

# CRISIS RESPONSE TO RANSOMWARE

## COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

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**GOAL: Staff, families and community members have confidence and trust in Highline Public Schools to address the ransomware incident.**

*In September 2024, Highline Public Schools faced a ransomware attack that closed schools for three days and disabled digital systems for six weeks. The communications team pivoted to offline strategies, sustained operations with analog solutions, and maintained community trust through clear, consistent messaging. This response not only safeguarded confidence in district leadership but also reinforced readiness for future crises in an era of constant disruption.*

## RESEARCH

We drew on two large-scale surveys: a 2023 SCoPE survey and a 2024 community poll. While audiences preferred email and digital tools, some were unavailable during the outage. We adapted by maximizing channels still accessible—robocalls, printed materials, news media, cell phones and in-person updates. We also consulted colleagues from nearby organizations that had faced ransomware and applied their lessons. Prior polling confirmed strong trust in Highline leadership, underscoring the need to preserve credibility. This mix of survey data and peer guidance grounded our strategy in both evidence and practical adaptability.

## PLANNING

Our plan addressed two priorities: sustaining school operations through analog workarounds and ensuring clear, timely communication across audiences. We divided the crisis into four phases, each with specific strategies and key messages.

- 1. Initial Disruption:** Inform audiences, acknowledge the incident, set expectations, and launch investigation.
- 2. Analog Operations:** Provide clear instructions for manual processes and update on system recovery.
- 3. Reimage & Password Reset:** Deliver step-by-step guidance for device reimaging and reassure staff.
- 4. Restoration & Long-Term Response:** Share progress on restoration, security improvements, and prevention.

This phased structure kept communication proactive, consistent, and aligned with operational needs throughout the outage.

## IMPLEMENTATION

We used every accessible channel to keep people informed.

- Cabinet leaders received daily briefings.
- Leaders were updated through work cell phones and staff were updated through meetings, robocalls, texts, and printed materials. Union partners helped share messages.
- Families received ParentSquare alerts and website updates.
- The broader community heard through media coverage and a mailed update.

## EVALUATION

Our objectives focused on restoring systems, maintaining trust, and ensuring accurate information.

- By Oct. 21, 82% of staff devices were reimaged, and clear instructions guided the recovery process.
- Media monitoring showed 98% of 166 stories aligned with district messaging.
- Staff and families praised the transparency and frequency of updates, reflected in stronger trust scores on the all-staff survey.
- Over 10% of staff enrolled in free credit monitoring, doubling the industry average.
- Feedback confirmed that proactive, multi-channel communication reduced uncertainty, supported staff, and reinforced confidence in district leadership.

## Comprehensive Communications Plan

For more information, including detailed research, objectives, strategies, evaluation, and supplemental materials, please see the attached comprehensive communications plan: [bit.ly/WSPRAcrisiscommsplan](https://bit.ly/WSPRAcrisiscommsplan)

