specific advantages over existing communication strategies, such as:

- High speed short message communication from one to several thousand people in a matter of minutes (depending on individual telecommunications services)
- Capacity to prepare in advance the wording of communications and the list of recipients
- Relatively inexpensive, compared with other communication methods
- An audit trail of all messages sent and received
- Does not require phone lines, leaving these unblocked for other important purposes
- Speed of communication allows pre-emptive action by the school, minimising confusion and panic
- Not susceptible to third party intervention (e.g. voice on mobile phones can be intercepted, as can police short wave radio)
- Can be conducted in a relatively covert manner (ie ,without audio)

## AVOIDING MISCOMMUNICATION

Schools need to communicate with accuracy and high speed – especially when it is so easy for students to use their personal mobile phones to send and receive phone and text messages. This means parents and the mass media could easily be misinformed.

Like all technology solutions, text messaging needs to be used by school leaders in the most appropriate way, with sufficient preparation of emergency text messages.

The following strategies are advised for schools that use an MGM communication platform.

### **Advance Preparation.**

- *Maintain up-to-date mobile phone numbers* for parents, staff, students and anyone else whom the school plans to send a text message (e.g., District Superintendent).
- Ensure there is an *alternative communication method* available for those for whom the school does not have a mobile phone number.
- Ensure you have leadership approved messages available for staff. These can be quickly deployed, knowing the wording has been carefully constructed to avoid confusion.
- *Multi-skill* - ensure there is more than one front office staff member who has practice sending a 'manual' or broadcast message
- Establish a *chain of command* to enable authorized people to understand when and to whom they should send a text message when communicating in an emergency.
- *Prepare parents* and other potential recipients by sending them information about when text messages will be used in an emergency and how to authenticate a text message from the school, by checking the tail of the message, which has MGM contact details listed.
- Ensure key staff, students and parents have the *school's virtual mobile phone number* stored in their mobile phone contacts screen.
- *Practice in advance* of an emergency, so that everyone knows what to do when or if an emergency arises.

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## APPENDIX 1: TEXT MESSAGING & LOCKDOWNS

### Sample School Communication Plan using Text Messaging

Activity	Possible Communication Approach (Situations in which text messaging may appropriate)	Key Person(s)
<b>Stage 1 Emergency Notification</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Gathering Information to understand the extent of the emergency Ensure text message response times have been tested before this type of communication is used. Do not use text if other methods are an option.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Normally done by landline phone (where connected to each classroom) or by personal messenger (if safe).</li> <li>○ Use text in a dispersed campus / classroom, not connected to the front office by landline phone.</li> <li>○ When it is necessary to maintain relative silence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Any individual with a mobile phone sends a coded text message to the school's virtual mobile phone number with information about their circumstance.</li> <li>○ Front Office can receive and reply using messageyou™Schools.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Notify Appropriate Authority of an emergency 'event'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Principal out of the school and has cell phone turned to silent or meeting mode.</li> <li>○ Education District Officer or School Council / Board Chairperson other non -school site education authority needs to be notified of an event, but their mobile phone is not being answered (e.g. as above).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Person in charge of the school at the time authorizes the text message to be sent, requesting the Principal or District Officer or Board member to contact the school immediately (avoid details – use agreed codes).</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 2 Management During the Emergency</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ School Leader or Commander in charge of managing the emergency needs to communicate with disparate or isolated individual or group, who does not have landline phone access and needs to maintain relative silence.</li> <li>○ School Leader or Commander needs to give a warning or movement instructions to large groups of people (e.g. staff or students on campus)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Leader sends instructions or questions requiring Y / N type responses to the individual's mobile phone.</li> <li>○ Leader sends broadcast to relevant staff / students using agreed codes.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ School Leader needs to let parents know there is a lockdown or a school closure before they get misleading information from the Media or other less informed persons.</li> <li>○ School leader needs to tell parents that a bus route will not be operating (e.g. due to weather conditions or bushfire).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ School sends broadcast text message communicating minimum information required to allay parent fears OR redirect them to an authorised source for more detailed information (e.g. radio broadcast / e-mail - e-news / police report).</li> <li>○ Use agreed codes.</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 3 Stand Down &amp; Post emergency Communication.</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ School Leader needs to inform parents that the crisis is over and how they can access further information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ School sends a broadcast text message to parents redirecting them to more detailed information regarding the emergency and consequent issues (e.g. web site / letter)</li> <li>○ Use agreed codes.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ School Leader needs to account for the decisions taken during the emergency and show what efforts were taken to manage communication with all persons affected.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ School Leader prints off relevant communication summary reports from messageyou™Schools / WatchLists for use in required reports.</li> </ul>

**NOTE:**

In the attached communication plan, mention is made of communicating by text with students. This will only be possible where schools have elected to maintain student mobile phone numbers in their SIS and these have been linked to your MGM communication platform.

\* See MGM White Papers, 'Keeping Mobile Phones Up to Date' and "Winning the Hearts & Minds of Parents".