



Communicating During a School Crisis

A crisis communication plan is as important as a crisis plan | Sarah Heck

School districts typically have a crisis plan or school safety plan in place. The binders include protocols on how to handle a variety of crisis situations, including major environmental events, the death of a student or staff member, threats to the physical safety of students, and more. Administrators often have several copies of the plan at their disposal — in their offices, at home, in their cars.

A crisis plan is an important first step in ensuring students and staff are safe in the event of an unexpected tragedy. However, a crisis communication plan is equally as important for districts to have at their disposal. The two are not the same, but should be developed in conjunction with each other. When a building goes into lock down or is in the process of evacuating, school leaders need to be thinking about and acting upon the communication that will go to families as a result of this action.

In an ideal world, parents would receive clear and accurate information about an incident from the

school or district first. However, we know that won't happen with students' constant access to technology and texting. Our goal is to be the first official source to provide clear and accurate information about an incident. We need to establish our school district as the source for factual and transparent information. To do that, we must establish trust before any type of incident occurs. If we want parents and the community coming to us for information, it's important to meet that expectation early on, especially before any type of crisis occurs.

What you do before an incident occurs is critical. Here are important areas of focus as you develop your crisis communication plan.

■ Talk to Your School Community

The first step is to talk to your families and community about school safety and your school safety plan. The best time to let students, staff, and families know what to do in an emergency is before it happens. Don't wait until a crisis. Use your

current communication channels to provide this information.

Create a blog, write a newsletter, submit an article to your local newspaper, and discuss it at PTA/PTO and other community meetings. You should message this multiple times — not just once. Remember, messages must be given seven times in seven ways to clearly get your information across to your stakeholders.

■ Build Relationships

To ensure that your communications get out to the people who need it, you must develop solid relationships with key groups. These include:

- Local law enforcement agencies,
- The media,
- Parent groups, and
- Civic and faith-based organizations.

Having local law enforcement as a partner in any crisis situation is invaluable. You will work together to craft and review communications, discussing timing to ensure there is a consistent and factual message coming from both of you.

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The media is also crucial. Even if you have only one solid news station or paper that understands and trusts what you are doing, they will become your most valuable resource. Go to them first when you are ready to get your message out.

■ Key Elements a Crisis Communication Plan

A crisis communication plan should effectively manage communication through formal, clearly defined channels to mitigate crisis or serious repercussions for an organization and to maintain a reputation of leadership and transparency on vital issues and breaking news.

It is not the communicator's responsibility to resolve the crisis. The communicator's job is to inform stakeholders about what happened, what is going to happen, and why. And, to keep leadership aware of what those stakeholders are thinking and saying. The following should be considered when developing your crisis communication plan:

- Plan how you will communicate and tell people where they should expect to find information. Will you send it via electronic messenger, post it to social media, and/or send emails to families? Whatever methods you choose, make sure your families and the community know where they will find the information you are putting out.
- Identify your internal and external stakeholders.
- Determine who will make up your crisis communication team. Make sure your team includes a trained spokesperson and that you identify the roles and

responsibilities of the team members.

- Review response processes and protocols, including appropriate technologies and resources.
- Determine if you need a notification system (for example, Blackboard Connect or School Messenger) allowing schools to rapidly reach stakeholders using multiple modalities.
- Determine how you will monitor traditional and social media. Know what others are saying so you can make a point to clarify facts and increase transparency.

■ Advice from School Communication Professionals

WSPRA members who have had experience with crisis communications offer a few of their most important takeaways.

- A crisis is always about people and emotions.
- Regardless of the type of crisis, the most critical need in the immediate aftermath is information.
- Whenever possible, communicate with staff first!
- Never let the media drive when

you give a response. Attend to your own stakeholders first!

- Difficult news must be delivered personally, in-person is ideal.
- Be transparent. Even if the facts aren't favorable to the district, be the first to share what you know. It's easier to respond when you're being honest and forthcoming.
- Don't speculate. If you don't know something, don't say it! Wait to get the facts. It's okay to say, "I don't know."

■ And, most importantly...

Family members will not remember exactly what you say, but they will remember how you said it and how it made them feel.

Please feel free to reach out to the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) if you need additional information. We have a team of communication experts who are available to support a district in need during a crisis. Please let us know how we can help. Fill out our contact form at WSPRA.org or reach us at 608-729-6659. ■

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Crisis Communication Planning Resources

The Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) offers a free crisis communication planning resource on its website at WSPRA.org. In addition, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), also has an excellent resource available for purchase online called "The Complete Crisis Communication Management Manual for Schools."

Visit NSPRA.org for more information.