

Schools and school districts will eventually be faced with navigating a crisis. The question is: Are you prepared? Are you ready for the onslaught of questions from parents, the media, and community stakeholders? Having only one communications staff or public information officer (PIO) can set the administration up for failure and very quickly lead to overwhelm. You should have multiple staff members trained in media relations and ready to go pre-event. You can control the crisis with the right TRAINING and PREPARATION!

This guide addresses three specific areas:



PRE-EVENT

PLAN AHEAD with Training



TRAIN a group of five to seven employees at each school site, including the district office, to handle press briefings times a hundred. A single communications staff member or PIO will not be able to handle the surge of media requests that will come during a crisis. Furthermore, a 24-hour news cycle reporting on the event means that people will need to go home to rest, feed the cat, and take care of family members. Additionally, relying on a principal or superintendent to write and distribute press releases at frequent intervals is not sustainable. District and school site leaders should be running the incident during the initial response phase, not getting sidetracked with communication tasks.

DEVELOP a media fact sheet about your school district and each school site. This document can be posted on your website and distributed at the scene of a critical incident (media staging area) to buy you some time to formulate a detailed statement. This media “one pager” should include district demographics and summarize the school’s mission, goals, and accomplishments. Other areas that should be included are:



- General information on the district and school site leadership
- Media phone number (i.e., a direct line to your communications team and/or PIO)
- Community stakeholders (i.e., parents/guardians/neighbors/caregivers) information phone line that is answered by a live person in an information room (An information room should consist of five to seven people working phones who have been trained on the district’s messaging. This is one toll-free phone number that is only made public during a critical incident and rolls over from phone to phone to avoid busy signals.)

- Demographic data
- School safety and climate for learning information
- Academic data, including school completion rates
- School size/acreage and class sizes
- Teacher and staff information
- Curriculum and instruction descriptions
- Postsecondary preparation information



SET UP and train a team of employees willing to staff an “information room” during a crisis. They will be answering phones and distributing information on district/school site social media and on your website. They need to be able to talk and work with reporters and your stakeholders.

DEVELOP a crisis management plan (CMP) that gives staff specific instructions on media relations activation. This is the what, when, where, why, and how of media relations. Establish clear communication-level protocols for different levels of emergencies (e.g., stand-by level one, level one, level two, and level three) and what staff is expected to do for each level and when and how are they communicated within the district.



TEST a phone number that can roll over to multiple phones in the “information room” to avoid busy signals to prevent misinformation because people can’t get through to access actual information.

CREATE a canned holding statement and practice it, so that you can get to the community and reporters early in a crisis. This statement will inform your community and the media that you are aware of the situation early on and will be providing a more detailed response shortly. **DO NOT WAIT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE INCIDENT!**



ESTABLISH a way to get highlighted messages out on your school’s and/or district’s website and on social media. Most of your community is connected to social media through their cell phones. Message through the districts/school site’s social accounts quickly and frequently.

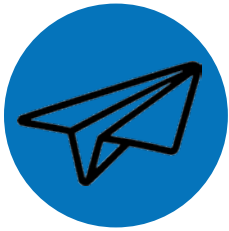
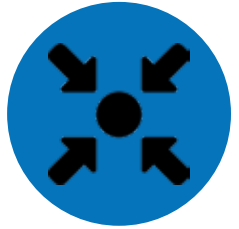
DURING THE EVENT

DEAL with the crisis! Student, teacher, employee, and stakeholder safety is your number one priority. In addition to minimizing damage and maximizing safety, dealing with the crisis swiftly will show all stakeholders, including members of the media, that your school and/or district is well prepared to handle emergencies.



ASSESS the crisis. Will this be a local or a national story? Consider what you need to do to prepare for media coverage given the breadth of interest in the story, as coverage level will dictate how many media inquiries your communications team or PIO will need to be ready to handle, as well as, potentially, how many media trucks may end up stationed around the campus.

SET UP a media staging area — essentially, a place for media to gather in a single location. You do not want members of the media roaming around an incident speaking with stakeholders without giving you an opportunity to respond.



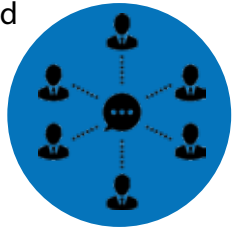
PASS OUT the pre-made fact sheets before the press conference. Make sure members of the media who are in attendance have the school's and/or district's one pager. This will show them you know what you are doing, and that you are well prepared.

HOLD a press conference to release a planned statement. When making a brief initial statement to buy yourself some time, commit to hold a press conference with more details and give members of the media an exact time for that.



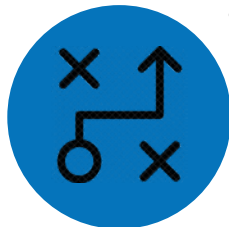
DEFINE the crisis. Coordinate with your site, and district communications team, as well as outside agencies such as police and fire. This is when you work together and decide what your response will be (Unified Command).

ACTIVATE your "communications room" team and get the phone number out quickly so that your various stakeholders don't feel like there is a communication gap.



MESSAGING is important, so get out on web and social media quickly and frequently. Be prepared to respond to questions and direct queries to the information room.

CONDUCT the planned press conference. Be honest, show empathy, and answer what you can. **TRAINING** can help your leaders with this.



PLAN more press briefings. You may need to hold them every hour, depending on the crisis level. At the very least, plan to issue updates prior to local and/or national newscasts.

POST-EVENT



SELECT a group of employees to run VIP visits. Often, the communication staff and PIOs will find themselves overwhelmed and unable to do this. Local and national politicians will be coming out of the woodwork to get themselves on film, so be prepared to receive them.

ASSESS what worked and what did not by conducting an After-Action Report (AAR). MORE training or equipment may be needed. This is an opportunity to grow as a team and work through any problems or shortcomings that may have been identified during the event. **IT IS NOT TO FIND FAULT.**

