

# BOTH/AND:

## How the Emergency Services Team of the California Department of Education Can Build a Reputation for *both Agility and Legitimacy*

Public Sector Communications Case  
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### SYNOPSIS

A mass evacuation below the compromised Oroville Dam in 2017 threatened local schools and spurred the California Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) to reach out to the California Department of Education (CDE) to coordinate a response. Subsequent wildfires brought the urgent need for emergency management leadership within the CDE itself into high relief. The CDE launched a new Emergency Services Team (EST) in October 2020, and its School Emergency Reporting System (SERS) in August 2021. The goal of the EST is to provide reliable, timely information and resources to schools before, during, and after emergencies. By partnering directly with other government agencies and emergency funding sources, the EST is working both *within* and *against* the reputation of government bureaucracy, and faces the time-critical challenge of engaging the participation of school districts *before* a disaster strikes. How can the EST use communication to shift K-12 preconceptions about the CDE, increase engagement, and create a distinct reputation that is both agile and legitimate?

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# ANALYSIS

## Background

In response to emergencies and natural disaster-related school closures in recent years, the CDE created a new Emergency Services Team (EST) to increase schools' capacity to successfully navigate the four phases of emergency management—preparedness, response, recovery, mitigation. Its online platform, the School Emergency Reporting System (SERS), is designed to: 1) increase situational awareness within K-12 education at all levels during the response phase of emergency management; 2) track school closures; and 3) discover unmet needs for schools and coordinate resources (CDE, 2021). The creation of the EST grew out of the CDE's acknowledgement of its own bureaucratic quagmire; even so, it took 3 years to authorize and establish the new team, consisting of two experienced emergency management professionals previously with the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (CalOES). All LEAs in the state were automatically enrolled in the new SERS, however each LEA must designate a point of contact who is responsible for being trained in how to use the system, and who will be the primary conduit for the EST in getting information both to and from LEAs affected by disasters.

## Issue/Problem

A key communications challenge faced by the EST is the need to capture the interest and participation of school districts statewide *before* disaster strikes. And it must do so while working both within and against the *de facto* bureaucratic reputation of the CDE and collaborating government agencies. As Canel and Luoma-aho (2019) explain, a shared sector reputation—such as the public perception that government agencies are slow to respond—may be working against the EST's attempts to establish itself as an agile emergency resource for Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Those in emergency management understand that disaster can strike anytime, anywhere; but LEAs outside high-risk natural disaster zones may be less inclined to make emergency preparedness a priority. How can the EST use communication to shift potentially counterproductive LEA preconceptions about the CDE, increase engagement, and create a distinct reputation that is both agile and legitimate? The following scenarios envision potential outcomes for the EST if no action is taken to address this communications challenge.

**Table 1. Communication Scenarios for the Emergency Services Team**

Best Case Scenario	Likely Case Scenario	Worst Case Scenario
The EST overcomes the bureaucratic reputation of the CDE, but only with LEAs that experience disasters, achieving higher interest and participation among LEAs in high-risk zones, but mixed interest and participation among LEAs in other parts of the state.	The EST maintains a mixed reputation due to the disconnect between the CDE's bureaucratic reputation and the EST's mission, and achieves only moderate interest and participation among LEAs statewide.	The EST fails to overcome the bureaucratic reputation of the CDE, and subsequently fails to engage enough LEAs to make a widespread impact on their ability to manage emergencies.

**Alternatives**

The following alternatives are provided as options to improve EST communication, and subsequent engagement of LEAs around advance preparation for emergency management.

**Table 2. Alternatives for Communication and Engagement with LEAs**

1. HAZARD ZONE SPECIFIC COMMUNICATION		
Alternatives	Advantages	Disadvantages
1.A. Develop different communication strategies for LEAs depending on whether they are in high, moderate, or low-risk zones for disasters.	LEAs receive priority communication and engagement based on their level of disaster risk, potentially enabling them to be better prepared.	Potential impression among lower-risk LEAs that the EST/SERS initiative is a low priority for their engagement.
1.B. Communicate with all LEAs using the same blanket strategies.	Simplicity, cost effectiveness.	LEAs may perceive the EST as “just another passing initiative” of the CDE and fail to give it adequate attention.
2. COMMUNICATING AGILITY & STABILITY		
Alternatives	Advantages	Disadvantages
2.A. Create communication strategies and messaging that demonstrate the proactive agility of the EST while leveraging the CDE’s stability, legitimacy, and reputation.	Uses blended power to achieve new-power agility and networking amid the old-power infrastructure of the CDE (Heimans & Timms, 2018).	If the EST distances itself too much from the reputation of the CDE, it could backfire both internally and externally.
2.B. Create communication strategies and messaging that do not distinguish the approach of the EST from the reputation of the CDE.	Association with the CDE lends legitimacy and stability to the emerging work of the EST in the eyes of LEAs.	Association with the CDE creates concern about bureaucracy and slowness among LEAs.
3. COUNTY-LEVEL COMMUNICATION HUBS		
Alternatives	Advantages	Disadvantages
3.A. Establish SERS training and technical assistance network through County Offices of Education.	Access to local trainers, assistance, and resources; local engagement and coordination may improve participation.	Time-consuming, requires hiring and coordination; COVID restricts in-person training.
3.B. Continue to coordinate SERS training from the CDE in Sacramento.	Consistency and centralized system; access to coordinated core state-level resources.	Remote location and reinforced association with bureaucracy.

## RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the EST establish strategic communications efforts that establish the legitimacy, reputation, and emerging positive impact of the EST and SERS in order to motivate time-critical engagement, training, and emergency management capabilities of LEAs statewide. Key decision criteria for this recommendation include:

**Staffing:** The EST currently consists of two full-time staff members; therefore, any recommendation must take into account the limitations of their workload.

**Costs:** The EST does not have its own programmatic budget, and instead operates within the School Facilities & Transportation Division of the CDE. For this reason, cost is a key consideration when determining the best course of action.

**Time:** The EST has a time-critical mission of engaging and training every LEA in the state, therefore it is important that the recommended course of action has a near-term impact.

### Course of Action & Justification

The course of action for the EST includes reputation building, outreach and awareness, as well as the ongoing evaluation of emerging communication strategies. The justification for this course of action is that the EST must increase its visibility, legitimacy, and prioritization in the eyes of LEAs in order to achieve its goal of disaster preparedness for LEAs statewide.

**Table 3. Goal & Objectives for the 2021-2022 School Year**

<i>GOAL: Increase engagement of LEAs statewide through strategic communications efforts that establish the legitimacy, reputation, and emerging impact of the EST and SERS.</i>	
Objectives	Benefit/Cost
Establish the reputation of the EST as proactive, agile, connected, and legitimate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Benefit:</b> Legitimacy in the eyes of LEAs, as well as belief in the ability of the EST to fulfill its mission.</li> <li>● <b>Cost:</b> Staff time, communications budget</li> </ul>
Increase K-12 and public awareness of the emergency management success stories of EST-trained and supported LEAs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Benefit:</b> Increased visibility, legitimacy, trust, and motivation for engagement among LEAs, and potential for increased public and government support.</li> <li>● <b>Cost:</b> Staff time, video, web, and or print costs</li> </ul>
Establish an ongoing stakeholder-informed evaluation system EST/SERS communication and impact, and conduct a baseline evaluation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Benefit:</b> Articulate the communication model, the fidelity of its implementation, emerging impact, and areas for improvement to EST/SERS communication.</li> <li>● <b>Cost:</b> Staff and stakeholder time, as well as in-house or contracted evaluator.</li> </ul>

## IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

To achieve the recommended goal and objectives, the following action steps are proposed.

**Table 4. Implementation Plan**

Action Steps	Participants	Resources	Indicators
Design communications strategies and messaging that both embrace the legitimacy of the CDE as an institution, and distinguish the EST as a proactive, connected, agile partner to LEAs.	EST & other CDE staff	Staff time	LEA engagement LEA feedback
Focus early communication and training efforts on ensuring that LEAs in the highest risk zones are engaged and prepared.	EST & LEAs	Staff time	High-risk LEA engagement and training reach Successful SERS use
Establish a multi-level dialogic social media communication framework and presence for the EST, through which to share and discuss LEA emergency management (Liu et al., 2020)	EST & LEAs	Staff time	Content quality LEA engagement
Identify, produce and disseminate LEA-EST collaborative success stories in video and print format via CDE communication channels, partner agencies, education media, and the general media.	EST & other CDE staff, LEAs	Staff time Production costs	Content quality Content reach LEA feedback
Establish an SMS system for pushing out both emergency alerts and links to information and resources	EST	Staff time	Content quality Content reach LEA feedback
Conduct a formative, stakeholder-engaged evaluation of the rollout of the EST & SERS, with an emphasis on communication design, implementation, and emerging impact.	EST & other CDE staff, partners, stakeholders	Staff time Partner time Stakeholder time	Staff feedback Partner feedback LEA feedback Community feedback

### **Emergency Communications Preparedness and Quality**

There is a growing body of research and recommendations about communications in the context of emergency management. Sharing lessons from the World Health Organization, Medford-Davis and Kapur (2014) make the following recommendations, adapted here for the context of the EST within the CDE:

- Build communications capacity prior to a disaster, including pre-writing public service announcements in multiple languages on anticipated FAQs;
- Maintain a database of statistics for different regions of California and types of disaster;
- Maintain lists of locally-trusted sources of information, and government and non-governmental organization contacts that can be used to rapidly disseminate information;
- Develop a network of 24-hour cross-coverage by participating agencies and partners;
- Create a central electronic sharepoint where all of these materials can be accessed by LEAs statewide.

In addition to these guidelines, Appendix A (p. 8 of this case study) presents a framework for social media-mediated dialogic communication during natural disasters (Liu, et al., 2020). The framework addresses message structural features, context-specific topical features, and linguistic features that build behavioral and emotional public engagement via social media.

### **Constraints & Potential Challenges to the Plan**

**Financial Resources Limitations:** While the Emergency Services Team connects LEAs with several different disaster relief grants (CDE, 2021), the EST budget itself is limited to the salaries of the two team members. Day-to-day material resources fall within the general operating budget of the School Facilities and Transportation Division of the CDE. According to the Emergency Services Team website (CDE, 2021), a CDE Emergency Response Fund was launched by a third-party foundation on Go Fund Me in 2020, which has raised just \$525 toward its \$100,000 goal (Go Fund Me, 2021). Appendix B (p. 8) analyzes potential costs of the recommendations in this case study.

**Human Resources Limitations:** The proposed actions require engagement of the EST, as well as CDE communications staff, video production staff, and evaluation staff or consultants. In order to achieve the recommended objectives, it may be necessary for the CDE to expand the EST staff by two—including an additional Staff Services Manager I and a dedicated Communications Coordinator. Medford-Davis and Kapur (2014, p. 4) offer the following recommended skillset for a disaster communications expert, with skills ranked highest to lowest within each category:

**Professional Skills:** Managerial skills (ability to lead and coordinate communications team and strategy); effective writing and editing skills; media relations experience; analytical skills (to synthesize large volumes of technical information into simple, concise everyday language).

**Technical Skills:** Photo/video production and editing; public health literacy; computer proficiency; fluency in English and other relevant languages

**Interpersonal Skills/Personality Traits:** Team player; diplomatic and culturally literate; calm under stress; willing to work in hardship conditions; flexible, proactive, resourceful multitasker; quick and agile assessment, decision making, responsiveness, and action.

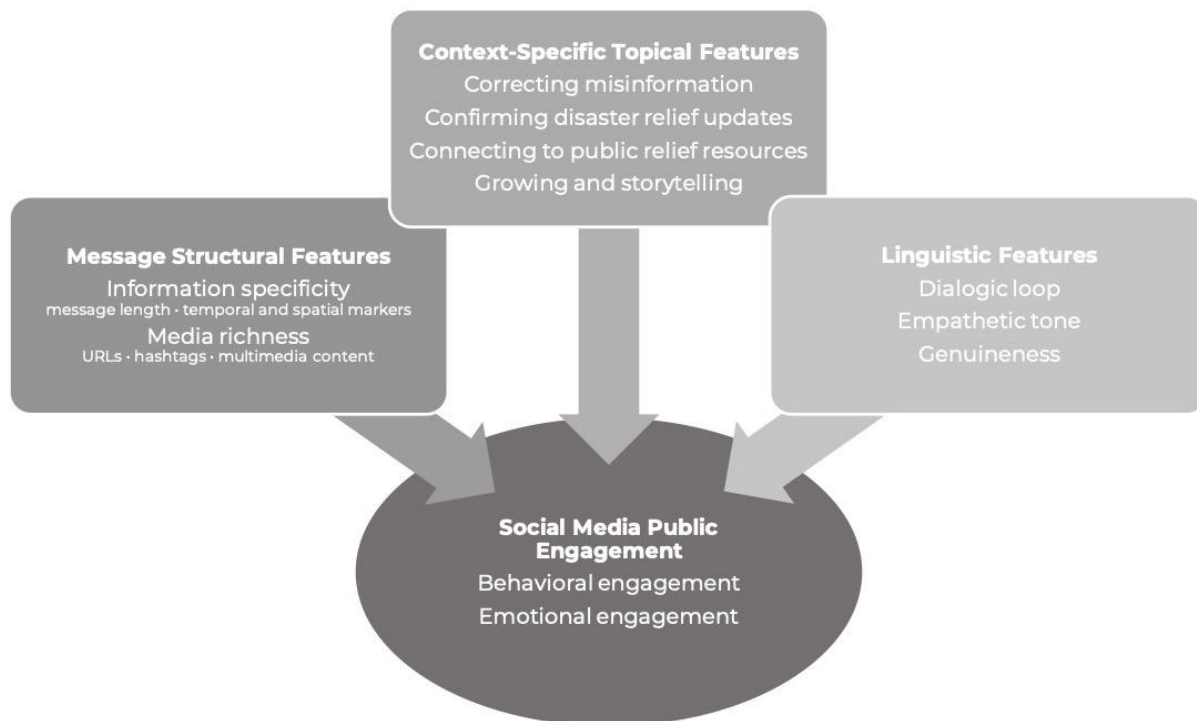
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## APPENDIX A: DIALOGIC FRAMEWORK

Liu et al (2020) propose the following framework for multi-level social media-mediated dialogic communication during natural disasters and public engagement outcomes (p. 4).



## APPENDIX B: FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

Potential costs associated with the recommendations include:

Recommendation	Estimated Cost <sup>1</sup>
Staff Services Manager I (full-time, expansion of existing team)	\$96,000
Communications coordinator or consultant (full-time)	\$80,000
Video production staff or consultant (part-time)	\$50,000
Evaluation consultant (part-time)	\$50,000

<sup>1</sup> Estimates based on Transparent California and the State of California Civil Service Pay Scale.