

Tips for Parents on School Emergency Communications

What starts as a normal school day can quickly change in the event of an emergency at one of our 14 Dickinson ISD campuses. This was the case on Tuesday, April 12 at Dickinson High School when the school front office received a phone call from a person who said he was in a bathroom at the school with a gun.

When an emergency occurs, Dickinson ISD implements detailed procedures to keep students and staff safe. It is so important for parents and the community to understand that at that initial announcement of an emergency, the sole focus is the safety of students and staff. With this in mind, below are several key points related to communication for parents and the community to consider when a school emergency happens.

1. ***Students will text parents quicker than the school district can notify parents.*** As soon as the emergency occurs, the principal will make an announcement about the emergency and initiate emergency procedures. After the announcement is made, students, especially at the secondary level, will begin texting family and friends. Upon making that announcement, the school notifies the district's Education Support Center. Key district administrators are quickly located and begin organizing communication efforts. From the time district administration is notified, to when a message is sent to parents, can take several minutes as it takes time to gather the most updated and factual information about the emergency and then draft the message to send to parents.
2. ***Social media and the district website will be the first places to look for emergency communications.*** Parents often question the school district about why the parent is finding out about the emergency through social media. While not everyone has social media, most do and information spreads quickly with just the click of a button. In addition, these communication tools can be quickly and easily corrected and updated. We always post information on social media and the district website first while working on the call out and email to parents since call outs and emails take more time. In addition, we have no control over the parents posting information on social media that they have received in a text from a student before the district has been able to communicate the emergency to parents.

3. ***School call outs and emails will take time.*** After a message is drafted and added to the parent notification system, it will take several minutes for it to reach all parents. Remember, in the case of an emergency at DHS, it is sending the message to approximately 3,400 parents. In the case of a district-wide emergency, it has to reach nearly 12,000 parents. The system will try a parent's phone number up to three times if someone does not answer or it is unable to leave a message. I can tell you that with the April 12 DHS emergency, when we were working on a second update callout, the initial callout was still trying to reach parents 20-30 minutes after it started because the parent had not answered and did not have voicemail enabled.

4. ***Update parent contact information and enable voicemail.*** It is extremely important that parents make sure their contact information with the school district is current. This is vital information we need to communicate with you. So many times, we find parents who do not have voicemail set up on their phone. Other times, the voice mailbox is full and not accepting new messages. Please help us communicate with you by setting up voicemail and deleting old voicemails so new ones can be left. If you miss a call from us, please check your voicemail to hear the message.

I hope this information provides parents with some insight to the communication process we quickly initiate when an emergency occurs. In the event of an emergency, all other work stops, and our focus in the Communications Department shifts to make sure we are communicating with parents and the community as quickly and efficiently as possible. The safety of our students and staff is our top priority, and we want to ensure the information you receive is accurate and factual. Please be patient with us as we try to provide you with this information as quickly as possible.