

# Part 1 – SECTION 12      **BACKPACK LETTERS**

## **WHAT ARE BACKPACK LETTERS AND WHEN SHOULD THEY BE SENT HOME?**

**Regular, clear communication between schools and families is essential. Letters to parents and guardians, often sent home in students' backpacks, are a key communications tool between principals and parents.**

**Especially when a critical incident has occurred at school or has involved one or more students or staff members in a school, letters, written in conjunction with public safety officials, can be an effective way of relaying important and helpful information. Unlike verbal messages, letters can be reread and used as a reference tool. Reporters often use backpack letters to verify facts and, even more importantly, to demonstrate to the community that a school is taking care of its students and staff members. The information in backpack letters can form the outline for media interviews.**

In a critical situation, a letter home gives a principal the opportunity to:

- Explain the situation that exists.
- Describe steps that the school has taken to ensure the safety of students and staff.
- List ways in which parents and family members can support their children.

### **WHAT SHOULD A BACKPACK LETTER SAY?**

All well-constructed backpack letters share of number of characteristics:

- They are clear and simply written.
- They avoid words or phrases that are inflammatory.
- They contain only accurate information and do not speculate.

Involve parents in the solutions. A backpack letter can be limited to three paragraphs.

- The first paragraph outlines the situation.
- The second paragraph details the steps the school has taken—along with other division staff and public safety and/or public health officials—to remedy the problem.
- The third paragraph lists ways that families can help and how families can get more information.

A draft of a backpack letter is prepared by the principal and first reviewed by the Superintendent. In all situations that involve sheriff or fire and rescue investigations, public safety officials could be consulted to review the letter before it is sent home. The Sacramento County Health Department could likewise review letters that involve public health issues.

The decision to send a backpack letter home after a critical incident is made on a case-by-case basis, usually by the principal in consultation with other administrators. Public safety and public health officials are involved in the decision to send a letter, when they are already involved in the investigation or the resolution of an incident.

In making the decision to send a letter home, a series of questions are asked:

- Are other children or adults endangered by this situation?
- Are others likely to be at risk at a future time?
- Are there actions that parents or guardians should take to further protect their children?
- Are there harmful rumors in the school community that must be addressed?

Sometimes, it is not appropriate to send a letter home immediately. Sometimes, such a letter might:

- Promise a sheriff or public health investigation.
- Violate the privacy of individuals involved in the situation.
- Create unwarranted anxiety.

Draft letters should be e-mailed or faxed to the District Office. District staff members will send the letter to the appropriate public agency for review. While this process can be completed within an hour, if that is necessary to meet school dismissal times, every effort should be made to allow as much time as possible for the review process.