

DISASTER STRIKES

On August 10, 2020, a derecho tore through the Midwest.

Cedar Rapids, Iowa, experienced the brunt of the devastation.

- During a historic pandemic
- Days before scheduled school reopening
- On the first day of new teacher orientation



[Derecho: a large fast-moving complex of thunderstorms with powerful straight-line winds that cause widespread destruction.]

2021 NSPRA National School Public Relations Communication Award
Gold Medallion Entry - CRISIS COMMUNICATION



Cedar Rapids Community School District (CRCSD)
2500 Edgewood Rd NW | Cedar Rapids, IA 52405

PreK-12 school district | 16,294 students | 3,100 staff | Four communication team members

Submitted by:
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SYNOPSIS

On August 10, 2020, the day started with a promising hint of normalcy for the district as new teacher orientation began. Staff were also back together—socially distanced and masked—for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began mid-March. Then, four hours later, an unforeseen natural disaster struck the community, including all 31 Cedar Rapids Community School District (CRCSD) school buildings.

Derecho? Many of us in the communications profession, founded in words, had never heard of this natural phenomena, but we all learned the devastating effects of the 142-mile-per-hour winds and pounding rain associated with a derecho.

[The Weather Channel Interviews Superintendent Noreen Bush as Main Feature Story](#)

Just two weeks before rolling out our [Return to Learn Plan](#), sirens blared and underground shelter was sought as we all were concerned about our colleagues and daycare children out in our school buildings. This, as we tried to adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols and worry about our own homes and relatives.



Once the communications team, superintendent and facilities managers emerged from our underground shelters, we immediately launched into crisis mode. This document provides an overview of how CRCSD conducted crisis communications and hopefully can be a guide for other districts who may someday find themselves operating under these types of conditions:

A community and school district operating without an infrastructure:

- Nearly the entire community without electrical power (an average of six days, with some of the population without power for up to 10 days)
- Nearly the entire community without internet access (an average of a week, with pockets of the community without internet for many weeks)
- CRCSD internal IT system completely down for over a week, including email and all other messaging tools
- All 31 school buildings suffered damage, 21 severely

Communication during a natural disaster, pandemic and just prior to school start date:

- Negotiations with Iowa Governor's office to obtain new school start date due to several buildings inhabitable
- National media attention for rare, destructive disaster just weeks before the beginning of an already unique school year
- Our superintendent leading at time of personal health journey. [Pandemic, derecho and the Big "C"](#)

GOAL SETTING AND RESEARCH

After emerging from shelter, the communications director and superintendent immediately met to establish goals and priorities within the crisis environment and create solutions to the obstacles CRCSD faced: no electrical power, no internet, roadways completely blocked by fallen debris, high heat index, and the district's IT infrastructure down.

Goals:

1. Find a way to distribute crisis information to staff and families with extremely limited digital assets available.
2. Garner regional and national media attention, as the country (and many in our state) were unaware of the devastation due to lack of initial widespread media coverage.
3. Help CRCSD students and families with basic human needs of food, water and shelter. Plans for learning to come, as the immediate focus was health and safety.
4. Advocate to the Iowa Governor and Iowa Department of Education for a delay to the school year, as all 31 school buildings were damaged; 21 of them severely.
5. Communicate the rollout for return to respective buildings under repair to all affected families and the community. Note: this was executed with a layer of pandemic safety protocols and state mandates added to the mix.

Note: The evaluation section on page 11 outlines our measurement around these goals.

CRCSD by the Numbers



16,294
ENROLLMENT

121 square miles
SIZE OF
DISTRICT

3,100
STAFF



1,081
ENGLISH LANGUAGE
LEARNERS

60
COUNTRIES
REPRESENTED



21 schools
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

6 schools
MIDDLE SCHOOLS

4 schools
HIGH SCHOOLS

THE AFTERMATH

Iowa derecho in August was most costly thunderstorm disaster in U.S. history

"The storm complex, blamed for four deaths, hit Cedar Rapids, Iowa, particularly hard, cutting power to almost the entire city of 133,000 people and damaging most of its businesses and homes."

The Washington Post
[October 17, 2020](#)

2020 U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters in historical context

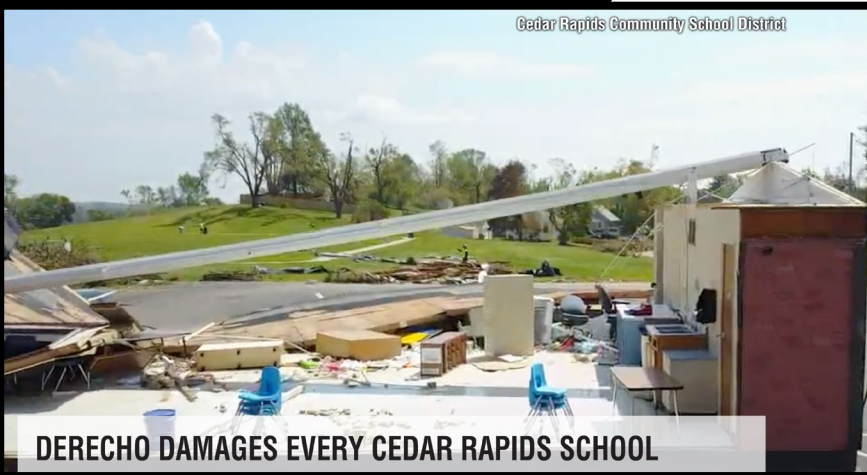
"There was also severe damage to homes, businesses and vehicles particularly in Cedar Rapids, Iowa."

Climate.gov
[January 8, 2021](#)

\$4 Billion in Federal Aid to Cedar Rapids

"Derecho damages every Cedar Rapids school. The president is coming today."

The Weather Channel
[National: The Weather Channel Feature Interview](#)



DERECHO DAMAGES EVERY CEDAR RAPIDS SCHOOL



DERECHO DAMAGES EVERY CEDAR RAPIDS SCHOOL

Photo credit: CRCSD Published: The Weather Channel

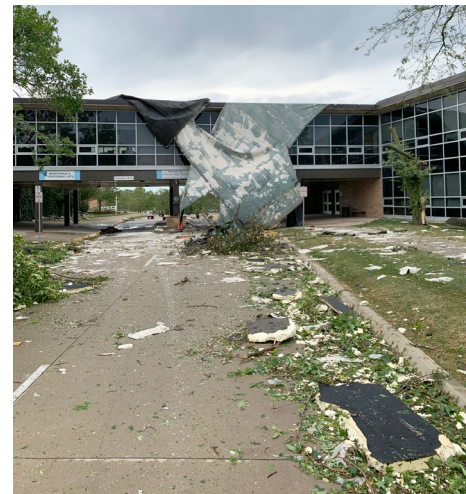
PLAN AND IMPLEMENTATION

1. Find a way to distribute crisis information to staff and families with limited digital assets available.

The city's electrical and digital infrastructure was down for six to 10 days depending on location, with the internet grid down in many areas for even longer. Yet, we needed to get critical communication out to families, staff and the media.

In the initial week, the only means of communication for the entire city was via cell service, which was extremely spotty. Therefore, mass phone calls, text messaging, social media platforms via apps, and Facebook Live press conferences were the modes of communication that all school families turned to for information. Mass email was sent out, but we knew a percentage of family contacts utilized work emails and many of those servers were down throughout the city.

- Utilized cell service based on digital platforms in lieu of internet services
- Pushed out to platforms that could be retrieved by cell services
- Twitter, Facebook, Instagram became important tools
- Distributed mass phone and text messages
- Utilized radio as people were driving in their cars and could retrieve the information
- Engaged with the local TV stations' Facebook Live press conferences that had large followings
- Superintendent Noreen Bush, as part of a city-wide crisis team, presented at press conferences that a significant amount of the population waited for each day



The Morning After

No electrical power. No internet access. CRCSD server down.

“We drove through the disaster zones as best we could in search of stronger cell service and to charge our phones and laptops, as car chargers were the only means available due to the entire city without electrical power. The cell phone was needed as my initial hotspot to connect my work laptop, as the city was without internet access also. Additionally, our CRCSD server was down and we needed to create a way to access our databases to send critical messaging out via our School Messenger tool. As my IT colleague simultaneously drove through the city in order for us to communicate via cell phone, we mastered a backend entry that allowed me to send critical communications to staff and families.”

CRCSD Director of Communications

2. Garner regional and national media attention, as the country (and many in our state) were unaware of the devastation due to lack of initial widespread media coverage.

Our community experienced literally and figuratively the “perfect storm.” We needed media coverage to help garner the attention necessary to obtain federal aid, but there was a pandemic and our state COVID-19 numbers were high. No national journalists (CNN, GMA, etc) were able to travel to our state, so the rest of the country did not understand our plight, hampering the arrival of additional resources.

- Our local news stations were trying to get the word out via their national contacts with some success days later. CRCSD contributed to the national lens by landing a significant feature on The Weather Channel (they sent one reporter and camera person) where the main topic was all the damage to schools just days before what was to be the opening of a new school year.



- Additionally, we even needed to get the attention of our state government to garner funding and allow the alteration to our school start date (this is detailed on page 8). In coordination with Governor Kim Reynolds' communication team, a tour of damaged schools and media coverage was orchestrated.

[Superintendent Bush and Governor Reynolds Derecho Damage Tour and Meeting](#)



- A press conference was held after then-President Trump visited Cedar Rapids, bringing national attention that day to the derecho-damaged area. The president declared federal funding would be given to Cedar Rapids. Superintendent Bush was featured in that press conference: [Derecho Press Conference and Media Coverage](#)

3. Help CRCSD students and families with basic human needs of food, water and shelter. Plans for learning to come, as the immediate focus is health and safety.

CRCSD staff at our schools spread their caring network out to the streets to search for district families/students in need and offer a supportive hand and kind voice. Here is one example of inspirational stories we pitched to the media outlining the dedicated acts from our staff, and most importantly it reflects the wonderful resilience of our district families:

[With students displaced, Cedar Rapids' Hoover Elementary staff steps up after derecho](#)

“We’re not just another number. We’re actual people they care about.”

Hoover Elementary Family



As people in the community quickly wanted to help displaced families and staff who were suffering right before what was to be the start of a new school year, communications were sent out directing people to the Cedar Rapids Community School Foundation and the contributions were disseminated to those in need.



Striving for a feeling of normalcy, the high school football season was allowed to occur even with limited equipment due to damage.

An opposing team created a GoFundMe campaign and presented our Jefferson High School players with a check at halftime to help pay for needed equipment.

The communications team helped express gratitude via social media and the post catapulted to over 1,900 likes, 1,500 shares, 183 supportive comments and a reach of 259,408 people.



Kennedy High School organized several food pantry offerings to assist families who experienced food insecurity following the derecho. Note that due to extended lack of electricity, most families lost all their refrigerated food supply.

This was widely communicated via social media and School Messenger generated phone and text messaging.

4. Advocate to the Iowa Governor and Iowa Department of Education for a delay to the school year as all 31 school buildings were damaged; 21 of them severely.

Within a crisis mode timeline, Superintendent Bush worked closely with the Iowa Department of Education to detail the destruction and plea for an in-person visit from the governor to have a firsthand view of the school building damage. She then quickly and thoroughly wrote a School Start Plan that was the foundation for the governor's school emergency proclamation signed August 21, 2020.

- Noon, Aug. 10: Derecho hits Cedar Rapids
- Evening of August 10: Superintendent Bush in communication with Iowa Department of Education outlining the situation and the need
- Aug. 11 - 13: Continued communications and requests for assistance from the state
- Aug. 14: Iowa Governor Reynolds and President Trump visit Cedar Rapids. Superintendent Bush conducts a building destruction tour with the governor.
- Week of Aug. 17: Superintendent Bush creates School Start Plan for CRCSD and submits to the Iowa Department of Education
- Aug. 21: Governor Reynolds signs emergency proclamation allowing remote learning, extended school start date and waiver of instructional time



Cedar Rapids Community School District

Published by Mark Benischek [?] · August 14, 2020 ·

Superintendent Bush along with members from Buildings and Grounds showed Governor Reynolds some of the damage at John F. Kennedy High School Friday afternoon.

August 2020 State Public Health Emergency Proclamation

"As Gov. Reynolds announced yesterday, the proclamation also authorizes school districts with buildings damaged by the derecho natural disaster to offer instruction by primarily remote learning with approval of the Department of Education. And those that are unable to conduct even primarily remote learning because of the derecho may apply for a waiver of instructional time from the Department."

Mass communication was developed for waiver of instructional time and school start delay to September 21, 2020. The announcement and the subsequent multi-layered rollout of damaged building remote learning and projected schedule of reopening was conveyed in streamlined execution to help audiences understand the complexities. Page 9 outlines the rollout of communications needed to inform our families, staff, the community and media of the unique reopening approach.



5. Communicate the rollout for return to respective buildings under repair to all affected families and the community. Note: this was executed with a layer of pandemic safety protocols and state mandates added to the mix.

The school start date extension due to natural disaster and pandemic involved much communication. Here is an overview of the crucial happenings that demanded extensive communication with families, staff and the community:

- New start date from August 24 to September 21 via the Governor's proclamation
- Remote and in-person rescheduling for 21 buildings that were able to open September 21, 2020
- Remote only for 10 school buildings still under repair (including all three high schools) that could not open to in-person learners September 21, 2020
- Nine school buildings opened after repair in November and December 2020
- Last high school building reopened January 19, 2021

In the initial stages while the city infrastructure still did not fully have electricity and internet service, we communicated in all the manners noted in Goals 1 and 2, but we eventually were able to evolve to a streamlined, systematic manner to frequently communicate all the information so many people needed. The CRCSD mission is: *Every Learner. Future Ready.* This mission had traditionally focused on getting students ready for the digital age of learning and also their future opportunities. Well, between a pandemic and natural disaster, our district needed to significantly speed-up "future ready." We developed a newsletter communication called Future Ready **Today** that is now used to communicate news to our key stakeholders: families, students, staff, community and the media.

Where we began: 10 days post derecho, not knowing our clear direction yet and having to communicate mostly via social media and phone messaging.

“Once building assessment, city infrastructure and (governor's) proclamation are solidified, a new CRCSD return-to-learn plan will be created and shared with families and staff.” excerpt from post



Cedar Rapids Community School District

August 20, 2020 at 12:51 PM · 🌐

August 20, 2020 A message from Superintendent Noreen Bush. Dear CRCSD Families, As I've watched the destruction across our community and school district, it pains me, but I now look toward the work that needs to be done. I also see within the disaster a... [See More](#)



Future Ready Today

Kennedy High School Reopens January 19

The day has been a long time coming for Kennedy High School, which sustained the most severe damage of Cedar Rapids Community School District's 31 school buildings during the August 10, 2020, derecho storm.

On Tuesday, Jan. 19, the doors will finally be open to students for in-person learning. Along with the rest of the district, Kennedy students and staff transitioned to virtual learning in March 2020 due to the onset of the pandemic—nearly a year ago.



Where we landed: with a newly-branded Future Ready Today newsletter that is electronically distributed to nearly 20,000 families, staff, community members and media waiting to hear significant news announcements. This image features the story on our final building reopening January 19, 2021, after the derecho hit August 10, 2020.

Goal 5. Continued

We prepared a [Back to School Message During Historic Pandemic and Post Natural Disaster](#) video and widely distributed. Throughout, there was “hope” and optimism reflected in the communication.



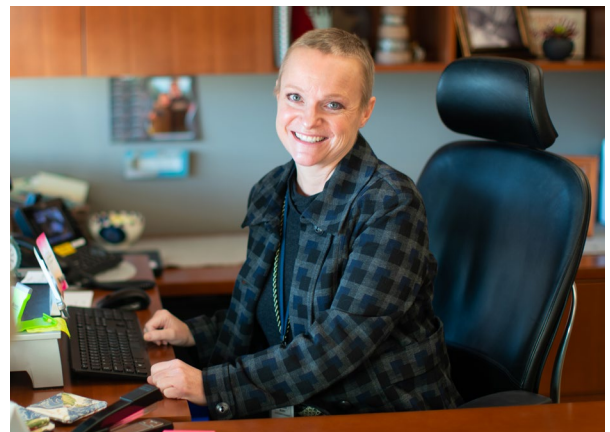
Please take six minutes to watch the summation of our crises and also to be wonderfully inspired.

A Trio of Crises

Please note that during the pandemic and derecho crisis our beloved superintendent was also going through cancer treatment (and currently is receiving additional treatment). Her strength and leadership has always been greatly admired by the CRCSD community, and especially during this “trio” of crises: pandemic, natural disaster and cancer.

In February 2021, Superintendent Noreen Bush was named 2021 National Female Superintendent by [AASA, The School Superintendents Association](#).

The Iowa Department of Education featured her in this [Pandemic, derecho and the Big “C”](#) article.



EVALUATION

During the crisis period, CRCSD saw significantly increased engagement on digital platforms, high media attention, and positive sentiment projected from key stakeholders.



89%

phone message delivery rate to a database of 20,000 the week of August 10, 2020, despite electrical power and internet outages.

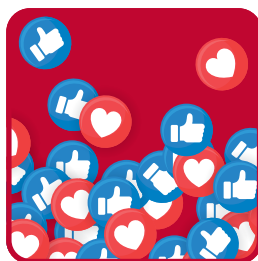


Qualitative:

Outpouring of support via social media and community relations inbox comments for CRCSD's handling of the disaster communications. Teacher, administration and family praise.

*"Thank you for all your work!
Schools and teachers are so valuable!!"*

Parent, 8/26/2020



From August 8 - September 20

836

new social media followers
across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

FACEBOOK - AVERAGE ENGAGEMENT PER POST GREW MORE THAN SIXFOLD

Date Range

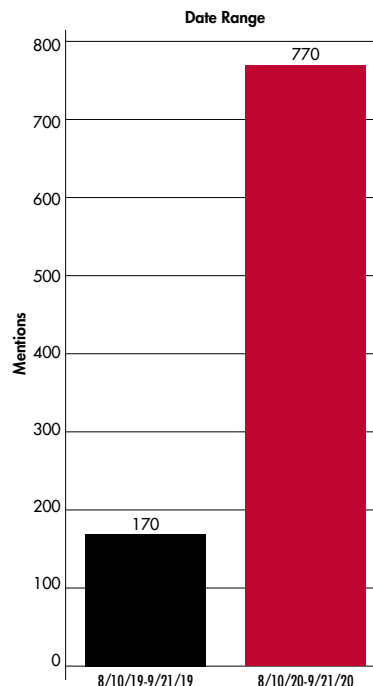
■ 8/10/19-9/21/19

■ 8/10/20-9/21/20

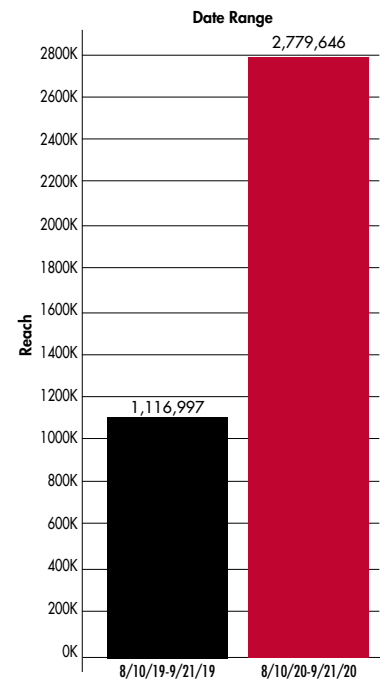
8/10/19-9/21/19
Total Engagement: 7,626
Total Posts: 59
Average Engagement per post: 129.3

8/10/20-9/21/20
Total Engagement: 52,557
Total Posts: 61
Average Engagement per post: 861.6

353% INCREASE IN TOTAL MEDIA MENTIONS



149% INCREASE IN MEDIA REACH



Date Range

■ 8/10/19-9/21/19

■ 8/10/20-9/21/20

SUMMARY: KEY TAKEAWAYS AND HELPFUL GUIDANCE

- Create a backup plan for key digital and electrical infrastructures.
- If utilizing School Messenger or other software programs, have an alternative entry that does not rely on existing IT server/structure.
- Plan for cell phone access from multiple carriers (ATT, Verizon, US Cellular).
- Equip communications team to establish and utilize hotspots from cellular devices.
- Establish strong social media platforms that can be retrieved via cellular phones and utilize them as a crisis platforms in the initial stages of the disaster.
- With ongoing communication post-disaster, establish one main communication tool to drive key stakeholders (families, staff, media) to so you are not juggling multiple means of communication. This helps with your workload and also guarantees all stakeholders are receiving the same messaging.
- Be proactive and available to local and national media to help tell your story and communicate crucial information.
- Utilize leadership as a calm, effective voice during a disaster. Conduct media training and crisis communication training as a proactive measure. Utilize video as an effective platform to evoke emotion and urgency.
- Be prepared to provide communications swiftly and thoroughly to state officials gathering information to make key decisions regarding your school district post-disaster.
- Simultaneously, conduct community efforts to garner basic human needs support for school district families.

Supplemental Materials

Please see linked articles, videos and plan throughout the document.

CRCSD Communications Team

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