




CASE STUDY

COMMUNICATING DURING COVID-19:
CENTRAL ARKANSAS CHRISTIAN
SCHOOLS' OUTREACH AND
DISTANCE LEARNING STRATEGIES





When COVID-19 began sweeping across the United States in early March, many schools experienced a similar timeline of temporary closures and initial tentative planning, which then turned into full-scale emergency planning and an immediate switch to fully remote instruction. Central Arkansas Christian Schools' experience looked a lot like that. The independent private school, with three campuses located in Little Rock, North Little Rock, and Maumelle, Arkansas, was founded in 1971 and has about 800 students enrolled.

Tracy Crawford, FACTS' K-12 customer relationship manager, spoke to Director of Communications Rachel Brackins about Central Arkansas Christian Schools' exceptional, consistent communications plan and their pivot to distance learning and remote instruction.

► **Tracy:** What does your role entail as Director of Communications for the school?

► **Rachel:** I do all the internal and external communications: administration-to-faculty communications, or school-to-teacher communications, but then I'm also responsible for school-to-home and school-to-external audience communications too, via our social media, website, and other channels.

► **Tracy:** I imagine your role has changed significantly during this crisis.

► **Rachel:** It's changed a lot. On a day-to-day basis, my normal responsibilities focus on community engagement. I focus on making sure parents are informed about what's going on at the school, what's coming up, and how they can be involved. On the student side, my normal communications are around keeping them involved, sharing what the students are doing, and recognizing the good things they are doing.

When the pandemic started making its way into Arkansas, my role shifted solely to focusing on communications. We needed to make sure parents and students understood the decisions that had been made and they had the tools they needed to make the shift to online learning. We also had to anticipate and answer questions related to the emotional crisis side of this—how can we as a school support the families and the students? We needed to provide detailed explanations of what we were doing to support them, while also giving them the confidence to move to remote learning.

► **Tracy:** What was the COVID-19 timeline at your school? How did the crisis unfold for you and your families?

► **Rachel:** The first case was detected in Pine Bluff, Arkansas on Wednesday, March 11. That's about three and a half hours away from the school. The president of the school [Dr. Carter Lambert] wanted us to immediately communicate with parents, so we crafted an email to families letting them know we were aware and taking precautionary steps.

By that evening, I had received the call that we were temporarily closing campus the following day, Thursday. We were notified that a parent had come into contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19 on a business trip. We anticipated closing temporarily, cleaning the school, and re-opening the following Monday. We planned to close Thursday and Friday and we were not going to require any work for the students those days. We sent another communication to families informing them of those changes. And then, later that Thursday, the governor of Arkansas closed four school districts in the state and our school falls within one of those districts. We called a war room meeting and immediately began making plans to transition to online learning.

We did online learning the entire next week, had our spring break, and then resumed online learning. We've been doing it ever since.

► **Tracy:** I imagine you were busy over spring break planning for making the switch to distance learning!

► **Rachel:** We were incredibly busy. We realized we needed a remote learning *strategy*. We weren't sure how long this was going to last. We were more hopeful for a shorter timeline in early March than we are now.

When we originally came up with our week-long plan prior to spring break, it was just a temporary plan. For our secondary school, we knew we had enough Chromebooks for the students—our technology team is incredible. We're not a 1:1 school, but we have enough Chromebooks for every classroom. We initially came up with a device loan program for the Chromebooks for our secondary students. For our elementary students, we did physical PDF packets created by the teachers to cover a week's worth of material. Then spring break happened and we became aware that our campus closure would last much longer. At that point we sat down and began to differentiate and plan much more thoroughly.

One thing I want to add is that we have a rule that we communicate with faculty members first. Always. I cannot preach that enough. As an administrative team, it is so important to communicate with your faculty and staff first before your families and students. We also like to give a 24-hour grace period from when we give a plan to our faculty and staff before we share it with parents and students so we can have time to adjust if there are issues.

► **Tracy:** What were some of the adjustments or changes you made over spring break once you knew the campus closures would last longer?

► **Rachel:** We revised both the secondary and elementary remote learning strategies. The biggest change was to the elementary strategy because that was originally a physical PDF packet, and then we made it all online and included them in the device loan program.

We talked to our Google-certified educator and created tutorial videos for our families and started from ground zero, understanding there was a global pandemic and understanding our families were not used to having their students at home all day. We absolutely did not want to overwhelm our families.

► **Tracy:** Have you changed the way you're handling assessments and grading too?

► **Rachel:** Originally, we were going to do grading as normally as possible with less homework and classwork. But parents and the administration still felt like that was too much, especially for our middle schoolers. It was causing stress and anxiety for the students and parents. Our new grading philosophy for our middle school is a pass/fail system and that was to alleviate stress on middle school parents and students. That's now in place for grades 4 through 8.



► **Tracy:** How have your parents responded to the shift to remote learning?

- **Rachel:** Our parents were very patient because they understood this was new territory for us, like everyone. And we made it a point to overcommunicate and reassure families, especially as campus closed and we moved to distance learning. We wanted to avoid them asking, “Well have you thought about this? Have you thought about that?” We wanted to anticipate their needs. It now feels as normal to “regular” school as it possibly can under the circumstances.

► **Tracy:** What are your main communication channels to your families? What are your communication strategies?

- **Rachel:** Clear, concise communications are something I’ve been a big proponent of throughout my time here at the school. A lot of times school communications can include too much information, too many words, and not enough visuals. And even if it’s important and even if it’s something the parent needs to know, they won’t read it.

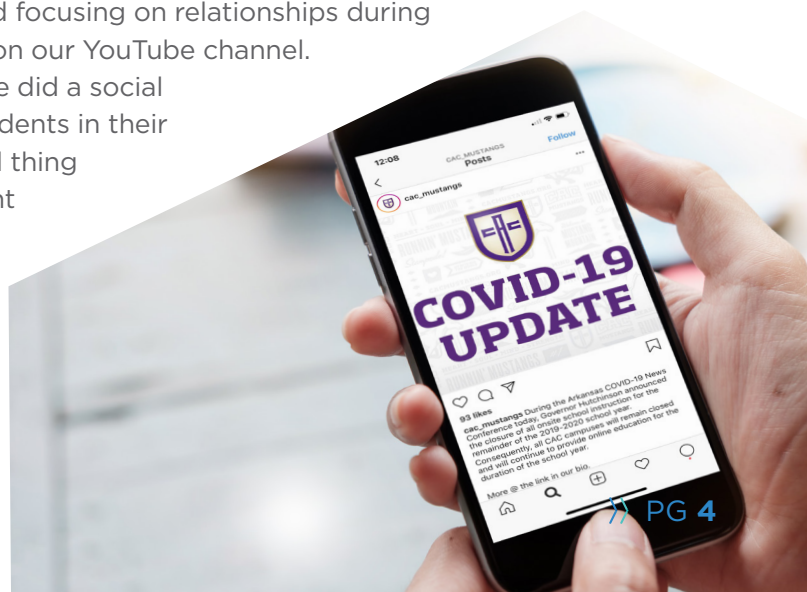
From the get-go, we knew that we needed something on the website that could house our COVID-19 updates. Every update that was sent to parents was sent through FACTS SIS’ communications area. All it said was “COVID Update” in the subject line with the date. In the body of the email it said, “Please click here to view the most recent COVID-19 update,” with a thank you from our president. That link would take them to our COVID-19 area on our website with the most updated information they needed to know. They could scroll down and see our updates and all our communications from the very beginning. We call that area on our website our [COVID-19 information hub](#). The most recent information is always at the top. We didn’t want parents or students to have to go back through dozens of emails to find the information they needed.

What I love about using FACTS SIS for our email communications is that I can send them but still have them come from our president so he doesn’t have to spend time on them or work on them, but can still receive the replies. Part of my job as the communications director is to take that burden off him so he doesn’t have to think about it. I get the green light from him, go into FACTS SIS, write the communication, send it from him, and then we’re done. From my perspective, the communication capabilities were a life-changer.

► **Tracy:** Your school has an amazing social media presence.

- **Rachel:** We worked really hard on our social media engagement before COVID-19 and that’s paid off now. We’ve shifted our content there now to drive traffic to our COVID-19 information hub so I’ve been creating graphics and posting a link with it to make sure people have the information there too.

We’ve also shifted our content to being encouraging and focusing on relationships during this time. We’re doing things like offering chapel online on our YouTube channel. We’re working on community engagement there too. We did a social distancing teacher parade for the elementary school students in their cars in our campus parking lots, which was an emotional thing for the elementary students and a good connection point for everyone. We also decided to do yard signs for all our seniors. They were all individualized with their names and their senior photos. We used FACTS SIS to pull their names, addresses, and deployed our admin staff in clusters in neighborhoods early one morning to put them in their yards. One of the best parts of that was that our parents started organically sharing that content too.



► **Tracy:** What are your top tips for schools transitioning to remote learning successfully?

- **Rachel:** You have to break it down to the basics. For example, we made a video on how to log into a Chromebook and for some parents that was a lifesaver. You have to work through every question that you could possibly anticipate. If you have a trusted person that's a parent or a faculty member, show them a communication that you're planning on sending out and ask them to read it with the eyes of a parent. Ask them what information you're missing or what questions parents might still ask. We have this mantra: "No questions." We want to anticipate as many things as we can up front.

See how you can support your families too. Parents and students will be more understanding about changes if they know your communications are coming from a place of love and care. It's not just saying "we are here for you." You have to show that you actually mean it. For example, we created a small business support page. We sent out an email and put a message on social media that said, "If you have a small business or know someone that has one that's been affected by this, reach out to us and we'll add your business to our support page." That way we and our families can help support our local small businesses. Actions over words, all the time.

► **Tracy:** I love that so much. Have you seen your marketing and admissions processes change during this time too?

- **Rachel:** It's changed pretty dramatically. We, just now, shifted our focus to how we need to change our admissions practices. Our admissions director is great at interpersonal relationships. We sent all prospective and admitted families a message that said we're thinking about you, we're praying for you, we already consider you a part of our family, and we showed them how we're interacting with our current families. We showed them our information hub and our distance learning plan as an example of that. All our campus tours, shadow days—we're not doing any of that. We haven't done virtual tours yet, but we're thinking about that. We're just now thinking about how we can make more changes.

► **Tracy:** What's the next big thing for you to tackle this year or over the summer?

- **Rachel:** Can we do graduation? Can we do senior day? Our seniors are looking forward to a lot of things. So we're looking at community engagement tools to feature our seniors and make them feel special. And then we need to pivot our focus to admissions.

► **Tracy:** It was so great speaking with you. You have done such inspiring work at your school. Do you have any final thoughts to share with other educators or administrators?

- **Rachel:** It's worth the hard work. It's worth the time and effort you'll put in at the front end thinking about all the questions and considering all your potential audiences. And there are at least six potential audiences for us as a private school: secondary faculty, elementary faculty, secondary parents, elementary parents, the student body (seniors and senior parents), and prospective families/students. Communication is so important and doing it carefully, clearly, and with purpose really makes a difference.

