

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TO KEEP PARENTS OF PRIVATE
SCHOOLS UPDATED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The arrival of the COVID-19 virus in Hawaii in March 2020 required schools to go into lockdown to protect the health and safety of the students, faculty, and community. Schools were faced with new challenges – distance learning, enhanced safety measures, schedules, new technology. What methods are schools using to keep parents informed and engaged? What types of communication strategies are most effective when communicating with parents?

Effective communication is paramount in education. During a crisis, effective communication requires additional attention and care. In particular, COVID-19 is a health crisis that presents unique challenges for K-12 education, and consequently, school-parent communication. Although COVID-19 has had a noticeable impact on K-12 education, surprisingly little research has examined how K-12 schools communicate with parents as this health crisis unfolds. It is important to examine this topic because strong communication is essential to ensuring families feel supported during times of uncertainty.

To provide perspective on the importance of school communication and furthermore communication strategies during COVID-19, I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with 11 parents who currently have children studying in Hawaii's various private schools and 8 school leaders at various Hawaii private schools. Thematic analyses of interview transcripts showed that: asynchronous communication, synchronous communication, communication styles, specially trained personnel, and COVID-19 facts, were some key techniques and elements that private schools deployed when communicating about COVID-19 with parents. Implications of these findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis jolted school communications protocols. As the division head of Communications at a private school that serves roughly 800 students grades preschool through 12, I experienced the pressure to quickly pivot to meet the demands of this crisis. COVID brought fear, uncertainty, stress, and anxiety for everyone, especially parents who had children who were faced with a multitude of concerns – adjusted school schedules, safety, social emotional health, distance learning. Lockdowns and distance learning created additional communication barriers that schools were quickly required to work around.

As the world worked to adjust to the pandemic, schools faced a multitude of very unique challenges. Distance learning, enhanced safety measures, schedules, new technology, are just a few of the challenges that schools are facing. How did communications shift to ensure parents feel not only that they are receiving the value of their tuition payment, but also safe? What methods are schools currently using to keep parents informed and engaged? How have those methods needed to be adjusted during a pandemic, specifically COVID? What types of communication strategies are most effective when communicating with parents?

PK-12 schools are the most complex organizations in the U.S. economy. Board members, administrators, parents, and policy makers must understand that the models of leadership and management that may be effective in other businesses and organizations have to be adapted to the extraordinary realities of educational institutions. School leadership and management is far more complex than many parents, board members, policy makers, and pundits want to admit. Successfully navigating these organizational challenges requires an unusually high level of practical intelligence, emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and especially humility (Barron, 2019).

The complexities of school systems are what also contribute to the differences and comparisons between public schools and private schools. At the heart of it all are the children whose parents are entrusting schools to nurture, educate, and keep them safe. Like any other business, the service provided by private schools is measured by parent satisfaction. Positive student achievement and attainment impacts strengthen the validity of parental satisfaction as a reliable outcome measure (Kisida & Wolf, 2015). Do parents feel they are getting the value of their tuition payment? How school communications affect the perceived value? Essentially, effective communication creates a much stronger bond between parents and the school and a positive experience. So what is key to an effective communication strategy and how is that tailored to each very unique school?

Effective communication is paramount in education. Whether it is teacher to student, student to student, teacher to teacher, teacher to parent, teacher to admin or admin to parent, or vice versa, communication is needed to make sure our students are successful (Andrade, 2015). Many studies suggest that good communication between parents and teachers has positive impacts on learning demonstrate that successful parent–teacher cooperation not only promotes working efficiency, it improves outcomes of many other school management issues (Ho, Hung, & Chen, 2013).

Understanding the benefits and importance, schools often dedicate a lot of time and resources to strengthen communication between the school and parents. Traditional and digital communication channels, platforms and tools commonly used by schools include: email, social media, newsletters (digital & print), mobile phone (voice, text and apps), and website.

Crisis communication is an integral part of school-parent communication since the school is an organization and the parents are stakeholders. In particular, COVID-19 is a health crisis that

presents unique challenges for K-12 education, and consequently, school-parent communication. When campuses closed their doors due to COVID-19, schools were required to quickly pivot to adapt and find ways to stay connected with families while physically apart. Hawaii's public school campuses closed in March and the state Department of Education has acknowledged spotty success in reaching its 180,000 public school students through distance learning (Gutierrez, 2020).

Schools scrambled to effectively adapt a COVID communication strategy that included messaging, frequency, and channels). America's sprawling K-12 public education system is scrambling to move online, almost overnight, with little time to plan and even less clarity about what happens next. Undertaken in response to the spiraling coronavirus crisis, the massive and scattershot transition has shifted much of the burden of schooling onto overwhelmed parents and caregivers, highlighting both the enormous potential and profound limitations of classroom technology (Herold, 2020).

Many schools were unprepared that resulted in longer shutdowns and students away from campus for extensive periods of time. The Board of Education on Thursday voted to delay the reopening of public schools by two weeks — until Aug. 17. The delay is designed to give teachers, principals, and other staff members additional time to prepare for the return of students to campuses and train on distance learning tools (Gutierrez, 2020).

The COVID-19 lockdowns resulted in school closures for more than 168 million children globally (UNICEF, 2021). In Hawaii, a year after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools remain closed and students remain learning remotely. Hawaii's 283 public schools are officially closed until April 30, although teachers are working remotely with students on coursework. Hawaii's public schools are expected to stay shut until COVID-19 is no longer spreading in the

community, defined as four weeks with no new cases, according to the Department of Education (Essoyan, 2021).

Although COVID-19 has had a noticeable impact on K-12 education, surprisingly little research has examined how K-12 schools communicate with parents as this health crisis unfolds. It is important to examine this topic because strong communication is essential to ensuring families feel supported during times of uncertainty. For private schools that rely on maintaining a strong enrollment for financial stability, effective school communications will also help you retain families to allow schools to emerge stronger on the other side of the COVID crisis. The data collected will help schools create effective communication plans for the COVID-19 crisis, as well as better inform schools for future pandemic crisis. This will allow schools to improve on current communication strategies and create effective strategies and protocols that will result in optimal learning conditions for the students. With these factors in mind, I intend to examine: a) What communication strategies do private schools in Hawaii use to keep parents updated about developments related to COVID-19 and b) What communication strategies are *effective* in keeping parents of private school children in Hawaii updated about COVID-19?

2. Literature Review

2.1 School-Parent Communication: Information Delivery Modes and Communication

Styles

Luhmann defined communication explicitly as the *unity* of information, message, and understanding. By taking the communication of an information and its reception as a single—albeit complex—unity, the concept of "meaning" could be made constitutive of his idea of a social system (Leydesdorff, 2000).

Communication is a complex and multidisciplinary concept, and there is no consensus on exactly how it should be defined across the disciplines (Krauss & Russel, 1996). The complexity of the term comes from the fact that any behavior is considered a type of communication, so long as it occurs in a social situation (Novinger, 2001). One implication of this view is that to understand communication, every symbolic or expressive gesture in a given situation must be taken into account, and such a prescription does not lend itself easily to a practical research strategy. To add to this complexity, communication involves processes that enable participants to produce and comprehend messages at the intrapersonal level, and at the same time, it involves processes that cause participants to simultaneously affect and be affected by one another. Further, as Novinger (2001) notes, communication across cultures is more difficult than communication among individuals from the same culture.

Communicating effectively means that your ideas and concepts are being heard and people are acting upon them. It also means you are able to listen, understand, and take action on what other people say. Like any relationship, effective communication between a school and parent is a two-way process and requires trust, transparency, and thoughtfulness. The goal is for parents and independent schools to work together to create and sustain effective partnerships.

The more information a parent has, the better equipped he or she will be to become involved in the education of the child. Schools should strive to open as many avenues for communication as possible (Blackerby & Elementary, 2004).

Communication creates a social system which forms a network supporting the child. (Palts & Kalmus, 2015). Parent–school communication is a process that exchanges information to develop consensus, coordinate action, fulfill stakeholder needs and achieve effective learning goals. Many studies suggest that good communication between parents and teachers has positive impacts on learning demonstrate that successful parent–teacher cooperation not only promotes working efficiency, it improves outcomes of many other school management issues. Teachers must communicate well with parents; communication about school activities and child development must be processed using diversified, clear, and effective methods. To form cohesive parent–teacher cooperation, teachers must contact parents regularly and invite parents to participate in various school activities, groups, or seminars (Ho, Hung, & Chen, 2013).

Teacher attitudes and practices are considered as essential in fostering parental involvement in school education. In Hong Kong, amongst possible types of home–school links, teacher–parent communication about children's learning has been agreed to be the primary concern of both schools and parents. Teacher intention, together with teacher commitment, has predictive power for teacher's time spent in communicating with parents (Pang, 2000).

Teachers strive to establish partnerships with parents to support student learning. Strong communication is fundamental to this partnership and to building a sense of community between home and school. In these changing times, teachers must continue to develop and expand their skills in order to maximize effective communication with parents (Graham-Clay, 2005).

One-way communication occurs when teachers seek to inform parents about events, activities, or student progress through a variety of sources, such as an introductory letter at the beginning of the school year, classroom or school newsletters, report cards, communication books, radio announcements, school Web sites, and so on. Two-way communication involves interactive dialogue between teachers and parents. Conversations may occur during telephone calls, home visits, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and various school-based community activities. Teachers should actively incorporate both strategies to maximize sharing information with parents (Graham-Clay, 2005).

2.1.1 Information Delivery Modes in School-Parent Communication

The fast development of information technology creates an opportunity for all parties connected with school to interact through various media, take active part in information exchange, and communicate on a personal as well as on an institutional level (Tidwell & Walther 2002). With the constant introduction of new technologies, communication directors and specialists are required to always be ready to pivot to adjust strategy. Most schools have long used different strategies to connect with parents (e.g., newsletters, telephone, face-to-face meetings, student communication books, and home visits). Traditional channels such as personal conversations, phone calls and filling the diary continue are still being used to a large extent. (Palts & Kalmus, 2015). However, in this digital era, ICTs often complement traditional communication methods in school-parent communication. Smart device messages, such as LINE, Facebook Messenger or SKYPE, could be convenience tools to issue notices to parents and reduce conflicts due to negligence such as missing phone calls, or forgotten alerts (Chena & Chena, 2015). A review of the literature shows that digital technologies have increased the number, range, frequency, speed, efficiency, and richness of connections possible and the

concomitant expectation that these improved connections will enable productive parent-school relationships (e.g., Ho et al., 2013; Lewin & Luckin, 2010). Indeed, studies have suggested that parent-teacher communication through digital technologies has positive effects on a child's socialization and academic progress (Palts & Kalmus, 2015).

Traditional and digital communication channels, platforms and tools commonly used by schools include:

- Email
- Social media
- Newsletters (digital & print)
- Mobile phone (voice, text and apps)
- Website (Parent Portal)

Email

Electronic mail or e-mail is one of most popular uses of information technology. Email is defined as messages distributed by electronic means from one computer user to one or more recipients via a network.

E-mail provides, according to the interviewed teachers and parents, broader opportunities to discuss problems concerning the child and constant dialogic communication. The advantage of written digital communication for teachers is also the security and feeling that the necessary information has been shared on time and it can be interpreted in the same way. On the negative side, written digital interaction takes time for both partners, because it presumes careful consideration of the content and format (Palts & Kalmus, 2015).

Parent-teacher e-mail represents a significant change in parent-teacher communication. Traditionally, parent-teacher communication has been infrequent, occurring at designated times

(i.e., conferences) or when teachers contacted parents regarding problems with their children.

Parent-teacher e-mail communication has been hailed as a parental involvement panacea because CMC makes teachers more accessible and communication more convenient, leading to reported increases in parent-teacher communication in the past decade claimed that e-mail and Web sites have become the “communication hub” between school and home (Thompson, 2008).

One study examined parents' use of four widely used ICTs (text message, email, social networking sites, and Skype) to communicate with family including differences in use by child's age. Results show parents' use of various ICTs is dynamic, reflecting developmental differences in the child and relational differences in the family system. Findings revealed that the use of ICTs for parent-child communication increased with child's age, communication with co-parent via text message was more likely among parents of school-aged children, and parents of adolescent children were less likely to use text or email to communicate with non-resident family than parents of school-aged children.

The size of the school's student body will also drive the best strategy for the school. For example, texting parent updates about their child could be manageable at a school with 50 students, however, at a school with 1,000 students that service would be impossible for a school to execute. The size of the student body also drives the size of the staff, so smaller schools could also lack the resources to create fancy weekly newsletters and a robust website like the larger schools that have specialists in place. Cost is also a factor that drives the communication of a school. Besides manpower and salaries, technology, printing and equipment are big investments that schools are required to weigh the benefits vs. cost.

Newsletters

A newsletter is a tool used to communicate regularly with your audience, delivering the information you want in print or digital formats. School newsletters are intended to provide essential information to parents and can also foster a connection between the classroom and the home. Newsletters can be distributed on a weekly or monthly basis, depending on the type of information being reported. Neatly formatted, concise, easy-to-read articles are best for school newsletters (Bietz, n.d.).

“Written communication is probably the most efficient and effective way we can provide valuable ongoing correspondence between school and home” (Williams & Cartledge, 1997, p. 30). Written communication is a permanent product that requires careful consideration regarding format and content. The goal is to organize concise, accurate information so that parents will read and understand it. Newsletters are commonly used to share written information with a parent community. Consistent application of several specific strategies can make classroom and school newsletters even more effective communication tools (Graham-Clay, 2005).

Social Media

Social media is computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the building of virtual networks and communities. By design, social media is internet-based and gives users quick electronic communication of content. Content includes personal information, documents, videos, and photos. Users engage with social media via computer, tablet or smartphone via web-based software or web application, often utilizing it for messaging (Dollarhide, 2019).

The continual rapid growth of available interactive digital and mobile technologies, particularly social media, and their inevitable adoption by schools and teachers has raised questions about how these technologies may (or may not) facilitate parent-teacher engagement.

These questions are particularly pressing in early-years settings since most of the literature about the use of social media has occurred in the context of students in secondary schools and tertiary education (Wilis & Exley, 2018).

The choice of Seesaw as the social media platform for use in early-years classrooms further aided early engagement. Seesaw provided a speedy, secure, user-friendly, age-appropriate means to cross home and school settings. It encouraged parent enthusiasm for participation by making visible their child's learning in easy, effective, continuous ways. Hence, they were able to meaningfully and personally connect with their child's school learning throughout the research. The app also enabled information and ideas to be shared with and from parents. This increases teaching opportunities that focuses student attention on critical knowledge and skills needed to articulate informed opinions, self-evaluate their work, and provide useful feedback to their peers. The use of social media led to the creation of vibrant classroom communities in which students demonstrated heightened motivation and enthusiasm for learning and strived for mastery in the production of different items and texts (Willis, 2018).

Facebook, Twitter, and other social media such as Instagram do not just connect educators and provide neutral spaces in which they can share ideas; through their algorithms, features, and designs, they also affect the nature of the connections that are made and the kinds of spaces that are cultivated (Friesen & Lowe, 2012). Different social media may shape experiences in distinct ways. Retweeting, for example, is a particular feature of Twitter and is a common practice among educators who use education-related Twitter hashtags (Carpenter, Morrison, Craft, & Lee, 2020).

Looking at social media as a tool for schools to communicate with parents requires understanding the affordances and features of each platform, as well as the users. Schools can

use Facebook and Instagram to post event information, reminders about upcoming shows, or share photos of students. Social media allows for more e-learning opportunities as well. As remote jobs and online classes are becoming more popular, training students to work from a distance is an important lesson, and social media can help with that.

Created in 2010, Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing social networking service. Users access the service via an app or a feature limited web interface and can edit content with various filters. Instagram offers private messaging, the option to tag content with searchable hashtags, the ability to include multiple images or videos in a single post, and a stories feature, which allows users to post content to a feed that is accessible to others for 24 hours. Messages, posts, and stories allow individuals to communicate with other users in ways that vary in privacy and formality (Carpenter et al., 2020).

Schools are using Instagram to share photos with parents, whether it is a school account, or private class accounts managed by individual teachers. The platform allows sharing from the school and encourages parent involvement due to the comment feature and ability to parents to also post and share.

Mobile Phone

A mobile phone, cellular phone, cell phone, cellphone, or hand phone, sometimes shortened to simply mobile, cell or just phone, is a portable telephone that can make and receive calls over a radio frequency link while the user is moving within a telephone service area. Since its launch in 1983, the mobile phone features have expanded to include: a web browser, text messaging, email, camera and video recorder, applications like a clock, alarm, calendar, contacts, and calculator and games (Park, 2005).

One popular communication strategy is a phone call home. As the teacher of a multi-age class, Gustafson (1998) called the parents of each child in her class monthly to discuss concerns or to answer questions. She noted that these contacts provided her with valuable information about the lives of her students, including extracurricular activities, bullying experiences, and a death in the family (Graham-Clay, 2005).

Text messaging is one of mobile's most used features and one of the most common forms of communication in the 21st century. A recent study that concluded nearly 1/3 (31%) of the American population prefers receiving text messages over phone calls; 14% were undecided and stated that it depended on the circumstance (Lazaros, 2016).

In a 2009 qualitative study, Kharbanda, Stockwell, Fox, & Rickert (2009) found that the concept of reminders sent via text messaging, were well received by parents. Many parents felt that receiving text messages would be a more effective method of communication as opposed to a traditional phone call home. Parents also preferred text message reminders as opposed to traditional mail as long as they were personalized, short, and simple (Lazaros, 2016).

Modern information technology makes communication prompt and convenient and parents have more opportunities to understand what their children do in school. Since the innovation of information technology, there are many media able to provide e-communication environments such as short messages, e-mail, websites, and weblogs. Short message services (SMS) provide synchronous and asynchronous information transportation, and short messages are timelier and easier to carry than e-mails (Ho et al., 2013).

Perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are key determinants of use intention. To implement a messaging system successfully, communication and training prior to implementation allows teachers to understand the usefulness and benefits of the new parent–

teacher communication system. In addition, attitudes and subjective norms are important factors of use intention; teacher preferences affect implementation of a messaging system. Therefore, authorities should provide inducements that not only attract teachers to use the system, but that foster positive attitudes toward the messaging system to further increase use intention (Ho et al., 2013).

Mobile texting was also used in school-home communication, and teachers considered it a fast and efficient communication tool, convenient for parents (Palts & Kalmus, 2015).

Ho, et al. (2013) point out short messages (SMS) can be a useful media for parent-teacher communication. However, using SMS as parent teacher communication media has its disadvantage such as extra expenses to send SMS and teacher could not know if the parents read those SMS or not. As information and communication technology change rapidly, the teacher parent communication applications should also be updated (Chena & Chena, 2015).

Therefore, to use smart device message as parent-teacher communication medium successfully depends on the intention of parents. The authorities should devote to demonstrate the advantages of using smart device messages as communication tool between parents and school and persuade parents that using smart device message is really going to help them and their kids. Once parents have the intention to use, they will definitely use smart device messages to communicate with teachers (Chena & Chena, 2015).

Many teachers and parents in our study mentioned the mobile phone as one communication channel preference. In primary school, telephone communication may, indeed, be necessary from time to time. Ramirez (2002) remarks that short phone calls can prepare a beneficial situation for later cooperation by creating for parents a positive experience of interacting with the teacher. According to some parents in our study, telephone communication is

sometimes necessary because they feel uncomfortable with written digital communication, due to previous bad experience or insufficient skills. In line with this, Williams and Cartledge (1997) have emphasized that audio communication should be preferred to communicate with parents with lower writing skills (Palts & Kalmus, 2015).

Another mobile phone feature is the mobile application (also called a mobile app), which is a type of application designed to run on a mobile device, which can be a smartphone or tablet computer. For example, it can be a game, a calculator, or a mobile web browser.

The mobile phone app could be considered as the new era medium to perform teacher–parent communication, therefore, the fully understanding of the behavior of adopting short messages as teacher–parent communication medium become more necessary before adopting a new technology instrument (Ho et al., 2013).

There are a multitude of mobile phone apps now available that are built specifically for school communications. Some of these apps include: SchoolMessenger which offers a robust notification system that allows you to push out important notifications to your audience via text, phone, email, and social media. BlackBoard, SchoolGlow, and Campus Suite are other school-specific apps for school-parent communication. Blackboard SchoolGlow and Campus Suite offer mobile apps to allow the school and parents to communicate. Common features include push messages/notifications, resource links, photo sharing, and texting.

Website (Parent Portal)

Typically, parents find it difficult to get information from their uncommunicative children about what happened during school (Beverly, 2003; Kasprowicz, 2002). Instead, parents are seeking other methods like school Web sites and portals to obtain that information (Merkley, 2006).

School and classroom Web sites promote and maintain home-teacher communication by informing parents and community members of school and classroom activities (Bigalow, 2003; Solomon & Andres, 1998). In addition, homework hotlines and online student management portals extend opportunities for families to stay linked to classroom requirements and resources (Merkley, Schmidt, Dirksen, & Fuhler, 2006).

Parents with access are beginning to rely more on these online sites for daily updates about their child's grades, attendance, and homework (Fusco, 2004). These online communication mechanisms are more convenient for parents, as they do not have to interrupt their workday to phone a teacher or attend a conference (Merkley & Schmidt, 2006).

Parent-teacher communication might be enhanced using a Web-based system that manages student reading artifacts along with teacher insight and explanation. Parents are requesting additional access to more evidence of their child's progress, so this approach provides specific artifacts documenting academic progress, not just a reported grade or a homework assignment summary (Merkley, Schmidt, Dirksen, & Fuhler 2006).

The analysis of communication channel preferences revealed that teachers and parents of different types of school had somewhat different channel preferences. Furthermore, discrepancies between preferences of teachers and parents of the same school existed (Palts, 2015).

As a general conclusion we stress that despite the extensive opportunities and advantages of written digital communication, enthusiastically shared by many teachers and parents in our study, significant problems and communication barriers involved in using digital channels exist (see Nichols & Read 2002 for similar findings), some of which are related to uneven digital competence and some to prejudiced attitudes and fears. Therefore, it is paramount to provide

both teachers and parents with evidence-based knowledge about strengths and weaknesses of all available communication channels, in particular, digital tools, to decrease fears of communication and increase mutual trust and development of shared communication conventions (Palts & Kalmus, 2015).

2.1.2 Communication Styles

In addition to the mode of information delivery, communication styles matter in school-parent communication. A communication style is the method by which one negotiates situations involving others. It is a distinctive way and mode of action by which one usually behaves when exchanging information, ideas, and emotions with others (Reece, Brandt, & Howie, 2010).

Different leadership styles can be associated with different communication styles. Reversibly, different styles of communication indicate different leadership styles. Each leadership style, part of which is communication, has different effects on school performance (Ibrahim & Mahmoud, 2017). Effective communication requires effective communication styles, not just effective communication channels. One study suggests that principals should rely more on the preciseness style when they communicate to groups. When they engage in individual communication, they should be precise and supportive (Ibrahim & Mahmoud, 2017).

Relationships are the cornerstone of many aspects of educational leadership. According to Northouse (2015), every situation involving school leaders requires some degree of relational behavior. Current topics in education—such as trust, collaboration, professional learning communities, distributed leadership, supervision, mentoring, coaching, and family-school-community partnerships—reflect the relational nature of the school leader position. Furthermore, the increased involvement of parents and community members in educational processes requires school leaders to develop stronger relationships than ever before (Lasater, 2016).

Relationship development starts with building rapport, which is summarized in eight categories of rapport: disclosure, honesty, and respect; supporting and monitoring; recognizing the individual; sharing, mirroring, mimicking, and matching; interacting socially; availability, accessibility, and responsiveness; caring and bonding; and communicating effectively (Lasater, 2016).

Engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes also provides an opportunity to develop shared expectations. It can be difficult for school leaders to meet the expectations of others when the expectations are unknown or are inconsistent with the expectations of the school leader. Conversely, it can be difficult for stakeholders to meet school expectations when the expectations are unclear or inconsistent with their own expectations (Lasater, 2016).

It is also important to consider vocal qualities. Vocal qualities include volume, pace, pitch, rate, rhythm, fluency, articulation, pronunciation, enunciation, tone, to name a few.

These qualities make your presentation interesting, engaging, and pleasant to listen to. They keep the listeners attuned to your content. Voice quality has been defined as the characteristic auditory colouring of an individual's voice, derived from a variety of laryngeal and supralaryngeal features and running continuously through the individual's speech. The distinctive tone of speech sounds produced by a particular person yields a particular voice. Voice quality is at the centre of several speech processing issues (Keller, 2005).

School leaders should focus on the vocal qualities of their own speech—specifically their vocal tone and speech rate. Often, it is not what is said, but how it is said that can create problems with communication and ultimately damage relationships. For example, there are many ways to communicate the simple phrase “keep trying.” In some cases, “keep trying” might be communicated in such a way to encourage, foster persistence, and exhibit optimism; whereas,

“keep trying” could also be communicated in such a way to suggest failure, disappointment, or frustration. Though the words are the same, the tone in which the words are communicated can drastically change the message. Thus, it is important that school leaders use a tone and speech rate that is consistent with their intended message (Lasater, 2016).

To summarize, some the best ways for teachers to communicate effectively with parents include:

- Setting up expectations for both the parents and school
- Establishing rapport and trust
- Training parents to use your channels of communication.
- Ensuring parents aren't facing barriers to accessing technology.
- Engage parents and teachers in decision-making process
- Good vocal quality practices
- Contacting parents personally when necessary.

In any organization, communication is a necessity for coordinating most activities, and this is especially true in educational institutions. Given the widespread changes in education today, educational institutions need effective leaders who are good communicators. Lunenburg and Irby (2011) contend that effective leaders spend most of their time communicating with various stakeholders (Ibrahim & Mahmoud, 2017).

The fast development of information technology creates an opportunity for all parties connected with school to interact through various media, take active part in information exchange, and communicate on a personal as well as on an institutional level. Communication creates a social system which forms a network supporting the child. Research has shown that the communication between parents, teachers and the community (other family members, caretakers,

supporting teachers, social workers, etc.) plays an important role in the academic progress and socialization of students in primary as well as secondary school (Palts & Kalmus, 2015).

Recognizing the critical need for parent-teacher communication, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that schools communicate with all families and involve them in ways that enhance students' success (Lewis, 2002) (Merkley, Schmidt, Dirksen, & Fuhler, 2006).

Understanding the importance of communication in leading schools, educational associations give attention to communication in their publications. The Educational Leadership Constituent Council standards (ELCC), which guide the preparation and development of school leaders in the US and many other countries, for instance, highlight communication as a main component of school leadership. According to ELCC standards, communication is the vehicle that enables leaders to improve their schools. The standards require that principals be responsible for articulating the vision, leading an effective instructional program, managing all aspects in schools ethically and professionally, working in partnership with communities including students' families, and understanding and influencing the larger society. None of these responsibilities is possible without effective communication (Ibrahim & Mahmoud, 2017).

The communication between the teacher and the parent takes place as an interaction between two discourses – exchange of information about the child's academic and social development, and partnership – which presumes active communication between parents and teachers. Partnership means that the family, school and community have an equal role and joint responsibility for students' education and development (Brandt et al. 2014), which is considered an important supporting factor of children's academic progress (Palts & Kalmus, 2015).

Communication is usually an implied element in the general leadership style of the principal. Few researchers study communication as a separate and important factor that could lead to improved school performance. Salazar (2008), for example, highlights that high-performing schools were led by principals who positively affected school success. He notes that successful leaders concentrated on five areas of action, one of which is establishing processes to enhance two-way communication rather than one-way communication. He concludes that open and democratic communication is considered an important factor in the effective leadership of schools and the creation of a non-stressful work culture (Ibrahim, 2017).

Furthermore, student academic performance and social competence are influenced positively by parent involvement; effective parent–teacher communication not builds parent reliance on a school, it enhances parent knowledge of raising children. As information technology develops rapidly, it is already a trend that e-communication is replacing traditional paper communication. Mobile phone messages could be a convenience tool to issue notices to parents and reduce conflicts due to negligence such as missing phone calls, forgotten alerts, etc. (Ho, Hung, & Chen, 2013).

Parents and teachers indicated better student attitudes and behaviors since the inception of the Internet and e-mail for school-to-home communication. Findings of the study showed there is a significant difference in the student achievement levels in schools with greater school use of the Internet and email for school-to-home communication. The results showed that schools are providing information that is accessible to parents through technology, however; the level of use by schools can be improved and parent use is still limited (Dardenne, 2010).

Teacher parent relationships can be the most critical component affecting student’s learning. Thus, it is most important to get to know the family and share the accomplishment and

improvements of the student. Students' learning improves when the teachers communicate with parents on a broad range of issues. Good communication is central to cooperation and support. So in recognition of the importance of parent cooperation and support of children's education, educators are calling on schools to promote partnerships with parents aiming to improve their pupils' progress (Lekli & Kaloti, 2015).

Essentially, communication strategies create a much stronger bond between parents, pupils and teachers to form a strong community that works together to produce the best in education. Schools recognize that effective partnerships are characterized by clearly defined responsibilities, a shared commitment to collaboration, open lines of communication, mutual respect, and a common vision of the goals to be reached, providing clear expectations, and accessibility to faculty and staff. The positive outcomes associated with fostering family-school partnerships include: (1) higher academic achievement); (2) student sense of wellbeing; (3) better student school attendance; (4) better student and parent perceptions of classroom and school climate; (5) positive student attitudes and behaviors; (6) student readiness to do homework; (7) increased student time spent with parents; (8) better student grades; (9) higher educational aspirations among students and parents (Patte, 2011).

2.2 The COVID-19 Crisis And School-Parent Communication

2.2.1 COVID-19's Impact on Education

In particular, COVID-19 is a health crisis that presents unique challenges for K-12 education, and consequently, school-parent communication. The current outbreak of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (coronavirus disease 2019; previously 2019-nCoV), epi-centered in Hubei Province of the People's Republic of China, has spread to many other countries. On 30th

January 2020, the WHO Emergency Committee declared a global health emergency based on growing case notification rates at Chinese and international locations (Velavan, 2020).

Coronaviruses are enveloped, positive single-stranded large RNA viruses that infect humans, but also a wide range of animals. Coronaviruses were first described in 1966 by Tyrell and Bynoe, who cultivated the viruses from patients with common colds. Based on their morphology as spherical virions with a core shell and surface projections resembling a solar corona, they were termed coronaviruses (Latin: corona = crown) (Velavan, 2020).

Schools for more than 168 million children globally have been completely closed for almost an entire year due to COVID-19 lockdowns, according to new data released today by UNICEF. Furthermore, around 214 million children globally – or 1 in 7 – have missed more than three-quarters of their in-person learning. The analysis on school closures report notes that 14 countries worldwide have remained largely closed since March 2020 to February 2021. Two-thirds of those countries are in Latin America and the Caribbean, affecting nearly 98 million schoolchildren. Of the 14 countries, Panama has kept schools closed for the most days, followed by El Salvador, Bangladesh, and Bolivia (UNICEF, 2021).

Notably, many schools transitioned to distanced based learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Steinmayr, 2020). Distance learning is not a new term introduced by COVID-19. It has evolved with the introduction of technology and been popularized as schools were required to shift into distance learning for protection from COVID-19. Phipps & Merisotis (1999) stated, “It is important to understand what is meant by ‘distance learning.’ Because the technology is evolving, the definition of what distance learning is continuing to change (p. 11).” In the same report, they illustrated the fact that much of the research in distance learning since 1990 has

serious, methodological flaws and there is “a relative paucity of true, original research dedicated to explaining or predicting phenomena related to distance learning (p. 2).” (King, 2001)

Our definition of distance learning is this: distance learning is improved capabilities in knowledge and/or behaviors as a result of mediated experiences that are constrained by time and/or distance such that the learner does not share the same situation with what is being learned. Distance education is formalized instructional learning where the time/geographic situation constrains learning by not affording in-person contact between student and instructor. In person education is formalized instructional learning where the time/geographic situation constrains learning by requiring synchronous person-to-person interaction (King, 2001).

A first study in seven European countries on over 6000 children and adolescents that examined the time of the school lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that overall parents found distant teaching to be of poor quality, with insufficient support from schools (Thorell et al.,2021). Between 19-25 % of the parents in this study reported that successful learning was not possible at home during the school lockdown due to a lack of structured instructions (Steinmayr, Lazarides, Weidinger & Christiansen, 2020).

Students whose teachers succeed in building cooperative relationships with their parents are highly likely to be engaged in learning and experience higher achievement gains across time than their peers with lower teacher-parent relationship quality (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). In the Landau study on distant teaching, the majority of parents (62.7 %) stated that they did not have any exchanges with teachers during the school lockdown, apart from emails teachers sent with weekly assignments (Steinmayr, Wildemann & Hosenfeld, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the inequity of education and not just between public and private, but amongst socio-economic classes. Most private schools were equipped for

distance learning with technology in place or the means to purchase devices for students and faculty. Other schools were faced with issues of students not having access to basic tools to operate in distance learning such as devices or Wi-Fi.

Parent-reported socio-demographic background contributed to the prediction of students' students' academic outcomes during the school lockdown (Steinmayr et al., 2020). Parents with an academic school-leaving certificate reported more positive student outcomes, which is in line with various studies on the link between socio-economic status, students' academic achievement and motivation (Sirin, 2005). Thus, not only in regular face-to-face schooling students academically benefit from their parents' academic education, but also during the school lockdown (Steinmayr et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Crisis Communication and School-Parent Communication During COVID-19

Given that COVID-19 is an emerging and evolving health crisis, it is important to understand what crisis communication entails. Crisis communication can be defined broadly as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation. It is the “dialog between the organization and its public(s) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence. Crisis communication is an integral part of school-parent communication since the school is an organization and the parents are stakeholders (Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014).

In crisis management, the threat is the potential damage a crisis can inflict on an organization, its stakeholders, and an industry. A crisis can create three related threats: (1) public safety, (2) financial loss, and (3) reputation loss. Effective crisis management handles the threats sequentially. The primary concern in a crisis has to be public safety. A failure to address public safety intensifies the damage from a crisis. Reputation and financial concerns are considered after public safety has been remedied. Ultimately, crisis management is designed to protect an

organization and its stakeholders from threats and/or reduce the impact felt by threats (Institute for Public Relations, 2020).

It has been well documented that during all stages of crises and risk events, people engage in various forms of communication to learn, to reduce, and to gain a sense of personal control over the situation (Lin, Spence, Sellnow & Lachlan, 2016). During crises of any kind, key publics often obtain or receive information from a plethora of media and communication channels and sources (e.g., Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011). In turn, organizations attempt to reach out to their key publics using crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

Understandably, many existing studies on crisis communication across contexts have examined how various factors influence key publics' levels of trust in an organization (e.g., Coombs, 2007). According to the situation crisis communication theory (SCCT), which is one of the major theoretical frameworks within the field of crisis communication, several key factors predict organizational reputation. Specifically, the SCCT posits that crisis response strategies, attributions of crisis type, an organization's prior relationship reputation with stakeholders, and an organization's history of getting into crisis situations, can influence organization reputation for better or for worse (Coombs, 2007). In particular, Coombs (2007) identified several types of crisis response strategies and crisis types. There are several key crisis response strategies:

Denial: When organizations engage in denial, they attempt to deny the existence of a crisis or blame some other entity for the crisis.

Diminishment: Downplaying the severity of a crisis or denying an organization's intent to do harm.

Rebuilding strategies: An organization fully accepts culpability for a crisis and asks for stakeholders' forgiveness; or attempts to compensate those affected

Bolstering strategies: An organization reminds stakeholders that they were negatively impacted by the crisis, and reminds them of their past accomplishments.

The SCCT also identifies a few key crisis cluster types:

Victim cluster: The organization did not do anything to cause a crisis, and is also a victim of the crisis. Examples of such crises include health pandemics and natural disasters.

Accidental cluster: Under such circumstances, although an organization's actions led to a crisis, these actions were unintentional. Examples of such crises include industrial accidents caused by technological malfunctions.

Preventable cluster: In such contexts, an organization willfully jeopardized the safety of others through malpractices or regulation violations. Examples of such crises include law flouting by an organization's entities.

In addition to the SCCT, other scholars have also attempted to develop typologies of crisis response strategies. According to the image repair theory (Benoit, 2015), organizations can engage in several crisis response strategies geared toward repairing their image:

Denial: When an organization engages in denial, they claim that they did not cause the crisis in question or blame the crisis on other entities.

Evasion of responsibility: When an organization evades responsibility, they engage in actions such as claiming they meant well or that the crisis was a consequence of accidental circumstances.

Reducing offensiveness of crisis: Organizations that attempt to reduce offensiveness of crisis often engage in strategies such as victim compensation, stressing past good acts, and minimizing crisis impact.

Corrective action: Promising to implement strategic plans to solve a crisis.

Mortification: Apologizing for a crisis at hand.

Other scholars have also attempted to come up with typologies of crisis response strategies. According to Olsson (2014), there are four key types of crisis response strategies. Operational crisis response strategies center around disseminating germane information about a crisis to key stakeholders in order to help them make decisions. Second, strategic crisis communication is carried out with the key goals of ensuring long-term organizational survival and maintain positive relationships with stakeholders. Third, resilience based crisis communication focuses on providing vital information for key stakeholders that is aimed at helping them tide over, and bounce back after a crisis. Fourth, reputation based crisis communication is organization centric in mind, and emphasizes describing and promoting the organization's version of events.

In the specific context of health crises, a pandemic is arguably regarded as an unintentional and external crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Many organizations such as schools, are often 'victims' of such crises (Coombs, 2007). Effective strategies for health risk communication are essential for protecting public health in the event of pandemic influenza. Reducing negative consequences relies heavily on gaining cooperation from diverse countrywide entities. Communications must successfully instruct, inform, and motivate appropriate self-protective behavior; update risk information; build trust in officials; and dispel rumors. However, responses to influenza risk information are influenced by existing psychological, social, cultural, health, and socioeconomic factors, which greatly affect how individuals interpret health risk communications, as well as their willingness and ability to act in a timely manner (Vaughan, & Tinker, 2009).

Ideally, pandemic communications maximize the public's capacity to act as an effective partner by encouraging prevention, promoting containment, and fostering resilience and recovery. Moreover, with an expanded role in pandemic planning and response, communication processes can prepare the public to adapt to changing circumstances or uncertainty during an emerging pandemic, educate public health planners about existing vulnerabilities and resources that affect influenza risk for specific populations, facilitate anticipation of surprising events, create dialogue between potentially affected populations and risk managers, and foster an environment of mutual trust. Preparedness strategies must consider what may be asked and expected of individuals at all stages of a pandemic to guide communication planning. A pandemic may require minimally disruptive actions (e.g., increasing hand washing), but other behaviors may be difficult, evoke strong emotions, raise concerns, and fuel controversy (e.g., quarantines and school and public facility closures). Moreover, disturbing information may need to be conveyed without harming public cooperation (Vaughan & Tinker, 2009).

Professionals in the fields of communication, education, and health behavior change need to take responsibility for carefully evaluating what is known and insights currently emerging. We are in a position to use their expertise to counsel others to adjust their strategies to fit the new and largely unknown situation, and heeding the call to action can play a significant part in guiding our societies through these challenging times. Effective health communication is a key factor in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic (Finset et al., 2020).

Although COVID-19 is likely to have had a discernable impact on K-12 education, surprisingly little research has examined how K-12 schools communicate with parents as this health crisis unfolds. Emerging research on crisis communication during COVID-19 has mostly focused on how governments (e.g., Wang, Hao, & Platt, 2021) or health care professionals

(Malecki, Keating, & Safdar, 2021), communicate various aspects of COVID-19 with populations. It is important to examine this topic because strong communication is essential to ensuring families feel supported during times of uncertainty. For private schools that rely on maintaining a strong enrollment for financial stability, effective school communications will also help families to emerge stronger on the other side of the COVID crisis.

2.2.3 *The Public/Private School Divide & COVID-19's Impact on K-12 Education in Hawaii*

As with other parts of the world, the COVID-19 health crisis has upended K-12 education in Hawaii. However, there are certain unique aspects of private K-12 education in Hawaii which makes it important to examine: a) what communication strategies do private schools in Hawaii use to keep parents updated about developments related to COVID-19, and what communication strategies are *effective* in keeping parents of private school children in Hawaii updated about COVID-19?

As such, the sections below describe the public versus private school divide in Hawaii, and also detail how COVID-19 has impacted K-12 education in Hawaii.

2.2.3.1 Public vs. Private School Education in Hawaii. The importance of education in Hawaii dates back to 1840 when a system of public education was established by King Kamehameha III. In 1842, Punahou School, the oldest private school founded in Hawaii, opened for missionary children. In 1846 the Department of Public Instruction was founded to oversee the school system of Hawaii. Other private schools followed, most with religious and missionary affiliations including St. Ann School, Iolani School, and St. Andrews Schools.

A deep rooted history paved the way for an established public and private education system in Hawaii. Hawaii is home to 111 private schools and has one of the highest rates of private school attendance in the nation. An analysis of data from the National Center for

Education Statistics shows that 16 percent of Hawaii's roughly 214,000 school-age children attended private schools during the 2010-11 school year, the most recent year for which comparable national statistics are available (Wong, 2014). Hawaii has one of the highest rates of private school attendance in the nation. By comparison, the national average was 8 percent, with 12 states, including Colorado, Texas and Wyoming, reporting private school populations of 5 percent or less. Private school enrollment in the islands ticked down a notch to 15 percent this year (after an influx of 5,000 students into the state's K-12 population), according to an analysis of data from the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools (HAIS) and the state Department of Education. So the islands still nearly double the national average (Wong, 2014).

There is a common belief, especially in Hawaii, that a private school education is superior to a public school education. In fact, Hawaii has one of the highest rates of private school attendance in the nation (Russo, 2019).

The idealization of private school education has a detrimental impact on public school students and here's why — most often it is families of higher socioeconomic status that turn to private schools for their child's education. When families of higher economic means leave the system, they take with them the drive to improve public education. This disinvestment creates a feedback loop which furthers the narrative that public schools are inferior. For example, spending \$10,000-\$50,000 per year on private school is completely justified, while at the same time, efforts to increase funding for public education continue to be met with resistance.

Other factors drive this feedback loop. For instance, students must test-in to be admitted to private school. Studies have shown that students of higher socio-economic status do better on academic measures such as testing; thus students who are admitted to private schools are sometimes performing at higher levels than their non-private school peers (Russo, 2019).

Criticism of Hawaii's public education system has created increased interest in private schools. For many years, Hawaii's public school system has lagged behind its mainland counterparts. Although the student body changes each year, many public school employees remain in the system for years (Keany, 2011).

Educational opportunity has never been equal. When missionaries arrived in Hawaii, they established private schools, like Oahu College (now Punahou). Royal Elementary School, which I attended, was once a boarding school for the children of Hawaiian royalty. And less than a hundred years ago, the best public schools were reserved for those who could speak English fluently. We have progressed in many ways. The public school system serves more people than ever before. Students attend longer and graduate. And women now outperform men at almost all levels of education. However, access to education is not the same as access to quality education (Higa, 2019).

At schools like Punahou and Iolani, the question is not whether students will attend college. The question is which college they will attend. In part, this is because some parents have the means to provide their children with every advantage: test preparation, private tutoring, expensive extracurricular. But it is also because achievement is normal and expected, even of students from less affluent backgrounds (Higa, 2019).

Primary predictors of student achievement include family income, the presence of special needs, and limited English proficiency. Demographic information suggests that student achievement in Hawaii's public education should be relatively high (i.e., compared to public school students in other states). For example, former superintendent Pat Hamamoto has pointed out, "Study after study conclusively find that poverty is the single greatest predictor of student performance," yet Hawaii has a relatively low percentage of students from families below the

poverty line (17.3 percent versus the national average of 20.7 percent in 2011). The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches is also lower in Hawaii (46.8) than is the national average (48.1). So if Pat Hamamoto is right about poverty being the single greatest predictor of student performance, the level of student achievement in Hawaii should be above the national average (Roth, 2016).

Overcrowding is an issue that has plagued the Hawaii public education system. Rep. Bob McDermott, R, Ewa Beach, Iroquois Point, says it is what he had to do to fix what he calls “emergencies” at an Ewa school. McDermott filed a class action lawsuit Wednesday on behalf of his children and the students of Campbell High School. He claims the defendants — Gov. David Ige, DOE superintendent Kathryn Matayoshi, and Board of Education chairman Lance Mizumoto — are failing to provide appropriate school facilities for students. McDermott says Campbell is grossly overcrowded and things must change now to make a better learning environment for the students (KHON, 2016).

Private schools, as well as charter schools, act as aid to the state’s challenged Department of Education system that is overwhelmed by more children to educate than there’s space. While an estimated 1 in 10 kids attend private schools across the U.S., in Hawaii the number is much higher. Roughly 34,800 students are enrolled in about 120 private schools statewide; Hawaii private schools educate about 16% of the total school-age population (Lee, 2020).

The benefits of private schools go beyond the student attending and his/her family. According to a study conducted by the consultancy Oxford Economics, private schools have a public benefit. Research conducted by the consultancy Oxford Economics found that Britain’s private schools contribute a gross £11.7 billion (\$19.5 billion) to annual GDP, support 275,000 jobs and generate £4.7 billion (\$7.8 billion) in tax revenue, £173 for every household in Britain.

This puts private education on a par with the city of Liverpool in terms of its contribution to the U.K. economy. As well as analyzing the contribution of the independent school sector to the economy, the researchers also estimated that the U.K.'s 2,600 private schools represent an annual saving of £3.9 billion (\$6.5 billion) to the taxpayer, who would otherwise have to pay to educate those students in state schools (Morrison, 2014).

2.2.3.2 COVID-19's Impact on K-12 Schools in Hawaii. COVID-19's effect on education in Hawaii began with the closure of all school in March 2020 after a mandated announcement by the Governor. In March 2020, David Ige ordered all Hawaii residents to stay home under a statewide shutdown intended to help stop the spread of the coronavirus. Residents will be allowed to leave their homes for such needs as health care, buying food and gasoline and taking care of the elderly, children or people with disabilities. People may also leave home to pick up educational materials for distance learning, meals or other related services, and they may exercise outdoors, provided that social distancing measures are followed (Magin, 2020).

During campus closures, most schools offered distance learning for students. However, all distance learning is not created equal. Hawaii's digital divide students was a big issue in March, when schools first pivoted to all-remote learning to stem the spread of COVID-19. Despite pleas from lawmakers, advocates and public officials to provide more specific data on kids' digital access, the DOE — even as of late May — floundered. Now, with more than five months to collect data on distance learning needs, it is still not clear if the DOE has any better handle on the capacity gap and where it is most pronounced — or how the district is working to get devices and wireless internet hotspots to those who need them the most (Lee, 2020).

Initially amid the pandemic, HAIS took on the role of providing as much information to all its schools as possible, with daily updates in partnership with Hawaii Emergency

Management Agency, to provide numbers and guidelines from state and national entities. Since then, the association has organized nearly 20 webinars for heads of schools, business officers and admissions staff to help them adjust to COVID regulations and to also help them recruit new students – an area of concern earlier this year (Kukaua, 2020).

For the 2020-21 school year, schools were given the option to open up for in-person instructions. Some private schools opened campus and by November 2020 most private schools followed suit. Hawaii’s Department of Education failed to re-open for face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic due to “lack of preparedness.” As private schools moved from distance learning and resumed face-to-face instruction, the public schools remained in distance learning. Hawaii public school families can expect to continue some distance learning through the end of the calendar year. Hawaii public schools have been back in session since Aug. 17 under an all-distance format due to spiking coronavirus cases — with the exception of vulnerable students like special education learners and those who do not have internet at home (Lee, 2020).

In Hawaii, elementary school students are having trouble keeping up with coursework during the pandemic, with 21% “well below” proficiency in English and 15% falling short in math in the first semester, new public school data shows. At the high school level, 12% of students got failing grades in either English or math, along with 10% in science or social studies. Among middle schoolers, 8% failed English, math, science or social studies (Essoyan, 2021).

COVID-19 brought new considerations for parents deciding between public vs. private schools for their children. The increasing unemployment rate require private schools to increase financial aid to support current families. For example, Mid-Pacific said it will not know how many students it will lose until the fall when classes start up again. “Our projections show that our financial aid output could increase by as much as 72 percent over last year,” the school said

in an email. Punahou said it expects “full enrollment” but that demand for financial aid will increase by 50 percent. In an email, Iolani School said it also expects its classrooms to be filled but added: “We budgeted \$6 million in aid for this coming year ... we do expect an increase in that number for the fall,” the school said (Daysog, 2020).

With DOE schools still doing distance learning due to virus spread concerns, the state’s private schools are becoming increasingly attractive to families looking for some sense of normalcy for their children — and repose from their own harried schedules. Most of the 100 member schools that are part of the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools are now offering on-campus, in-person instruction either entirely or in a blended model, according to HAIS Executive Director Phil Bossert. Kamehameha Schools switched to blended learning earlier this month after the fall break, according to spokesman Darren Pai (Lee, 2020).

The physical closure of many schools led to a rapid shift to distance learning which placed more responsibility for learning on parents and guardians. As one of the major stakeholders in the education process, experiences of parents with their children during remote learning are worth examining to inform future policy decision making (Garbe, Ogurlu, Logan, & Cook, 2020). Given the lack of research on how private schools communicate with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study aims to investigate parents’ experiences and struggles during school closure answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What communication strategies do private schools in Hawaii use to keep parents updated about developments related to COVID-19?

RQ2: What communication strategies are *effective* in keeping parents of private school children in Hawaii updated about COVID-19?

3. Methods

In an attempt to provide perspective on the importance of school communication and furthermore communication strategies during COVID-19, I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with: 1) Parents who currently have children studying in Hawaii's various private schools and school leaders at various Hawaii private schools, and 2) School leaders working at Hawaii's private schools. Finding parents was easier because that is a larger group, however, with limited school leaders at K-12 private schools in Hawaii, that group was harder to find participants. Ultimately, I interviewed 19 individuals – 11 parents and 8 school leaders. Their characteristics are reported in greater detail in the Results section.

Qualitative research aims to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds. Central to good qualitative research is whether the research participants' subjective meanings, actions and social contexts, as understood by them, are illuminated (Harvey, 2002). Given the exploratory nature of my study, qualitative in-depth interviews are an appropriate data collection method that will allow me to obtain a detailed understanding of: a) the decisions underlying the types of strategies used in school-parent communication about COVID-19 from the perspectives of school leaders, and b) how parents *perceive* the various communication strategies used by private schools to communicate with them.

3.1 Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

3.1.1 Parent Participants

Parent participants for this study had children aged between 5-18 years old who are currently enrolled in various private schools in Hawaii. The schools had to meet the following

criteria: a) private school in Hawaii offering K-12 education, b) a member of the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools, c) experienced COVID-related changes.

These parent participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. I first approached parents whom I personally knew with children aged between 5-18 years old who are currently studying in private schools. Next, I asked these parents to refer other parents who meet my study's criteria to me. I contacted eligible parent participants through emails, phone calls and text messages. Owing to COVID-19, the individual interviews were conducted online via Zoom and will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

3.1.2 School Leader Participants

In addition, I recruited school leaders who currently work at Hawaii's various private schools. These school leaders consisted of people such as principals, communication directors and advancement directors. As with parent participants, these school leaders came from private schools that: a) offer K-12 education, b) are a member of the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools, c) and experienced COVID-related changes. These school leader participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. I first approached school leader participants who I knew personally. Next, I asked these school leaders to refer other school leaders, specifically leaders who met my study's criteria to me. I contacted eligible school leader participants through emails, phone calls and text messages. Owing to COVID-19, the individual interviews were conducted online via Zoom and took approximately 30-45 minutes.

My interviews concluded when theoretical saturation was reached, i.e., when no new themes emerge from coding.

3.2 Interview Questions

The following questions served as the basis for my in-depth interviews.

3.2.1 Examples of In-Depth Interview Questions for Parents

In terms of introductory questions, I asked participants which private school their children are attending and what grade their children are in. With regards to main interview questions, I asked participants questions such as “What method(s) did your child’s school use when communicating with you about COVID-19?” Importantly, I asked participants follow up probes to: 1) Understand the respective advantages and disadvantages of each method outlined by them, as well as 2) To learn more about the types of information that were conveyed using each specific method in question, for example.

I also asked questions such as “As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, in what ways (if any) has your child’s school changed the way they communicate with you about this pandemic?”, and “Overall, what improvements (if any) do you think can be made in terms of the way your child’s school communicates with you about the COVID-19 pandemic?”. The full in-depth interview instrument can be found in the appendices section.

3.2.2 Examples of In-Depth Interview Questions for School Leaders

Similarly, for the school leader interviews, I asked the participants introductory questions that identify their position and experience working at schools. With regards to main interview questions, I asked participants questions such as “In what ways has your school’s instructional approach evolved throughout the COVID-19 pandemic? and “What methods did the school use to communicate with parents about COVID-19 updates?”

I also asked school leaders to send to me examples of the school communication discussed during the interview.

3.3 Positionality

As a school leader at a private school in Hawaii, my background allowed me to ensure the interview questions thoroughly cover the topic and I was able to confidently probe for additional information if anything is missed in the main questioning.

As a parent of two children who attend private schools in Hawaii (Punahou and Kamehameha School), I regularly receive COVID communications from these two schools. This helped me to identify and find parents and school leaders for the interviews.

4. Results

With the study being open to only two specific groups – private school leaders and parents with private school children, it was somewhat challenging to find participants for my study. Finding parents was easier because that is a larger group, however, with limited school leaders at K-12 private schools in Hawaii, that group was harder to find participants. Ultimately, I interviewed 19 individuals – 11 parents and 8 school leaders. To allow the parents and school leaders to discuss openly and freely, it was agreed that the schools they represent would not be shared. Before moving on to my analysis, I would like to offer some background information about each of my participants in order to provide context for their answers discussed below.

4.1 Meet the Parent Participants

Elaine. Elaine is a parent with two daughters in Grades 8 and 10. Both children attend the same K-12 private school. Elaine was selected because she is a fellow student in the M.A. Communications program. Her youngest daughter also recently shifted from public school to private school, so she also offered perspective as a parent receiving communication from a public school.

Michele. Michele is a parent with a daughter in Grade 9. Her daughter attends a K-12 private school. Michele was selected because she is an involved parent serving on the Parent Faculty Association at her daughter's school where she attended since Kindergarten. She is very familiar with the school's communications and is very open with her thoughts and opinions.

Natalie. Natalie is a parent with two sons in Grades 2 and 8. Both children attend the same K-12 private school. Natalie was selected because she is a parent and an employee at the school her children attends, which offers a different perspective on communications as she receives most of the communications as an employee as well.

Cole. Cole is a parent with two daughters in Grades 1 and 7. His children attends two different K-12 private schools. Cole was selected because he has children in two different private schools and could speak about both schools.

Bonnie. Bonnie is a parent with two daughters in Grades 9 and 12. Both children attend the same K-12 private school. Bonnie was selected because she is also a faculty member at the school that both her children attend. She also offers perspective from a parent who only has teenage/older children.

Raquel. Raquel is a parent with three daughters in Grades Kindergarten, 7 and 9. All three children attend the same K-12 private school. Raquel was selected because she has three children attending private schools, all in different divisions.

Keith. Keith is a parent with a son in Grade 9 and a daughter in Grade 12. Both children attend the same K-12 private school. Keith was selected because he is a divorced parent and shares custody of his children. This offered perspective on communication where the children are in two households. Keith also serves on a board committee for another private school that his children do not attend.

Lisa. Lisa is a parent with two daughters in Grades Preschool and Grade 1. Her daughter in Grade 1 attends a K-12 private school. Lisa was selected because she has two young children and could offer perspective from a parent who only has young children.

Yasmine. Yasmine is a parent with two sons in Grades 6 and 8. Both children attend the same K-12 private school. Yasmine was selected because she is a busy working mom with two children attending private schools and a baby.

Jeremy. Jeremy is a parent with two daughters in Grades K and 2. Both children attend the same K-12 private school. Jeremy was selected because he has two young children and could offer perspective from a parent who only has young children.

Ronnie. Ronnie is a parent with two sons in Grades 9 and 11. Her son in Grade 11 attends a public school and her son in Grade 9 attends a K-12 private school. Ronnie was selected because she has a child attending a private school and another attending a public school – both high school. She offers perspective of a parent who receives communication from two different schools.

4.2 Meet the School Leader Participants

Alexander. Alexander is the division head of Communications at a K-12 private school. He has been at the school for 6 years. Alexander was selected because of his position at a private school and his time and experience at the school.

Sienna. Sienna is the division head of Advancement at a K-12 private school. She has been at the school for 1 year and working in education for 20 years. Sienna was selected because of her experience working in education, as well as her leadership role at a private school.

Trevor. Trevor is in leadership at a K-12 private school. He has been at the school for 3 years and working in education for over 35 years. Trevor was selected because of his experience working in education, as well as his leadership role at a private school.

Chris. Chris is the division head of Communications at a K-12 private school. He has been at the school for 3 years. Chris was selected because of his position at a private school and his role in the school's communication plan and implementation.

Brandy. Brandy is the division head of Advancement at a K-12 private school. She has been at the school for 3 years and working in education for 18 years. Brandy was selected because of her experience working in education, as well as her leadership role at a private school.

Monica. Monica is the division head of Technology at a K-12 private school. She has been at the school for 8 years and working in education for 21 years. Monica was selected because of her experience working in education, as well as her leadership role at a private school.

Peter. Peter is in leadership at a K-12 private school. He has been at the school for 6 years. Peter was selected because of his leadership role at a private school and his role as a parent of two children who attend private schools.

Taylor. Taylor is the division head of Advancement at a K-12 private school. She has been at the school for 2 years. Taylor was selected because of her leadership role at a private school and her role as a parent of two children who attend private schools.

4.3 Data Coding Approach

Although previous studies have developed theoretical frameworks such as the SCCT (Coombs, 2007) or image repair theory (Benoit, 2015), to understand how stakeholders react to an organization's crisis communication efforts, such frameworks are admittedly constrained by specific variable types. Given the potential for a wide range of responses on how private schools communicate with parents about COVID-19, I used thematic analyses to analyze my in-depth interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Using thematic analyses to analyze the qualitative data can produce reliable and valid findings. Thematic analyses enable the researcher to identify emergent themes or patterns in participant responses (verbatim transcripts). The goal of qualitative data analysis is to reach some inferences, lessons, or conclusions by condensing large amounts of data into relatively smaller,

more manageable bits of understandable information. Analysis of qualitative data often works inductively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), as opposed to hypotheses testing approaches commonly used in quantitative research methods.

In thematic analyses, codes are first generated from a variety of sources such as the literature review, interview questions, and the interview transcripts themselves (Benevene, Kong, DeCarlo, Lucchesi, & Cortini, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2012). A code is a shorthand representation of some more complex set of issues or ideas. As more interviews are transcribed and analyzed, these preliminary codes are subsequently edited and re-edited to form a finalized set of themes with sub-themes and definitions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Notably, the outcomes of qualitative thematic analyses may be indistinguishable from those derived from a grounded theory approach. Many researchers are likely to find using a general inductive approach more straightforward than some of the other traditional approaches to qualitative data analysis (Thomas, 2006).

The COVID pandemic presented schools with a new situation that required quick action with limited and changing information. The interviews suggest that schools worked to meet families where they thought they needed to be, which varied by the information shared, technology available, and resources. Overall, many private schools used various forms of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools to reach out to parents.

In this study specifically, I recorded and transcribed the audio from the parent interviews and the school leader interviews. Once the transcriptions were completed, I read and highlighted all excerpts that were relevant to this study's goals. I coded the answers provided for patterns, in order to analyze the relationship between COVID communication received from the school and effectiveness of the communication. The coding was based in provisional coding, with a pre-

developed set of codes to help begin to structure analysis of the interviews (Saldaña, 2016, p. 168). These pre-set codes were based on information gained from the literature review, as well as the research question. They were subsequently edited and re-organized to form a final set of themes with sub-themes that are reported below. The broad themes and sub-themes are as follows:

- Asynchronous communication platforms
 - Emails, social media, websites, self-screening apps, and signage
- Synchronous communication platforms
 - Chat, virtual meetings, and phone calls
- Communication styles
 - Safety reassurances, creating trust, being transparent, and over-communication
- Personnel involved in COVID-19 communication
 - Contact tracing teams, and medical professionals
- COVID-facts and terms
 - Positive cases, community spread, and risk mitigation strategies

4.4 Asynchronous Communication

Asynchronous communication happens when information can be exchanged independent of time. It does not require the recipient's immediate attention, allowing them to respond to the message at their convenience. Examples of asynchronous communication that emerged in this study are emails, social media, websites, self-screening apps, and signage.

Emails

Electronic mail or e-mail is one of most popular uses of information technology. Email is defined as messages distributed by electronic means from one computer user to one or more recipients via a network distributed by electronic means from one computer user to one or more recipients via a network. Emails are commonly used to communicate about COVID announcements and provide parents with updates. All schools interviewed used email as the primary communication channel for COVID communication. During COVID many schools created COVID specific emails for parents to send COVID information or questions.

The school leaders interviewed all mentioned that the school used email to communicate with families about COVID. Many expressed that this was the most frequently used channel to communicate and an important way to keep parents informed and up-to-date. A school leader shared, “Most of our school’s COVID is sent through weekly email updates. Early on there were a few videos also sent through email, but it has been primarily copy heavy weekly email updates.”

The emails included messages from the school leader and also newsletters that included COVID-specific and oftentimes other school-related information. Parents are familiar with email and overall liked this form of communication for COVID updates and information. Michele stated, “The school used e-mail updates to communicate about COVID. I like the e-mail push – it is like reading the newspaper at my leisure, I can go back to it when I want to.” Parents also appreciated being able to go back into their emails to find information they needed. Yasmine stated, “The school sent email updates for the week that showed the level the school was in and shared any positive COVID cases and the details. So that was helpful because it was all in one place.”

Parents explained that they were able to differentiate the level of importance based on who the email was being sent from. For example, a parent said, “When there was an important COVID email it would come from the Head of School. This was very concise and in one place. It was always sent from the Head of School.”

However, some parents expressed that the emails sent from various school leaders and departments also posed difficulties understanding and prioritizing what was important. A parent stated, “Between all three of my children and all their classes/teachers any given day I may receive 10 or more emails from a school-related party. It becomes very difficult to identify what is important and non-essential information.”

Some school leaders relied heavily on emails from the Head of School. One parent expressed that all email about COVID came from the Head of School. Most of the other schools took a different approach and reserved emails from the Head of School for important and urgent messages that included major changes and announcements. Relatedly, some school leaders shared that they were careful about what was sent through email to ensure that families wouldn’t feel overwhelmed by information sent through that one channel. Some school leaders expressed the importance of situational awareness and taking into account all the emails parents are receiving from the school, including what is sent from teachers. A school leader shared, “We reserved email for broad notifications and new developments.” Brandy added, “We sent emails as needed. We did not have anything weekly or regularly. We did not want to send more than we needed to. Really knowing your community is important.”

Another school leader questioned the school’s decision to primarily rely on email communications, and shared “I do not know that we initially used all our channels that effectively. It has been primarily email updates. I am more a fan of visual updates.”

This recurring theme of emails as a key method of conveying information stands in contrast to previous studies which suggest that people generally do not obtain crisis-related information via email (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). All private school used emails to communicate COVID updates and information. This was in addition to emails that sent by teachers and administration that included instructional information or announcements un-related to COVID.

With the onset of COVID, school leaders decided to use email, which was an existing channel to communicate with families. Given that parents were already accustomed to checking email, school leaders determined it was an obvious channel to communicate COVID-related information. Parents were favorable of email as a mode of communication from their children's schools. Some parents expressed email was the most effective. Parents who had some criticisms about emails was not unhappy about the channel itself, but rather the content and frequency of the emails.

More specifically, in addition to messages and updates from the Head of School, emails include information from newsletters, and online handbooks.

Emails were identified by school leaders as the most frequently used communication channel, which parents confirmed was generally their preferred way to receive communication from the school. Parents agreed that they liked that emails were informative, they could read and reference at their leisure, and it served as a regular communication that they could rely on and expect.

Newsletters. A newsletter is a tool used to communicate regularly with your audience, delivering the information you want in print or digital formats. School newsletters are intended to provide essential information to parents and can also foster a connection between the classroom and the home. Newsletters originated as a printed communication and were generally

formatted similarly to a newspaper, which can include news, but can also include feature stories, photos and less urgent announcements. With the transition to online/digital, the newsletter has evolved and some newsletters has kept the newspaper format, but some look similar to email announcements with no photos, little formatting and graphics. The newsletters sent by schools that included COVID information varied in look and format. Most included some charts and graphs with little to no photos and organized content by sections. Statistics on positive cases, reporting on levels, and changes to mitigation measures were some of the information shared through newsletters.

Although little research has attempted to examine the role newsletters play in crisis communication, this finding is nonetheless in line with findings that highlight the importance of newsletters in school-parent communication (Jensen, 2006), broadly speaking. As with websites, the benefits of newsletters emerged from interviews with parents and school leaders, including the shared understanding of when information will be shared and received. The school leaders shared that digital newsletters were sent weekly. Some newsletters were already in place and COVID information was simply added, and other school leaders reported that they created a new newsletter specific to COVID. Peter shared, “Prior to COVID a weekly email newsletter was our school’s primary communication with families. We continued newsletter during COVID, but we added a lot of additional communications, primarily email.”

The school leaders that did have newsletters shared that it was generally weekly and sent digitally via email. They liked this format because it allowed schools to plan and compile information. Parents also liked this format because it also allowed them to plan and anticipate when information would be shared. Bonnie said, “Every Friday they would email a newsletter with updates letting us know if there were any cases. But for the entire year there was no spread

on campus, but there were cases. They would also include what tier we're at. I thought they were really responsive.”

Another parent added “My daughter’s school sends COVID information in their newsletter which I find helpful because I know when it is coming and where I can go to find it if I need to refer back for information.”

The school leaders explained that the newsletters that are sent via email were just one type of emails sent. Other email communication included messages from the Head of School, division- and grade-specific information, and messages from extracurricular activities and sports. The important information was reserved for Head of School emails. Elaine said, “The school did include COVID information in the weekly newsletters, but that was not the primary channel they used to communicate. The really important updates were sent in an email. Reminders and things like that were in the newsletters, which I think made sense.”

Online Handbooks. Student handbooks are the guides to student life in the district, providing an orientation for new and current students. Each handbook should include general information about the district as well as on each school, such as contact information for administrators and the school board.

During COVID, schools added COVID information to existing handbooks. COVID handbooks were shared digitally through email and generally housed on the school’s website. Some created COVID handbooks that included information specific to COVID. School leaders expressed the importance to quickly create a handbook that housed all the COVID information. The challenges were keeping the information in the handbook up-to-date given the constantly changing conditions. Updates and changes to the handbook were also communicated via email and reflected on the website. One parent shared, “Having a COVID Handbook was so helpful.

They would email whenever there were updates and changes. So they did a really good job keeping us informed as things changed.”

Social Media

Social media are interactive technologies that allow the creation or sharing/exchange of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks. This includes platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, etc. Although schools consider social media to be an essential part of a school's communications plan, some parents have criticized the use of social media as a communication platform for COVID-19 information.

Keith shared, “I follow the school on social media, but I do not think it is the place for COVID updates and information.” Michele added, “I am not a huge fan of social media as an outlet for COVID information yet I know many establishments utilize this.”

Private school leaders shared the same sentiment as parents, electing not to use social media as a primary mode of communicating COVID-related information. School leaders expressed the importance of social media as a communication tool and channel, however, identified that it did not meet the needs of emergency messaging.

Chris shared, “Social media is a powerful tool to get brand messages and build community, but not all our parents follow us and it is very external facing, so we did not see this as a good way to communicate.”

Algorithms and followers factored into school leaders’ decisions not to use social media to communicate important information, such as COVID announcements. The platform did not guarantee that all families would receive the information, which was problematic. Parents viewed social media as a relaxed, social activity and did not see it as an appropriate way to share critical information such as COVID-related announcements. These views are in line with

research suggesting that people view information received via social media platforms with skepticism (e.g., Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014).

Overall, these critical views about social media as a method of conveying COVID-19 updates stand in contrast to previous studies which have touted the potential of social media as a platform for communicating information about crises (Eriksson, 2018). Although parents and school leaders agreed that social media was not effective in communicating COVID information, there were some who identified ways that social media could be used to support COVID communication efforts on campus. Monica said, “We tried to communicate through social media what school looked like because parents were not allowed on campus. We wanted to show that students were having fun and even though they were masked, they were ok and happy.”

Notably, in response to RQ1b, not all communication platforms were perceived equally favorably among parents. In particular, many parents were critical of social media as a means of providing school-related COVID-19 updates. By contrast, other modes of asynchronous communication such as emails, websites, and self-screening apps were widely lauded by both parents and school leaders as effective platforms for school-related COVID communication.

Social media might be perceived as less effective than three types of asynchronous communications because of its reach, as many parents are either do not use social media or do not follow the school. Social media algorithms also influenced schools, as they are aware that posts do not reach all its followers. Another criticism is how the platform is perceived. Social media is an external tool to build brand messages and community.

Although social media wasn't identified as an effective channel to send COVID communications, social media does serve a supporting role. For example, some schools shared that social media was used to share information about their medical professional team. Another

school leader shared that social media was strategically used to share photos of students happy and thriving on campus (masked) to reassure families and even market the school to potential families looking for this experience for their child.

Website

A website is a common communication and marketing tool for schools. Websites generally houses information about the school intended for external use and prospective families.

In particular, a parent portal is a common section that schools use that is located on the website to house communication for families/parents. Schools use the website and/or Parent Portal to house COVID information for parents to access. All schools created a dedicated COVID webpage that parents could easily refer to and access if they needed to look up a policy or information. Most webpages included important links, FAQs, and forms.

In line with previous research highlighting the importance of school websites as a crisis communication tool (Madere, 2008), quite a few of the participants who were interviewed expressed the opinion that websites were an effective communication tool. Natalie shared, “The school used email, newsletters (digital), zoom meetings, and their website to communicate about COVID. I think the most effective tool the school used to communicate was the website. It allows for the most up to date information to always be available. I liked that it was easy to find and always updated in a place I knew where to find it.”

School leaders explained that a decision made at the onset of COVID was to add a webpage on the school’s website that is dedicated to COVID. Their primary reason was to create a central location for the school community to find important COVID information and announcements. Chris said, “We knew we had to get a web page up and running. We needed a

single point where families could get their information. That page has been a very important piece. It has evolved into a dashboard.”

School leaders agreed that a key component of the success of the website would be keeping it updated and timely, as well as continuing to direct families there when sharing out messaging through other channels. Brandy said, “so part of our communications with families, we also had on our website an area dedicated just for COVID. We would constantly drive people there to get the latest information. That would be updated. That is where we had our reopening plan. That was key in our communication plan.”

Parents liked the convenience of having the information in one place, but most parents said that they did not use the website, and some parents were not even sure if the school had a webpage for COVID information. Keith shared, “It is good that the school uses the Parent Portal on the website to house COVID information, but I rarely go there.”

Some criticisms were that the website did not house all the information needed, so some parents relied on saving the email and digital newsletter communications to refer back to when they needed specific information shared that was not on the website.

Most school leaders shared that new technology was not introduced and the COVID information was added to the school’s existing website. However, some school did identify unique needs that COVID presented and increased functionalities of their school’s website. For example, one school leader shared, “We have always had a way for teachers and students to get technical support, but we also opened that up to families on our website.”

Self-screening apps

A self-screening app is a wellness screening process with customizable questions and actions by person type. Staff, parents (for younger students), and older students complete the

assessment from an easy-to-use website or app. The self-screening app is a communication tool for parents to provide daily reports on symptoms, travel, and other COVID-related information. To date, little research has explicitly examined the role of self-screening apps in COVID-19 related crisis communication. And the positive sentiments that parents and school leaders have toward self-screening apps are in line with an emerging body of research suggesting that technologies such as self-screening applications as vital in helping to contain the COVID-19 pandemic (Musanabaganwa et al, 2020).

Schools either used existing platforms or purchased new technology to create self-screening checks. Monica said, “We are a medium size school, but we have a really small tech team. We not only had to turn our school into an online school. We had to train teachers, new software. And at the same time, we needed to figure out how to handle self-screening. Self-screening tools was not something that existed. This was a whole new thing, so trying to identify what tools were available and figuring out if you could implement it in the timeline. So you are putting a beta type tool into production, that is not fully baked.”

Some online platforms include SchoolPass and MagnusHealth. The self-screening included daily health and wellness screening, temperature monitoring, and simplified contact tracing. Sienna said, “We used Magnus Health as a tool to self-screen. That has to be completed every day by everyone coming to campus. Also to come to campus you need to go through the security gate and need to show that you are screened.”

A school leader shared, “What evolved is a need to use other tools. We have a daily health check in app that we use for all employees and students. That has been a very important tool. We have used that very effectively. The health app was a key piece to our return to campus strategy. What we wanted to do was to track people’s symptoms on a daily basis before they

come to school. It went hand in hand with a very strict stay at home when sick policy. We knew that tracking or contact tracing was an important piece to keep the virus off campus.”

Parents, students, faculty and staff complete the self-screening by answering the required questions before coming to campus. Natalie said, “We do daily wellness screening. Questions are asked about any symptoms, exposure, and recent travel. I think it holds parents and students accountable, as they stress it is for everyone’s safety to not come to school if they are feeling ill at all.”

“I think it has been effective, it is not difficult to do and it adds a layer of parental or student responsibility to monitor their symptoms and close contacts. Of course people can lie or could be asymptomatic but for myself as a parent if the answer was yes for any of the questions, it would deter me from sending my child to school,” Raquel added.

Self-screen apps were also used by all the schools interviewed. Both school leaders and parents agreed that this daily communication was critical to keep the virus off campus. The self-screening app allowed for parents to communicate with the school any illness, travel, possible COVID exposure. And in turn, the schools could use this information shared to keep sick kids off campus, but the information was also used by the schools for contact tracing. The self-screening app also provided families with some reassurance that there were measures in place to try to keep COVID off campus.

Signage

Signage refers to communicating with graphic designs, words, symbols or emblems as a means of giving directions, warnings or providing information. Signs are important because they help establish the safety needs of different establishments. From handling your food to preventing swimming incidents, signs help keep patrons and employees alike safe and informed.

Three school leaders identified the importance of creating signage during COVID to ensure the new rules and policies were understood. One school leader shared that the signs also were important for communicating with parents during drop-off and pick-up because the traffic flow changes and the procedures changed. Another school shared that the signs also were an important mitigation measure because it reminded families to self-screen. Signs that said, “Did You Self-Screen?” were placed throughout campus to ensure families screened their children before dropping off at school.

An interesting observation is that none of the parents identified signage as a mode of communication that the school used to communicate with them. The absence of signage in the parent interviews does not indicate that it was not effective. It could have been that they took these signs for granted as a mode of communication. Another possibility is that the signs did not communicate changing information similar to the other asynchronous methods mentioned such as email, newsletters and website.

4.5 Synchronous Communication

Synchronous communication happens when messages can only be exchanged in real time. It requires that the transmitter and receiver are present in the same time and/or space. Some school leaders shared that the onset of COVID required new synchronous communication tools to supplement the lack of face-to-face interaction. Other schools shared the importance of synchronous communication tools such as chats, virtual meetings, and telephone calls, when dealing with heightened anxiety and crisis situations such as COVID-19.

Chat

Chat refers to the process of communicating, interacting and/or exchanging messages over

the Internet. It involves two or more individuals that communicate through a chat-enabled service or software. Chat is also known as chatting, online chat or Internet chat.

Schools utilize online chat features to allow parents to communicate with the school about COVID. Some used to assist with distance learning transition. Some used to assist with COVID questions. Monica shared, “We added a chat widget so parents could chat directly with us. What was happening was we were losing a lot of face to face interactions because we were in distance learning, and we wanted ways for them to connect with us.”

Online chat was identified as a convenient way for parents to communicate with the school and get help and answers. While some schools offered chats, most did not include this mode in their communication plans. Some parents expressed they would have liked to have a chat function to ask questions because calling seemed disruptive. Cole said, “I like using chat functions when communicating online with businesses and I think this would be helpful to get answers and information about COVID questions.”

Similar to previous research that has identified online chat as an important tool in crisis communication (Taylor & Perry, 2005), quite a few parents had positive attitudes toward online chat as a means of obtaining information from the school leaders about the COVID-19 crisis in a prompt manner. Perhaps, online chat enables organizations to engender trust with key stakeholders through high levels of involvement (Taylor & Perry, 2005).

Virtual Meetings

Virtual meetings are real-time interactions that take place over the Internet using integrated audio and video, chat tools, and application sharing. Some of the commonly used platforms include Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Meeting, Google Meet.

Prior to COVID, most schools did not regularly use virtual meetings to communicate with parents. In fact, many schools shared that they did not hold virtual meetings at all. During COVID, schools hosted virtual meetings to communicate with parents and allow parents to communicate with the schools, primarily to ask questions.

Virtual meetings pave the way for bringing people together and increases educational opportunities. All these efforts aim to maintain a sense of continuity in personal and professional relationships in these difficult times (Antonello, 2020; Hacker et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the new tool presented new challenges. Some schools implanted training for faculty and staff to use the new platform. And some school leaders expressed the quick decisions that were required deciding which of the virtual meeting companies to select for the school's use. Ensuring safety of information, capabilities, and ease of use were a few of the many factors that schools weighed.

The schools reported that during COVID they all held virtual meetings to communicate with parents, however, there were a few schools that made this one of the primary communication channels. One school leader shared, "Knowing that so many people were going to have questions, we arranged about 100 zoom sessions. We had a lot of virtual meetings."

Another school leader added, "I also believe that the all-employee zooms hosted by the Head of School has been a highly effective means of communicating with LJA parents about COVID updates and changes in policy. They have provided an opportunity to reaffirm the school's commitment to transparency, consistency and best practice and to respond in real time to questions and concerns, which in turn have helped to build trust and confidence amongst parents in the school's COVID response.

Overall, parents, especially parents with younger children really appreciated that the school offered virtual meetings. One observation was that parents with younger children seemed to engage in virtual meetings and were likelier to attend the meetings. One parent with high school children said, “My kids are older, so although the school offered zoom meetings, I did not attend any. The emails they sent were good.” Another parent with younger children said, “I attended every parent zoom meeting offered and it was super helpful because we were also allowed to ask questions in the chat, which they answered on the call.”

Virtual meetings were a popular mode of communication – by school leaders and parents. School leaders immediately added this channel to their communication plans given the loss of face-to-face interaction, and families appreciated the ability to engage with the school in real time. Virtual meetings also allowed both school and parents to schedule times to meet and provided the option of one-way or two-way communication depending on how the school used the platform.

Phone

A telephone call is a synchronous form of communication. It is when one party speaks in real time to another party. The phone is also used for text messaging.

As with other studies showing that phone calls are instrumental in conveying crisis information (Tyler, 2005), a common form of phone communication from schools is set up through an emergency messaging system. This allows schools to send large group messages through the selected channels on the system, which generally includes phone call, text, and email. Some schools shared that they did use their emergency messaging system to send COVID information, however, it was very rare and only reserved for urgent messages that needed immediate attention. Trevor explained, “The urgency of the message and level of detail

determined the way we communicated. Urgent messages would go out through text or phone calls. First degree contacts phone calls. Email for broad notifications and new developments. For distance learning information, we used websites and Google classroom to communicate instructions.”

Some schools shared that phone calls were made to families who were determined first-degree contacts, especially when it involved younger students. Peter shared, “Given that I oversee younger children it was extremely important that we make personal phone calls to families affected whenever there was a COVID positive case. So myself and our team would make calls to first-degree contacts. And then follow that up with emails that have more detailed information.”

One school sent daily text messages reminders to self-screen. The school leader shared, “In the beginning we thought people would be annoyed by the text reminders to self-screen. But it has remained a constant piece. Parents rely on it and we will continue to do it.” A parent confirmed this observation, saying, “you had the option to turn off the text notifications, but I needed it.”

Overall, schools shared that phone calls and text messages were not commonly used to communicate COVID messages. This is in line with previous findings that phone calls tend not to be a popular tool in crisis communication (Austin et al., 2012; Craig, Olaniran, Scholl, & Williams, 2006). Parents generally agreed that phone calls and text messages should not be used regularly and only for urgent matters. Raquel said, “I think COVID updates that affect students and/or families should be communicated directly to them in a format depending on the type of information being shared. So email and website for general info and a phone call for more urgent matters.”

Overall, with regards to online synchronous communication, it seems that parents emphasized the usefulness of online chat or virtual meetings over phone calls. Online chat and virtual meetings were the two synchronous modes of communication that parents generally preferred. Most schools only used phone calls for urgent matters, which included contacting first-degree contacts. Some parents shared that for their younger children, schools did make calls during the onset of the pandemic to communicate. While some parents did appreciate the calls, most shared similar sentiments as school leaders that phone calls should only be used for urgent matters and not as a primary channel to communicate.

4.6 COVID-related Communication Styles & Techniques

The new operational reality caused by the COVID-19 pandemic presents unique reputational and communication challenges for schools. In addition to the platforms and communication tools used to deliver messages, the tone and style of message delivery are also critical in assuaging relevant stakeholders such as parents that the school is making earnest attempts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. In interviews with parents, the following communication styles: ensuring safety, creating trust, transparency, and over-communication, were touted as strategies used in school-based communication about the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of communication styles, schools focused on communicating safety, being transparent, over-communicating, and fostering trust in their communication with parents. Many schools formed committees and groups of medical professionals to advise the school on policies and procedures. Finally, mitigation measures, positive case updates, and community spread, were some examples of COVID-19 information that were regularly communicated to ensure parents were informed and assured that the school was providing a safe environment for their children.

Safety Reassurances

Safety refers to the condition of being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury. Safety was identified as an important factor in decision-making during COVID. Similar to studies that have stressed the importance of addressing safety concerns in messages about health crises (Calonge, Aguerrebere, Hultberg, & Connor, 2021), many of the decisions made by the school and parents were done to protect students/children from risk.

During COVID schools worked to quickly to create a new set of policies and procedures to mitigate risk on campus to ensure safety for students, faculty and staff. One school leader shared, “Ultimately we needed to enforce rules to ensure safety. We needed to be clear about our boundaries and rules. We needed to draft the messages to consider all perspectives. Because we were such a collaborative team and all those decisions were made with a very diverse group. We had a task force around COVID to really look at all angles.”

Parents relied on school communications to help reassure them during COVID. The parents reported that they were generally happy with what the school did to help keep their children safe. A parent said, “The school has done a lot to ensure the safety of students and I feel assured that my children are safe when they go to school.”

Create Trust

Trust is defined as a firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something. During COVID, trust was a key factor in ensuring a positive experience for parents, faculty and staff. To ensure parents felt comfortable sending their child to school required trust that the school had the proper protocols in place. To ensure the school could operate required the trust of parents - that they’ll complete the self-screening, report illness/COVID, etc. As with previous studies that have stressed the necessity of building trust between organizations and

stakeholders during crises (Siegrist & Zingg, 2014), the theme of ‘creating trust’ emerged as an important communication style in this study’s interviews.

School leaders expressed that COVID presented the need for trust to become a pillar of communications, but also shared how this presented its challenges given the heightened feelings and constantly changing information. One school leader shared, “There has been a lot of distrust because of the political backdrop, which has been challenging for schools to work through.”

Schools firmed up communications and increased frequency to help build trust, then they went further to add expertise and measures that would further reassure families that the decisions being made and communicated were reliable. A school leader shared, “Our medical team is a heroic group of people who gave up their time, when they are really busy to provide really smart guidance to our school and really build that trust.”

Parents seemed to be understanding of the school’s challenges to make decisions given the new and rapidly changing information. Parents shared that they did rely on the school to provide information, however, they also stayed up-to-date on state and government news to ensure that they were informed to make the best decisions for their child.

Parents generally felt that schools did a good job sharing information and liked having options on how they wanted to engage with the school and how much information they needed to feel they could trust the decisions being made. Bonnie said, “I did attend some meetings and there were parents with a lot more questions. But I felt the school provided a lot of information, support and supplies. You really had to trust the communication because parents weren’t allowed on campus. So you had this blind trust because you just had to drop your kid off and leave.”

Be Transparent

When communicators are transparent, you invite trust by revealing that you have nothing to hide. You establish yourself as an honest, credible person in the eyes of others. Schools identified this as a priority when creating communication plans. During COVID, even more importance was placed on transparency to ensure parents felt reassured that their children could return to campus and safely attend school.

As with scholars that have underscored the value of transparency in crisis communication (Holland, Seltzer, & Kochigina, 2021), the words ‘transparency and transparent’ came up by a few school leaders. Those who spoke about this topic, shared that this was placed as very high importance when creating a COVID communications plan. One leader shared, “Transparency became the hallmark of our health response webpage and our weekly health updates. The weekly health email shares cases we had and we always kept people anonymous. It also shared compliance with daily health app. And our tier system. We wanted to make sure everyone knew what was happening.”

Another school leader added, “We were straight and transparent about why we were making decisions and communicating those decisions.”

Parents also equally brought up these keywords, sharing that they appreciated that the schools were transparent, which in normal circumstances could feel like oversharing of information, but in this case it was necessary. A parent shared, “I thought the school was really responsive and transparent. The weekly updates and zoom sessions made me feel comfortable that they were doing all they can.”

Another parent shared, “I understand the importance of awareness and transparency however, I question whether or not the over consumption of such information about daily case

counts, etc. has a potentially harmful effect for some individuals in creating unnecessary anxiety or uncertainty.”

Over Communicate

During crises, it is imperative to deliberately communicate more than is normal or generally considered necessary (Duck, 1993). Indeed, schools and parents identified the importance of the frequency of communication. During COVID, schools felt the need to over communicate and parents welcomed the communication. When dealing with a critical situation such as the coronavirus pandemic, it is important for employers to over communicate. They should continue routine employee communications whenever possible, in addition to any communications related to the crisis.

School leaders all agreed that there was a lot of over communicating with COVID, but that it was necessary given the uncertainty and the heightened emotions. Chris said, “We also knew communication on a regular basis that was very transparent was also going to be very important. So we started getting those communications out.” Another school leader added, “Constant communication with families was important to reassure them that we are doing what we can with the information we have.”

Some school leaders admitted that parents were possibly over informed and that the amount of communications were not aligned with general practice. Sienna shared, “I think families were possibly over-informed, but in this case because there was so much uncertainty that was necessary, which is not normal. We generally try not to over-communicate to families.”

Parents were mixed on the amount of communication from the schools. Some parents thought it was just right, some shared it was too much, and others said they would have liked more. The parents who expressed receiving too much communications were generally primarily

critical of the content that was shared, explaining that they did not need or want information that did not pertain to them or their child. Raquel said, “Basically as a parent, especially a parent with children at multiple campuses, it would be helpful to have some sort of communication differentiation system so you are able to access all COVID related updates but without it becoming overwhelming or excessive and without the volume of communication becoming so much where you miss the actual important information.”

Other parents observed that the amount of communication from the school tapered off as the COVID pandemic “normalized”. One shared, “We used to get a lot of detailed updates early on, but I do not get as much information and emails. I did like getting all the information because it made me feel like I was in the know of what was happening.”

A few parents questioned whether the amount of information added to the anxiety and feeling of crisis. One parent shared, “The school sends daily emails with the number of positive cases, similar to the daily case counts for the State/Countries. I personally would prefer this information was available on a consumption basis – where current information on cases is easily and readily accessible if you want to view this information but it is not sent directly to you daily. It felt like too much.”

In terms of communication styles, parents seemed to be mostly appreciative of safety reassurances, trust building, and transparent communication from schools, but had mixed opinions about over-communication as an effective communication style. The challenge with over-communicating and why it can be a double-edged sword is because how much information parents is sufficient and what is too much is subjective. During crisis, such as the COVID pandemic, schools made the decision to increase communications for transparency, to build trust, and ensure that families were informed on everything that the school was doing. Most parents

felt the amount of communication received by schools were adequate and they expected and appreciated the work and time the school put in to ensure they were well informed. Some parents worried that over-communicating resulted in increased anxiety and criticized when information sent by the school was not necessary. For example, sending communication for positive cases at other campuses/divisions or for every positive case rather than combining and sharing perhaps weekly. It seemed that they complaints were less about the frequency, but more about the relevance of the information being shared.

4.7 Personnel Involved in COVID-19 Communication

Many Kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12) schools offering in-person learning have adopted strategies to limit the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, and have communicated these strategies to parents at these schools. In particular, specific types of personnel: contact tracing teams and medical advisory boards were convened and trained specifically to communicate information about COVID to parents.

Contact Tracing Teams

Contact tracing is the process of attempting to identify people who have recently been in contact with someone diagnosed with an infectious disease, especially in order to treat or quarantine them. Consistent with emerging crisis communication research on the importance of contact tracing teams in combating COVID-19 (Paek & Hove, 2021), some schools had their own contact tracers to assist with identifying first-degree contacts during a COVID positive incident.

School leaders shared that the quick action to assemble a contact tracing team was due to the mistrust of scientists from the DOH and their limited contact tracing. Schools identified that

keeping the virus off campus required invest in training select school administration that could quickly identify first-degree contacts so those individuals could be contacted and tested.

“Early on we put a priority on getting members of our team certified to contact trace. That has been extremely helpful in identifying first-degree contacts quickly so we can notify families and get people tested promptly to prevent further spread,” said a school leader.

Two schools reported adding new technology to contact trace. A parent shared, “They have a system to contact trace. They put something in the student’s ID that they wear that tracks who they came into contact with. Overall I feel it was very proactive versus reactive.”

Schools credited the use of contact tracers to quickly identify first-degree contacts to test and stay off campus, which resulted in no campus spread. A school leader shared, “We did not have many COVID positive cases. We were fortunate that none of our COVID positive cases were traced to campus. We had a team who were certified to contact trace.”

COVID Response Team/Medical Advisory Board

To streamline COVID decision-making and ensure efficiencies, some schools created a COVID response team that assembled to make decisions about COVID cases, policies and/or procedures. To assist school leadership and administrators, some schools created medical advisory boards to help with COVID-related decision making and provide guidance. Often the medical advisory board was composed of alumni, alumni parents, and current parents. This aligns with previous research on the pivotal roles that medical personnel play in communicating credible information about health crises (Jones & Iverson, 2008).

“We put together a group of medical professionals to help guide our decisions and build trust in our community. So we would sometimes bring them to the parent zoom meetings to share information and answer questions,” said Monica.

Parents identified that having a group of medical professional guiding school administration made them feel reassured. A parent shared, “Our school has a group of medical professionals to help with decision making related to COVID. As a parent I feel good that there were medical professionals helping,”

School leaders identified the decision to form a response team and/or medical group as a critical piece in the COVID crisis plan. “Our COVID Response Team meets and handles first degree contact cases. The Team has done an exemplary job. Our board and our parents have been so supportive, including people who have differences of opinion on how COVID should be handled,” shared Trevor.

Most of the school shared that the medical professionals were primarily current parents, alumni, or alumni parents. Private schools were allowed the affordance of tapping into its parent and alumni connections for medical professionals to volunteer to help with COVID-related decisions.

Overall, parents complimented private school leaders for deploying contact tracing teams and medical personnel to provide COVID-19 updates. Contact tracing and medical personnel are favorably perceived by parents because it provides parents reassurance that the school has credible resources and safety measures in place to keep their children safe. It also provides credibility that the school understands the importance of consulting with medical professionals rather than relying only on school personnel. Schools that trained internal contact tracers also sent the message to parents that it values the importance of quickly responding and is willing to invest time and resources. This also provided schools the opportunity to highlight its strong school ties by showcasing how the medical professionals are connected to the school as alumni, current parent, etc.

4.8 Types of COVID-related Facts and Strategies Communicated

In addition to the broad themes described above, the following COVID-19 facts and terms: ‘positive cases’, ‘community spread’, and ‘risk mitigation strategies’, were widely used when schools communicated with parents about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Positive Cases

A positive case is when a member of the school community tests positive for COVID. This includes students, faculty and staff. This does not include parents or members of the household. As with other institutions and organizations that gave detailed COVID-19 case counts (Shulman, Bullock, & Riggs, 2021), it is a common practice for private schools to report positive cases about COVID. The frequency, detail and channels used to report positive cases varied.

Some schools sent weekly email updates that showed the level the school was in and shared any positive COVID cases and the details. Parents agreed that “this was helpful because it was all in one place.”

How schools handled positive cases varied. Some shared that they made phone calls to parents to notify them and others relied on email communication. Some school leaders also shared that how the school handled positive cases also varied by age of the students involved. “Given that I work with younger children it was extremely important that we make personal phone calls to families affected whenever there was a COVID positive case. So myself and our team would make calls to first-degree contacts. And then follow that up with emails that have more detailed information,” a school leader shared.

School leaders used the positive cases as a measurement of how well school policies and mitigation measures were working. One shared, “We did not have many COVID positive cases. In fact, I can tell you, we have had only 3 cases. We were fortunate that none of our COVID

positive cases were traced to campus.” Parents also reported that they felt the number of positive cases were low and reflected everyone doing their part to keep the virus off campus.

Community Spread

For the purpose of this research, community spread is defined as COVID spread through transmission on campus. Schools used this to determine the effectiveness of mitigation strategies. In line with the approach adopted by other institutions (e.g., Wang, Hao, & Platt, 2021), parents of children in private schools were given updates about the extent of community spread within their respective schools. Parents used this information to determine the effectiveness of mitigation strategies.

School leaders and parents both measured the success of the school’s mitigation measures by campus/community spread. Monica said, “We had very minimal positive cases and no on campus spread, so I think our policies worked. In fact, I think one thing we did that really helped is that we worked quickly and collaboratively.”

Another parent said, “Last year they were successful and knowing how much work and stress COVID added, I say successful because there was zero community spread on campus and they brought the kids back to campus for in-person learning.”

Communicating Risk Mitigation Strategies

Risk management is the identification, evaluation, and prioritization of risks followed by coordinated and economical application of resources to minimize, monitor, and control the probability or impact of unfortunate events or to maximize the realization of opportunities. During COVID, schools worked to communicate the importance of various risk mitigation strategies to their stakeholders.

Following any future school closure, helping parents to feel comfortable returning their child to school will require policy makers and school leaders to communicate about the adequacy of their policies to: (A) ensure that the risk to children in school is minimized; (B) ensure that the educational potential within schools is maximized; and (C) ensure that the benefits of school for the psychological well-being of children are prioritized (Woodland, 2021).

Schools prioritized communicating risk mitigation strategies and that effectively resulted in parents feeling comfortable and confident that the school was doing enough to keep their children safe on campus. A parent shared, “They always emphasized the handwashing and masking and what the school is doing to prevent spread and mitigate the possibility of spread. The way it was described in emails, I felt what the school was doing was sufficient in terms of mitigating the risk. I felt my child was safe and they did what was recommended by the science and they even stated that and pointed to CDC.”

In sum, although it is important for schools to proactively inform parents about risk mitigation strategies, such risk mitigation strategies will only be perceived as effective if they help to reduce positive case counts or community spread within schools. Parents view information about positive cases and community spread as a means to gauge the effectiveness of risk mitigation strategies. Nearly all parents interviewed applauded the school on its mitigation measures based on the low number of positive cases and no community spread. School leaders also made this connection and expressed effectiveness of mitigation measures with case count and no campus spread.

4.9 Overall Findings Summary

Interviews with school leaders and parent identified that the content of the information shared is more important than the channel or the frequency. Parents recognized and appreciated

when schools invested in the resources, such as medical professionals and technology, to ensure school decisions and the information shared is accurate and supported science. Parents were most critical about receiving information that wasn't relevant to their child, suggesting that school's take the time to segment communication and only send to the appropriate audience.

Based on this study's findings, schools should utilize the following strategies in their COVID-19 communication protocols:

- Communicate relevant information. When possible and necessary, segment communication for campus, division, grade
- Offer various asynchronous and synchronous communication options
- Invest in a group of medical professionals to help guide COVID decisions
- Be transparent about COVID cases and campus spread
- Create a shared understanding about communication plans and timing, i.e., Weekly updates or newsletters.
- Leverage existing technology and implement new tools to help with mitigation and communication

5. Limitations & Directions for Future Research

This study was not without its limitations, some of the limitations included parent's ability to recall all the communications sent from the school. Some parents struggled with remembering if the school had a website, or how often they would receive emails, or whether the school offered virtual meetings. What was observed is that parents generally focused on the modes of communications that they preferred and would ignore or bypass the communication that fell outside of what they felt was necessary and important. It was challenging to probe parent participants further if they could not remember.

The in-depth interviews also had its limitations given that it was virtual and did not allow for the personal connections that would possibly prompt interviewees to share more and elaborate. Also given the amount of modes of communications and styles, the questions were tedious and redundant, which made the questions feel repetitive during the in-depth interviews. It was observed that parents possibly skimmed over some of the questions that they weren't as confident answering.

Furthermore, this study was conducted strictly within Hawaii's context and cannot be generalized to private schools on the U.S mainland. As such, future research should examine whether parents in private schools on the U.S mainland have similar views about the COVID-19 related communication strategies employed by their schools.

Future studies can expand on the effectiveness of parent communications during COVID by researching K-12 public schools and charter schools. This will broaden the parent base and draw deeper comparisons. It may also be considered to send the questions via email rather than via a virtual platform or in-person. This format could allow parents to review the questions and

answer more in-depth given they have time to prepare, review and find past communications if needed. This could have resulted in richer data and information.

Future research could also include interviews with school faculty and staff to offer another perspective and opinion. This could add another layer to compare the effectiveness of communication with employees and compare the differences and similarities between what is sent to parents and what is sent to employees.

Also, in-depth interviews have limited generalizability as opposed to quantitative research methods such as surveys administered using probability sampling methods (Baxter & Babbie, 2003). Future research can utilize quantitative research methods such as close-ended surveys to ascertain which modes of communication are most effective at communicating COVID-19 related information among a nationally representative sample of parents from private schools.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, there were many similarities between what school leaders prioritized and thought to be effective communication and what parents thought was effective. Most parents felt that the COVID communications from the school was sufficient and some even expressed that there it did not need much improvement. Parents preferred asynchronous communication over synchronous communication for regular communications, however, they did appreciate synchronous for important announcements and updates. Parents' opinions varied on what they thought was the most effective mode based on the information being shared. Many of the schools selected the mode of communication depending on the messaging, however, there were some that relied on emails and website as the primary channel. There were some areas that the priorities of school leaders and parents did not align. For instance, many school leaders placed a high importance on create a COVID webpage however, many parents expressed they weren't sure the school had a dedicated COVID webpage. Most parents shared that the updates and information shared in emails were sufficient and where they went to if they needed to go back to reference past information. Some admitted they never went to the website.

The varying opinions and preferences by parents suggest that schools should invest in multiple modes of communication – both asynchronous and synchronous. Planning should include pre-selecting the mode of communication depending on the content and message to ensure quick responses and sharing. Parents appreciated timely information that was aligned with what was being shared in the news.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents prioritized trust, transparency and frequent communications. Given the new situation, parents relied on the school to create a plan and implement policies and mitigation measures that ensures parents their children are safe. The

mitigation measures parents most appreciated were having medical professionals to help guide school decisions, internal contact tracing, and self-screening apps. Both schools and parents attributed the effectiveness of mitigation measures and communications to positive case counts and campus spread.

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Appendices

Parent Semi-Structured Interview Instrument

Parent Introductory Questions

1. What private school does your child attend?
2. What grade is your child in?

Main Questions

1. In what ways has *insert name of private school's* instructional approach evolved throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. Possible probes:
 - i. When did the school decide to adopt distance-based learning?
 - ii. Is the school back to in-person instruction now? Why or why not?
2. What methods did the school use to communicate with parents about COVID-19 updates?
 - a. Possible probes for each specific method listed:
 - i. What are some advantages of *insert specific method*?
 - ii. Why did the school use *insert specific method* to communicate with you?
 - iii. What type(s) of information did the school convey to you using *insert specific method*?
 - iv. What did you like about *insert specific method of communication*?
 - v. What are some disadvantages of *insert specific method of communication*?
 - vi. What did you dislike about *insert specific method of communication*?
 - b. General probes:

- i. Among all methods of communication that you have described, which is the most effective and why?
- ii. Among all methods of communication that you have described, which is the most ineffective and why?
- iii. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, in what ways (if any) has your child's school changed the way they communicate with you about this pandemic?
- iv. Overall, what improvements (if any) do you think can be made in terms of the way your child's school communicates with you about the COVID-19 pandemic?

Does the school screen your child for COVID symptoms in efforts to mitigate risk on campus?

a. Possible probes:

- i. Did the school introduce any new technology to screen for symptoms? Or did the school use existing technology or method?
- ii. How did the school communicate to you about the screening?
- iii. Can you explain the process of the screening?
- iv. In your opinion has the screening been effective?

Concluding Questions

1. Is there anything that you'd like to add?
2. Could you send to me examples of COVID communication sent from the school?

School Leader Interview Instrument

School Leader Introductory Questions

1. What private school do you work at
2. What is your job title?
3. How long have been you working at the school?
4. How long have you been working in education?
5. What grades are offered at the school you work at?
6. How many students are at the school you work at?

Main Questions

In what ways has *insert name of private school's* instructional approach evolved throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?

c. Possible probes:

- i. When did the school decide to adopt distance-based learning?
- ii. Is the school back to in-person instruction now? Why or why not?

What methods did the school use to communicate with parents about COVID-19 updates?

d. Possible probes for each specific method listed:

- i. What are some advantages of *insert specific method*?
- ii. Why did the school use *insert specific method* to communicate with parents?
- iii. What type(s) of information did the school convey using *insert specific method*?
- iv. What did you find successful and positive about *insert specific method of communication*?

- v. What are some challenges or negatives of *insert specific method of communication*?
 - vi. What was the feedback you received from parents about *insert specific method of communication*?
- e. General probes:
- i. Among all methods of communication that you have described, which is the most effective and why?
 - ii. Among all methods of communication that you have described, which is the most ineffective and why?
 - iii. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, in what ways (if any) how has the school changed the way they communicate with parents about this pandemic?
 - iv. Overall, what improvements (if any) do you think can be made in terms of the way the school communicates with parents about the COVID-19 pandemic?

Does your school screen students and faculty for COVID symptoms to mitigate risk on campus?

- b. Possible probes:
- i. Did the school use existing technology or method to screen for symptoms?
 - ii. Was any new technology or methods introduced to screen for symptoms?
 - iii. How did the school communicate the screening?
 - iv. Can you explain the process of the screening?
 - v. Has the screening been effective?

How many COVID-19 positive cases has your school had since March 2020?

a. Possible probes:

- i. Has there been any cases of spread on campus?
- ii. Does your school have a COVID Response Team that handles COVID-19 decisions and/or incidents?
- iii. Does your school have a dedicated COVID nurse?
- iv. Does your school have contact tracers?
- v. Do you feel your school has been prepared to respond to COVID positive cases?

Concluding Questions

1. Is there anything that you'd like to add?
2. Could you send to me examples of COVID communication sent from the school?

Recruitment Email

Dear XXX

My name is Melissa Leina'ala Moniz and I am a graduate student at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in the School of Communications. You are being invited to participate in an interview on *Effective Communication Strategies to Keep Parents of Private Schools Updated During the COVID-19 Pandemic* that is being conducted as part of the requirements for earning my graduate degree.

These in-depth interviews will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. Only you and I will be present during the interview. With your permission, (I will audio-record the interview so that I can later transcribe the interview and analyze the responses). You will be one of about 20 people I will interview for this study.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you can skip any questions you feel uncomfortable answering. There are no significant risks to participating in this interview outside of what you ordinarily encounter in daily life. You will benefit from participation in this interview by possibly gaining new knowledge about what communication strategies are *effective* in keeping parents of private school children in Hawaii updated about COVID-19?

After I write a copy of the interviews, I will erase or destroy the audio-recordings. When I report the results of my research project, I will not use your name and company name. I will not use any other personal identifying information that can identify you. I will use pseudonyms (fake names) and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.

For questions, concerns, complaints you may contact Melissa Leina'ala Moniz, the principal investigator for this study by email at leinaala24@gmail.com. You can also contact her advisor, Dr. Rachel Neo at rneo@hawaii.edu or phone at 808-956-3332.

Sincerely,
Melissa Leina'ala Moniz
School of Communications
The University of Hawaii at Manoa

Informed Consent Form (School Leaders)



University of Hawai'i
Consent to Participate in a Research Project
Melissa Leina'ala Moniz, Co-Principal Investigator

Project title: Effective Communication Strategies to Keep Parents of Private Schools Updated During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Aloha! My name is Melissa Leina'ala Moniz and you are invited to take part in a research study. I am a graduate student at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in the Department of Communication. As part of the requirements for earning my graduate degree, I am doing a research project.

What am I being asked to do?

If you participate in this project, I will have an online interview with you via an online platform of your choice such as Zoom, Skype, or Facetime at a time and location that is convenient with you.

Taking part in this study is your choice.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time. If you stop being in the study, there will be no penalty or loss to you.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of my project is examining what communication strategies are *effective* in keeping parents of private school children in Hawaii updated about COVID-19? I am asking you to participate because you are a school leader at a Hawaii public school.

What will happen if I decide to take part in this study?

The interview will consist of approximately 20 open-ended questions. It will take 45 minutes to an hour. The interview questions will include questions like, "What methods does your school use to communicate with parents about COVID-19 updates?" Only you and I will be present during the interview. With your permission, I will audio-record the interview so that I can later transcribe the interview and analyze the responses. You will be 1 of 5 school leaders I will interview for this study.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part in this study?

I believe there is little risk to you for participating in this research project. You may become stressed or uncomfortable answering any of the interview questions or discussing topics with me during the interview. If you do become stressed or uncomfortable, you can skip the question or take a break. You can also stop the interview or you can withdraw from the project altogether.

There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this interview. The results of this project may help schools create effective communication plans for the COVID-19 crisis, as well as better inform schools for future pandemic crisis. This will allow schools to improve on

current communication strategies and create effective strategies and protocols that will result in optimal learning conditions for the students.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

I will keep all study data secure in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office/encrypted on a password protected computer. Only my University of Hawai'i advisor and I will have access to the information. Other agencies that have legal permission have the right to review research records. The University of Hawai'i Human Studies Program has the right to review research records for this study.

After I write a copy of the interviews, I will erase or destroy the audio-recordings. When I report the results of my research project, I will not use your name. I will not use any other personal identifying information that can identify you. I will use pseudonyms (fake names) and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation for your time and effort in participating in this research project.

Future Research Studies:

Even after removing identifiers, the data from this study will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Questions:

If you have any questions about this study, please email me at leinaala24@gmail.com You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Rachel Neo, at 808-956-3332 & rneo@hawaii.edu. You may contact the UH Human Studies Program at 808.956.5007 or uhirb@hawaii.edu. to discuss problems, concerns and questions; obtain information; or offer input with an informed individual who is unaffiliated with the specific research protocol. Please visit <http://go.hawaii.edu/jRd> for more information on your rights as a research participant."

Keep a copy of the informed consent for your records and reference.

Signature(s) for Consent:

I give permission to join the research project entitled, "Effective Communication Strategies to Keep Parents of Private Schools Updated During the COVID-19 Pandemic"

Please initial next to either "Yes" or "No" to the following:

___ Yes ___ No I consent to be audio-recorded for the interview portion of this research.

Name of Participant (Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Signature of the Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

Informed Consent Form (Parents)



University of Hawai'i Consent to Participate in a Research Project Melissa Leina'ala Moniz, Co-Principal Investigator

Project title: Effective Communication Strategies to Keep Parents of Private Schools Updated During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Aloha! My name is Melissa Leina'ala Moniz and you are invited to take part in a research study. I am a graduate student at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in the Department of Communication. As part of the requirements for earning my graduate degree, I am doing a research project.

What am I being asked to do?

If you participate in this project, I will have an online interview with you via an online platform of your choice such as Zoom, Skype, or Facetime at a time and location that is convenient with you.

Taking part in this study is your choice.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time. If you stop being in the study, there will be no penalty or loss to you.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of my project is examining what communication strategies are *effective* in keeping parents of private school children in Hawaii updated about COVID-19? I am asking you to participate because you are an adult aged 18 and above who is a parent with a child aged between 5-18 years old who is currently studying in a Hawaii private school.

What will happen if I decide to take part in this study?

The interview will consist of approximately 20 open-ended questions. It will take 45 minutes to an hour. The interview questions will include questions like, "What methods did the school use to communicate with parents about COVID-19 updates?" Only you and I will be present during the interview. With your permission, I will audio-record the interview so that I can later transcribe the interview and analyze the responses. You will be one of 10 parents I will interview for this study.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part in this study?

I believe there is little risk to you for participating in this research project. You may become stressed or uncomfortable answering any of the interview questions or discussing topics with me during the interview. If you do become stressed or uncomfortable, you can skip the question or take a break. You can also stop the interview or you can withdraw from the project altogether.

There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this interview. The results of this project may help schools create effective communication plans for the COVID-19 crisis, as well as better inform schools for future pandemic crisis. This will allow schools to improve on current communication strategies and create effective strategies and protocols that will result

in optimal learning conditions for the students.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

I will keep all study data secure in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office/encrypted on a password protected computer. Only my University of Hawai'i advisor and I will have access to the information. Other agencies that have legal permission have the right to review research records. The University of Hawai'i Human Studies Program has the right to review research records for this study.

After I write a copy of the interviews, I will erase or destroy the audio-recordings. When I report the results of my research project, I will not use your name. I will not use any other personal identifying information that can identify you. I will use pseudonyms (fake names) and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation for your time and effort in participating in this research project.

Future Research Studies:

Even after removing identifiers, the data from this study will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Questions:

If you have any questions about this study, please email me at leinaala24@gmail.com You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Rachel Neo, at 808-956-3332 & rneo@hawaii.edu. You may contact the UH Human Studies Program at 808.956.5007 or uhirb@hawaii.edu. to discuss problems, concerns and questions; obtain information; or offer input with an informed individual who is unaffiliated with the specific research protocol. Please visit <http://go.hawaii.edu/jRd> for more information on your rights as a research participant."

Keep a copy of the informed consent for your records and reference.

Signature(s) for Consent:

I give permission to join the research project entitled, "Effective Communication Strategies to Keep Parents of Private Schools Updated During the COVID-19 Pandemic"

Please initial next to either "Yes" or "No" to the following:

___ Yes ___ No I consent to be audio-recorded for the interview portion of this research.

Name of Participant (Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Signature of the Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____