



**The
Broad
Center**

Education leaders
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PREPARING NOW TO COMMUNICATE THROUGH A CRISIS

A template for public school systems
to develop a crisis communications
plan for use in any situation

NOVEMBER 2018

WHY DO YOU NEED A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TEMPLATE?

When a crisis — or potential crisis — develops, your school system’s ability to manage what your audiences know and when can be as important as managing the crisis itself.

The reality is, though, most public-school systems are vulnerable to weaknesses that the challenge of needing to communicate about a crisis too often exploit.

For example:

There are too many cooks in the kitchen, or there are too few. Sometimes it isn’t clear who and what level (school site, sub-cabinet, cabinet, etc.) are responsible for suggesting strategy, approving strategy, greenlighting messaging or serving as a spokesperson.

Staff is disinclined to draw further attention to potential crises. When school-based staff or leaders believe they didn’t cause the crisis — or there isn’t a “real” crisis, just a rumor or misperception — they may not recognize the responsibility they have to communicate about it effectively. While this reaction is understandable, the larger school system brand may still be injured when your audiences disagree with your staff’s assessment.

The most efficient and effective ways to pass along information are not clearly defined. Without the shortest-possible path between facts coming in and communication going out, reiterative side conversations, technological hurdles and other barriers may exponentially reduce response time or prevent information from flowing where it is needed.

There is no process or protocol in place to help leaders judge the need for crisis communications efforts and the real-time impact of their decisions.

Messaging is not received, or it doesn’t resonate. Audiences often find crisis messaging too technical, unrelatable or unreliable.

The team has not practiced how to handle a crisis before one hits. For even the best-laid plan to come to life, it must first be internalized.

It isn’t clear whether it is worth pulling certain leaders away from other priorities to get involved in preparing for a crisis. Staff or leadership may feel that other needs should be prioritized over planning for crisis communications.

But even in school systems with updated crisis plans, few of those plans focus on the nuts and bolts of effective communications. This template will help your organization develop an actionable roadmap for putting the necessary processes and protocols in place now — before a crisis hits — and offers guidance for handling what can otherwise become tricky, in-the-moment judgments that must be made flexibly to suit the situation at hand.

No matter what surprise and confusion arises, with such a plan in hand, you can proceed with confidence, ready to harness the power of effective communication to minimize disruption and maximize safety, audience trust and learning.

Note: This plan does not provide the steps required by law nor best practices for crisis management¹ (e.g. evacuation, student attendance roster checks, campus layout plans, critical first aid supplies). Nothing contained herein should be inconsistent with your crisis management procedure. Rather, the crisis communications plan that results should enhance crisis management by reducing confusion and creating partnership for action.

¹ If your organization is also looking for guidance in developing actual crisis management procedures, sources are provided in the Resources section of this document.

HOW YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AFFECTS YOUR CRISIS RESPONSE

Before reviewing the template below, please pause to take stock of additional crisis communications challenges that your organization may also face due to its *structure* and *size*.

You may need to adjust this template's use — or take additional steps before you even introduce it to your organization — depending on factors such as your organization's degree of centralization, size, "levels" (e.g. local, regional, national), governance structure and other decision-making norms.

For example, your degree of organizational centralization or decentralization may dictate

norms that determine when potential crisis situations are reported, upward or downward. What are your norms/agreements/policies for reporting possible crises to the network or central office? Or when central-office crises are reported to the school or regional levels? In these different situations, who makes the final call, manages media and speaks publicly? Who will be responsible for questions and follow-up?

In our experience, crisis communications decision-making usually falls somewhere along the following continuum:



Where does your organization currently fall on the continuum? Where do you have room to grow?

Centralized: In many systems — especially large school districts — spokespeople are centralized. Potential crises are to be reported to, decided by and managed at the department level. Possible challenges: The department may be too far removed from details. Depending on the system, a centralized spokesperson may be less credible or familiar to some key audiences. Bureaucratic layers may mean key facts pass within the system less efficiently, and response time may be too long to be credible.

“Shared” duties between central office and schools: In some smaller districts and charter school networks, there is shared responsibility between leaders at the central office and leaders at school sites.

Possible challenges: Coordinated decision making by a cross-level joint crisis team may not be effective if too many players or tiers are involved, especially if it is unclear who is in charge and who plays what role. Responses may be delayed or may never occur.

Decentralized decision making: This strategy is most common among locally empowered charter schools.

Possible challenges: Completely decentralized systems, where nearly all crisis communications work is handled at the local level, can cause major enrollment, funding and credibility problems in situations where the national or regional brand may be negatively affected.

Plans created using this template will enable streamlined, coordinated decision making by a **joint crisis communications team with single-point leadership** that, while allowing judgment and participation to be flexible given the audience and situation needs, still has clear roles and a defined decision-making process.

A streamlined, rapid-response, decision-making process is possible, even within large or multi-tiered organizations, when the plan allows for pertinent facts and strategic suggestions to come in from any level yet be acted upon quickly and decisively. What matters is that:

- *The joint crisis communications team immediately has access to all facts*
- *The decision maker, overall goal, appointed strategist(s) and additional fact gatherers are clearly designated from the beginning and*
- *No time is wasted on side conversations or side committees.*

This requires that an effective command hierarchy or structure is in place, involving who logically needs to be involved in the moment. Who needs to be involved will be situational, given who has facts, big-picture judgment and audience understanding and trust, with backups in place to account for anyone who may be out-of-pocket.

Additional considerations

Size. The larger the organization, the more audiences you will have to reach and the more people who may need to be involved in message distribution. What matters most is that all messaging be resonant and consistent. In addition, incoming queries should be tracked and answered quickly, leveraging the resonant, consistent messaging, and any new information must be immediately looped back to the team.

Degree of governance involvement in management. If your school board/mayor/governance body or the superintendent/CEO they oversee is the subject of the crisis, then governance must be involved. It is important that these people be familiar with your plan and in sync with team protocol and process. However, when boards want to be involved in managing lower-level crisis communications, it may be because they are not yet assured that an effective process is in place. In that case, the template below will provide many strong grounds for making the case to the board that new norms be established so that crisis communications, for the board, becomes simply a metric they evaluate.

Depending on your current structure, your school system may first need to amend its licensing agreements with regions or schools or reach a memorandum of understanding to establish norms and expectations for crisis communications decision making. Ultimately, it will be the joint practicing of hypotheticals — and actual crises — that will cement useful protocols and norms across the team.

LET'S GET STARTED

This crisis communications template is designed to enable your organization to efficiently and effectively define and direct your message and brand during crises, whether they are developing or full-blown.

Many school systems already have some strong tenets of effective crisis communications in place. Ideally, you already enjoy a good reputation because you have prioritized building authentic relationships with your key audiences — both inside and outside the organization — and have a proactive media calendar in place.

That said, this template assumes a school system needs to put in place all tenets of a good defense, which include:

- Clear crisis communication roles and responsibilities
- Timely fact finding
- Goal-driven strategy
- Family-driven messaging and release strategy
- Effective, tactical dissemination
- Follow up
- Effective partnerships with families and partners

In a nutshell: This template is designed to enable your organization to develop a customized crisis communications plan that helps you tell your story fast, first and in your audience's language, so your audiences have and maintain confidence in your leadership and your work.

This template was prepared for The Broad Center in 2018 by Lepping & Associates. It reflects best practices in crisis response across industries as well as specific needs identified in interviews, as well as strategy and training sessions with leaders and staff from various types of school systems over many years.

During the early stages of a crisis, two dynamics come into play for school systems:

1. Word-of-mouth typically drives the flow of information. This can pose immense challenges when things are moving fast and all facts have not been confirmed. Rumors can quickly take root and escalate.
2. Audiences are deciding whether they trust you, a public institution. This is a function of how much they like you, are reassured by you, are convinced by you and are inspired by you.

Restoring order as quickly as possible through effective, timely communications will clear the way for you to focus on your larger goals of teaching and learning. Here's how to plan for restoring that order.

[ORGANIZATION]
CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS
PLAN

[LOGO]

LAST UPDATED: [DATE]

PURPOSE

This plan seeks to:

1. Equip **[ORGANIZATION]** with the tools to efficiently and effectively manage communications during crises and do so in direct alignment with our organizational goals and
2. Provide a platform for training and improvement.

This plan should be reviewed and updated **every six months** by the crisis communications team to ensure all contact lists are current, new lessons are applied as they are learned and relevant policies, practices and procedures are up to date.

SECTIONS

The plan is divided into two major sections:

A. Managing Crisis Communications

1. Defines **stages of a crisis**, setting parameters for decision making
2. Defines and assigns the **crisis team**
3. Outlines **roles and responsibilities** of the crisis team
4. Details **steps to take during a crisis**, providing guidance for making high-stakes decisions

B. Resource Materials includes tips, planning documents and samples to use in pre-planning, crisis response and evaluation efforts. This section also includes contact lists and other available resources.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Overview

This plan covers seven essential steps for the crisis communications team to follow during a crisis:

Engage decision makers / Define roles
& responsibilities / Establish facts



Goal-driven strategy /
action (continue fact
finding)



Message development



Information readied to
release



Approve final core
messaging



Spokesperson &
delivery preparation
TACTICAL RELEASE



Follow up



Steps to take during a crisis

1. Confirm decision makers, roles and responsibilities; Establish facts

Our crisis communications team is laid out below. Team members are expected to spring into action when warranted. Before we review the team’s makeup, let’s align on what constitutes a crisis that warrants action from the team.

“Crisis” situations, triggering the use of this plan, can take the following forms:

TIER 3: MAJOR CRISIS requires immediate response (no more than 1-2 hours). Media have immediate, urgent need for information. One or more audiences express anger or outrage. Media may appear for live coverage (e.g. campus shooter, major protest, natural disaster).

TIER 2: LOW/MODERATE-LEVEL CRISIS requires response by end of day. Media are paying attention. Affected and potentially affected parties may threaten to talk to reporters. Partners receive media inquiries. Public at large is aware of the situation but no widespread attention yet (e.g. alleged discrimination/fraud, death).

TIER 1: DEVELOPING CRISIS typically requires a prebuttal within a few days to prevent a full-blown crisis. The situation may or may not have occurred; situation may or may not yet attract media/families (e.g. minor, nonviolent criminal activity or fight on campus gains some momentum, something that calls for an “As always, we strive to keep you informed” safety update).

TIER 0: NO CRISIS
No action necessitated, potential crisis unverified. Little to no attention attracted. No need to pull in the crisis team. (e.g. unsubstantiated rumors, a minor issue affecting one child).



Common sticking points

What are the signs that a Tier 1 situation is becoming a Tier 2 or Tier 3 crisis?

Does the situation have notable potential, now or in the long term, to:

Meaningfully affect our organizational brand and/or the trust stakeholders have in **OUR ORGANIZATION**?

Result in the superintendent/CEO receiving inquiries from board members and/or media?

Affect **OUR ORGANIZATION'S** operations or financial stability?

Substantially prevent school leaders from being able to focus on teaching and learning?

If yes, then the situation should be handled like a Tier 2 or 3 crisis, and decisions should be made by the central office.

When does a Tier 0 situation reach Tier 1 status, calling for a prebuttal and engagement of the crisis team?

Err on the side of reporting the situation to the crisis team leader! Get quick feedback on whether they “wanted to know this.” You will then have a better idea next time.

In any Tier 1-3 situation, you will inevitably have to share basic facts/actions you have access to (verbally or in writing) with one or more organization leaders. Often, these one-on-one “side conversations” take significant time. In the same amount of time it takes to share once, you can simultaneously loop in the crisis Team Leader who, if necessary, can immediately loop others in on a need-to-know basis, get you additional support or, at minimum, use the information you share to keep an organizational eye on trends and consider broad preventative measures.

A prebuttal is useful, and a crisis is developing, when facts could be reasonably (mis)perceived as something very bad. Count the negative angles a third party could potentially see (e.g. Could technology spread this information broadly? How many people could end up with information, including possibly wrong information?). What looks like an easily managed situation may quickly become a series of problems. So notify the crisis Team Leader.

Alternatively, even if situation is NOT **THE ORGANIZATION'S** fault, is there some minimal communication YOU would appreciate receiving in this situation if YOU were the audience, such as a parent

An effective prebuttal message will head off future questions and save you time in the long run. If you are concerned that sending out a prebuttal will lead to incoming queries that will detract from teaching and learning, consider that there may be a better way to craft your initial message so that it stands for itself.

Also, consider how conditions could escalate if you don't take action now. A year from now, could pointing to a responsible communication we issued help show stakeholders that we met our broader legal and ethical obligations to the community?

If so, there may be a trust- or empowerment-building opportunity here. The most effective strategy for dispelling rumors is to provide facts as soon as possible.

Roles and responsibilities of [ORGANIZATION] crisis team

The following chart defines those roles that should expect to move into action for a Tier 1, 2 or 3 crisis along with their top responsibilities. Complete the chart considering judgment, skills and experience within the organization. For every unique crisis team role, only one person — and always the same person, plus their backup — should be in place.

All members of the crisis team are expected to keep hard copies AND electronic copies of this plan nearby at all times. 24/7 contact information for roles is in the Resources section.

Backup = the responsible party when the primary is out-of-pocket (e.g. traveling, medical leave)

Crisis Communications Team roles — [ORGANIZATION]

Roles	Primary	Backup [^]	Responsibilities
Decision Maker	<p>Superintendent/CEO, or their designee, with successful track record of judgment during crises</p> <p>(For a Tier 1 crisis, this can be a particular school or regional leader, but only one person.)</p>	<p>Chief strategy officer or similar role</p> <p>(For a Tier 1 crisis, this may be a school or regional leader-designee.)</p>	<p>Declares goal at hand</p> <p>Approves strategy and message delivery after reviewing, if not guiding, proposed strategies</p>
Team Leader	<p>COO, chief of staff or director of operations-type role</p> <p>For a Tier 1 crisis, local leader with a successful track record managing urgent projects or their designee</p>	<p>Another designated strong manager or communications director until another manager takes over.</p>	<p>Arranges conference calls/meetings</p> <p>Indicates which team members listed in this grid must spring into action (considering areas of expertise required, who is closest to facts and audiences, keeping the number of advisors down to a manageable level) and their deadlines</p> <p>Indicates how the team will communicate important updates to one another (ideally, this will all be done on the shared drive unless access is impossible)</p> <p>Shares relevant central drive file with active team members</p> <p>Holds roles accountable</p> <p><i>Year-round:</i> Equips all roles with up-to-date copy of this plan and sufficient training to implement</p> <p>Ensures all contact info is current</p>
Advisors	<p>Strategic advisors to be involved as needed at the direction of the Decision Maker and Team Leader</p> <p>There should be no more than seven advisors for optimal decisionmaking. This team includes any combination of leads of schools, operations, technology, website coordinator, security, legal, human resources, finance, data, media, social media, community/intergovernmental liaison</p>	<p>Each potential advisor listed must designate a backup expert in their area</p>	<p>Develop and propose strategy on shared drive to Decision Maker</p> <p>Advise in area of expertise</p> <p>Request information from fact gatherers, as needed</p>

Crisis Communications Team roles — [ORGANIZATION] — Continued

Roles	Primary	Backup[^]	Responsibilities
Fact Owners	<p>Any team members listed above or their designated subordinates who are closest to relevant facts in the given situation Also list here anyone who naturally serves as a central hub for incoming information and communication at a particular level (e.g. school directors of operations, or a similar role).</p> <p>Fact-owners could be the CEO (who should share what partners or authorizers are asking), legal counsel (who should share governing law), communications director (who should share what media know and when) or school operations directors/ principals/ liaison to emergency responders/student caregivers/medical staff/other designated school emergency staff aware of on-the-ground facts</p>	<p>Their designated backups — meaning those empowered to do their jobs in their absence</p>	<p>Own fact-gathering and immediate sharing on shared drive</p>
Tech Owners	<p>IT leads for each school/region/district/ national</p>	<p>Their designated expert backups</p>	<p>Oversee and coordinate technology needs</p>
Messengers	<p>Communication leads</p>	<p>Their designated expert backups</p>	<p>Generate evolving message according to developing strategy, incorporating edits until message is approved and immediately transmitting core message to releasers to prepare for release May also create tailored versions of core message for each secondary audience (e.g. core message becomes press release/ parent email/authorizer email or rely on releasers to do this (depends on who best knows each target audience and has most skill tailoring messages)</p>
Releaser/s	<p>Primary people responsible for tactical distribution (e.g. press secretary, social media coordinator, community/ intergovernmental director, parent liaisons, communications director)</p>	<p>Their designated expert backups</p>	<p>Prepared to distribute the message, once approved, immediately to their particular key audiences (e.g. staff, parents) at the designated release time (not before or after) May also play a role in message tailoring in advance of release</p>

Your objective is to include the *fewest* roles from different organizational levels as possible as “crisis communication team members” while not excluding potentially critical roles. In school systems with dozens or hundreds of schools, the list of potential team members will be long. However, many of these people will not be needed to participate actively.

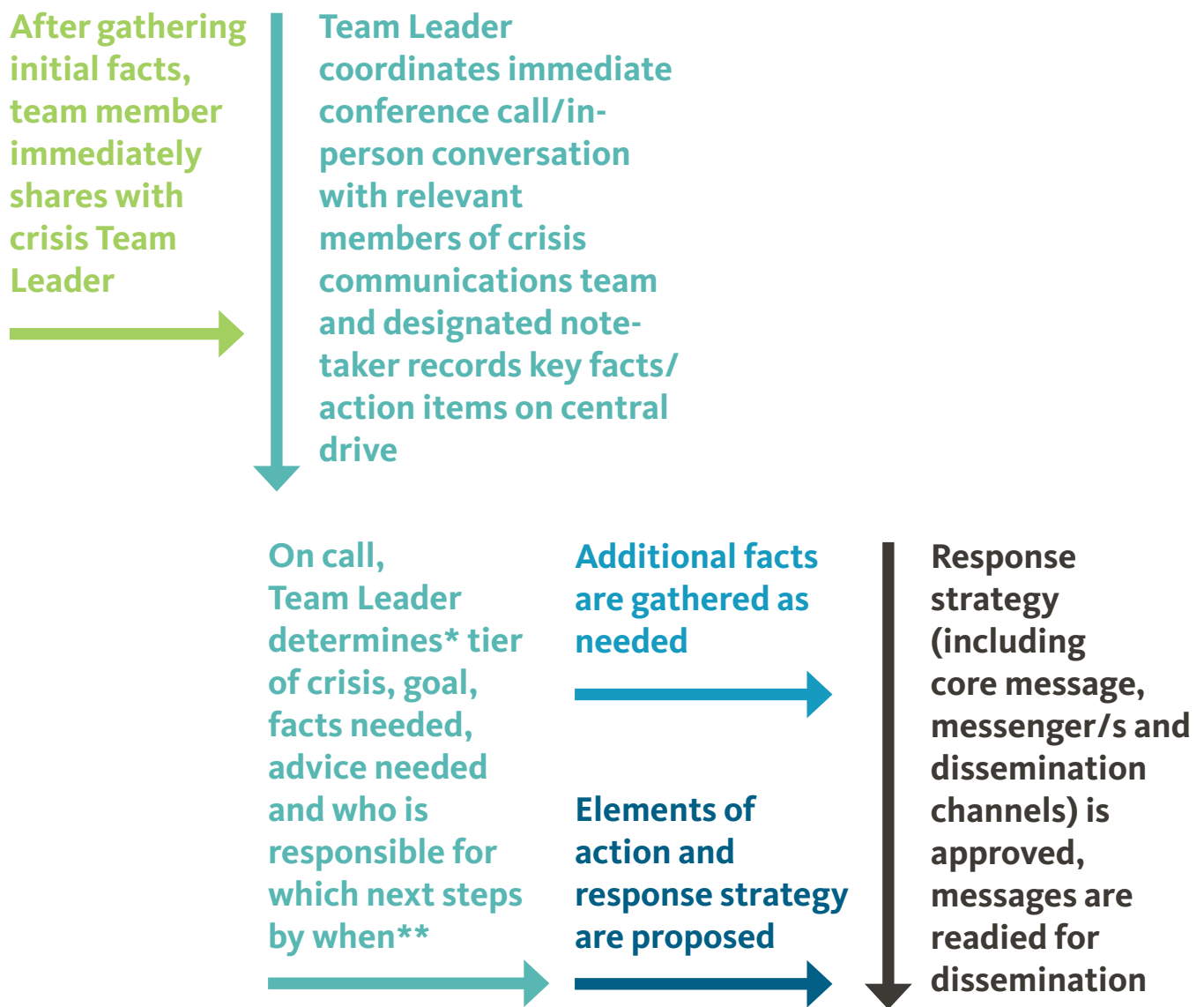
When a Team Leader becomes aware of a crisis, the Team Leader will be responsible for determining which “team members” are needed in a given situation. The fewest number of advisors is ideal; aim for a maximum of seven. The Team Leader may choose to bring in outside experts as de facto team members

given their relevance to the situation, such as a representative of the state, a law enforcement agency or partner organization.

Because those closest to facts and actions on the ground will be involved in implementing crisis response and communicating through it, it will be the crisis communication Team Leader's responsibility to make sure that other team members step forward to provide whatever communications support is needed — such as following an overextended teammate around with a laptop and a phone, if needed, to support recording facts onto the shared drive for the full team.

2. GOAL-driven strategy / action (continue fact finding)

As soon as a potential crisis comes to any team member's attention, proceed as follows:



As the team proceeds throughout this process, it is critical for all team members to be on the same page about the team's fundamental goal. That "goal" — set by the Team Leader or Decision Maker — will look like this:

To (somehow move) (a core audience) to (believe/do something toward a result critical to maintaining progress toward our organizational goals)

The goal will center on the core audience, usually families of our students.

**Multiple conversations may be required to finalize these items.*

***Coordination should be ongoing as needed with police/fire department/agencies, lawyer, partners, community groups, family, etc. at issue.*

Common sticking points

Guidance on finding and sharing facts

Share verified info on **ONE SHARED, PREVIOUSLY IDENTIFIED CRISIS COMMUNICATION TEAM DRIVE FOLDER THAT EVERYONE CAN ACCESS REMOTELY.**

Crisis communication team members must have phone/computer/wifi or immediately find and share their backup.

UPLOAD EXAMPLES OF COMMON CRISIS FACTS TO GATHER ONTO YOUR SHARED DRIVE AND INDICATE THEIR LOCATION HERE. (COMMON CRISIS FACTS ARE LISTED IN THE RESOURCES SECTION OF THIS TEMPLATE). Team members should also suggest situation-specific facts for gathering in the moment.

Guidance for Fact Owners as you work to verify “facts”

Consider:

- Do you have all the facts, to the best of your knowledge?
- What other information do you need to put this event into perspective?
- Has the situation been confirmed?
- How credible is your information source/s?
- Is information consistent across several sources?

Crisis communications goal: **To (somehow move) (a core audience) to (believe/do something toward a result critical to maintaining progress toward our organizational goals)**

Such as: *To build trust with families that we are meeting our public duty to keep their children safe while minimizing alarm and maximizing teaching and learning*

Elements of an effective goal:

- Calls out core audience, typically parents and guardians
- Possible audiences: families, students, teachers/staff, administrators, board, media, authorizer, inspector general, state, funders, partners, elected officials, alumni, taxpayers
- Answers the question: “Why do we want to reach families?”
- Aligns core audience’s key value(s) with our organizational goals

» Core audience key values are those triggered by a reasonable mis/perception of the situation (e.g. safety, caring, respect, opportunity, fairness).

Possible key values: safety, wellbeing, quality of education, opportunity equity/fairness, respect for culture, legal, transparency/information, accountability, choice, control, change to current expectation, honesty, caring, empathy

Note on Tier 1: Developing crises: Even if the situation does not seem like it could cause community or media attention, it is important for the crisis Team Leader to be updated about topline progress. Crisis situations can escalate very quickly, and it is extremely important that the communication team stay up-to-date on possible developing situations.

For further guidance on when public chatter rises to the level that necessitates official communication, see “Issues Management Response Flowchart” in Resources section.

The goal is articulated by the Team Leader or Decision Maker at the start of crisis team work and drives strategy and action. Examples of actions taken during different crises are in Resources.

Guidance on response time

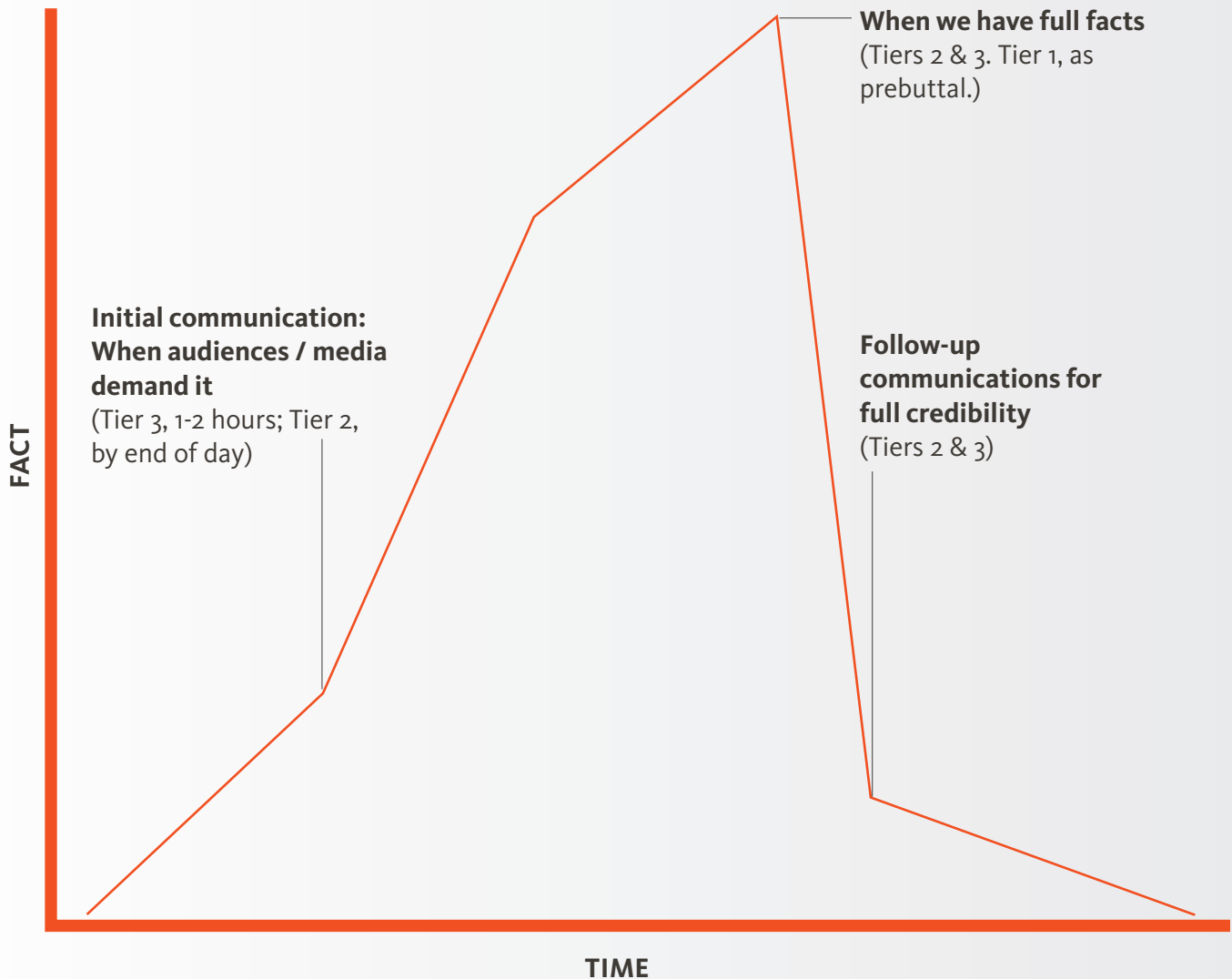
When would we want communication if we were the core audience? When would the average parent or guardian want to know?

Alternatively, consider by when school board/authorizer/state/key funder would consider a communication to be “too late.”

Optimal communications release points shown below.

Guidance on weighing proposed strategies/ risk analysis

Upload the following framework on a shared drive to guide the proposal and consideration of strategy.



Goal: What do we want our core audience/s to believe/feel/do?

Strategy 1

How we will effectively reach our audience and accomplish our goal

“Strategy” is the following:

Actions we are taking

Other core messages

Supporting details/evidence to release (to show, not just tell)

Ideal spokesperson

Optimal delivery channels

Strategy 2

(alternate, perhaps proposed by a different advisor)

same

Possible risks?

same

What could happen? What are the consequences of those risks?

Likelihood of risks manifesting? Severity?

Likelihood of mitigation being successful?

Common sticking points

Guidance for selecting audience-driven strategy

Consider that audiences have preferred ways of getting information. For example, parents and teachers may be primarily concerned with who is delivering the message and whether they know, like and trust them. Board members and authorizers may want to see critical, data-based analysis and a goal-driven, step-by-step plan.

Mold your strategy around messaging, spokesperson and supporting details according to the preferred thinking styles of your core and supporting audiences. [For more on what these are and how to do this, explore whole-brain thinking.²]

The four distinct types of preferred thinking are:

Logical / Analytical	Creative / Imaginative
Structural / Execution & Detail-focused	Emotional / Harmony-focused

² Hermann Brain Dominance Institute <http://www.herrmannsolutions.com/what-is-whole-brain-thinking-2/>

Procedure for crafting response

3. Message development

With a strategy in place, you are now ready to draft your core message. A good rule of thumb is to start by introducing a value-connect to show your core audience that you understand and relate to the core value at play. From there, lay out the relevant facts they need to know, show examples of the responsible leadership you are providing in this situation and explain how you will update them and confirm action has been taken. Finally, close with another value-connect message.

The following sample letter follows this approach:

SAMPLE LETTER TO FAMILIES regarding minor bus accident

Dear XXX,

(Value connect + relevant facts) We are dedicated to ensuring the safety of every student and maintaining strong partnerships with the families we serve. For this reason, I want to make you aware of an accident that occurred this morning. One of our school buses transporting _____ students home from school was involved in a minor traffic accident on _____ Road at _: _ p.m. yesterday afternoon.

(Org response + relevant facts) Safety of students is our first concern. Emergency medical personnel were contacted immediately. All parents of involved students were immediately informed of the incident. Four of the students were transported to _____ for observation after complaining of neck and back pain. Fortunately, these injuries are not life threatening, but we always take proper medical precautions to ensure the safety and well-being of our students. All other students were cleared by medical personnel on the scene and allowed to board another bus home. I reported to the scene and checked on the students at the emergency room. All students were treated and released last night.

(Relevant facts + follow-up) Neither the bus driver nor the passengers in the other vehicle were injured. Local law enforcement is investigating the cause of this accident, and we will take whatever steps are needed to prevent it from happening again. We are pleased that our transportation department has a strong safety record, and this was an isolated incident.

(Value connect) Regardless, we want you to be aware as we partner with you for the safety of your child. Thank you for entrusting your child to our care. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have questions.

Sincerely,

School leader

**Example of communications team member’s participation in team process:
CHECKLIST for crisis “COMMUNICATIONS LEAD” (in case of intruder, weapon, shooting, drugs)**

Checklist	Status
<p>1. Jump onto calls and shared drive. Root yourself in team goal at hand. Example: To assure families that school is taking every measure to maintain/restore safety on campus and how to get specifics on their child.</p> <p>Share any facts with team, such as what media know/are asking and when</p>	
<p>2. Following the Core Message Template (Value-connect, Relevant facts, Response, Follow-up, Value-connect), draft your core message. Include a brief summary drawing from facts listed on the shared drive and messaging strategy listed in the online advisor worksheet. Include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Nature of the emergency b. Where and when it happened c. [Organization] official response to the emergency d. Measures taken to contain it e. Physical extent of the emergency (number of employees/students affected/ injured, property damage) f. Plans to return to normal operation g. If families have been notified, the names of injured and/or deceased h. Names and phone numbers of personnel to contact for more information 	
<p>3. Get Decision Maker’s approval to release. Tailor core message for each separate audience as Releasers need.</p>	
<p>4. Transmit message(s) to relevant Releasers signaling time for release.</p> <p>* Releasers send out, in this order:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teachers/staff/students, using text, robo-call, e-mail, website posting and crisis hotline # b. Parents c. News media (communication lead is Releaser here) d. Board members and partners e. Local government (e.g., police/fire, public relations offices, mayor’s office) 	
<p>5. Keep up with the situation, and issue media and internal updates when situation changes materially.</p>	

Common sticking points

Guidance on drafting effective messaging

1. **Value connect:** Show that you understand the core audience value at hand whether the allegation is accurate or a misperception. Take it seriously. For example, if your families hear a rumor about a nonexistent danger present on campus, start by appreciating the larger value at play — “Your child’s safety is our number one priority.”
2. **Tell what you know, what you don’t know and what you are doing** to fix the problem.
 - Your job is not to provide the right answers. You won’t be able to be “right” when facts are still coming in. Your job is to be honest about what you know, what you don’t know **and** what you are doing to fix things.
 - Remain authoritative even when disclosing what you don’t know. Say “we are investigating” instead of “we don’t know.”
 - What you know needs to include facts you have learned that are relevant to the audience, historical facts and context that will matter to the audience and facts about your own actions/communications about the crisis.
3. **If there is a lot of bad news, put it all out at once.** Bad news is worse when it trickles out. Draft the information in priority order by what a parent prioritizes, such as imminent risk first, future risk second.
4. **Take responsibility and apologize for any wrongdoing. If there is absolutely no truth to the allegation, vehemently deny and refocus.**
 - Be careful with denials — even a failure to apprise the audience of key information ahead of time (when they would have wanted to know) that has led to their current perception may necessitate your taking responsibility for that communications omission now, as opposed to a flat-out denial that an issue exists.
- Could reasonable people have had this perception based on what they know? Show them how you will make the core audience whole, including what actions reasonably within your scope of control you will take to negate the immediate risk, any longer-term/larger risk and repair any damage.
- Recall that other organizations and authorities like law enforcement may be better suited to make audiences completely whole. You just need to show that you are doing your part.
5. **First in, first out.** When appropriate, make the issue bigger than you, letting others be the star going forward. For example, show your organization’s safety record in the city, so attention then focuses on those with lesser track records.
6. **Show, don’t tell.** Provide evidence of your claims and actions, as opposed to mere platitudes. Examples of strong supporting evidence are in next section.
7. **Message primarily to the audience that needs to be relieved that things are being handled appropriately.** They will feel better if they see that you are showing compassion for everyone involved while firmly managing the situation.
8. **Keep messaging brief.** Lengthy messages can inadvertently appear defensive. Using too many words communicates that you are concerned, which will lead your audience to be even more concerned and will inadvertently communicate guilt. Make your message just long enough to stand on its own days later without backtracking or clarification.

- To ensure a low-level issue remains so — such as a Tier 1 prebuttal — use neutral language and briefly contextualize the issue by addressing incident scope, frequency, precautions and previous record. Consider delivering the message among other announcements so it does not appear as a red flag.
9. **Don't give the other side any unnecessary airtime.** Don't waste space simply repeating in detail what critics are saying.
 10. **Define any jargon** (e.g. "programs," acronyms) in layman's terms or they won't be understood. This is not the time to unnecessarily confuse your audience.

These sentence starters may be helpful to trigger writing:

- Our first priority is...
- The best information we have at this time is...
- Our hearts go out to...
- Nothing matters more to us than...
- We treat each child as if they were our own...
- We will keep you updated as we get more information...
- As always, we strive to keep you informed...
- This is a distraction intended to...
- This is incorrect.
- There are no words...
- We are filled with sadness today...
- We were deeply moved by...
- We regret to announce that...
- It distresses us to share this news today...
- It is with a sense of loss that we...
- We deeply regret that...
- We collectively grieve today as...
- We were horrified to learn...
- Like you, our hearts are heavy...
- Words do not adequately express...
- We join with the community ...
- We are anguished to hear...
- We sincerely apologize...
- We are deeply troubled...
- We apologize for the error...

- We ask for your understanding at this time...
- Please forgive the...
- Nothing can excuse...
- Please pardon our...
- We do not condone...
- We take full responsibility...
- These actions were inexcusable...
- Please allow us the opportunity to...
- We regret any of our actions which may have played a role in this situation...
- We are disappointed and will take immediate action...
- We have learned a lot from this and are taking actions to make sure this never happens again.

4. Information readied to release

For your message to be credible, it must contain supporting facts that show what you say to be accurate. Examples of the evidence you will want Fact Owners to gather include:

- Statistics
- Safety record
- Recent audits
- Audit procedures
- Voices on discipline/safety
- Key academic results/studies on achievement
- Safety plans
- Discipline policy
- Graphics
- Photographs
- Fact sheets
- Organizational information
- History
- Record of operation
- Past similar events

Facts or images (if not the entire document) should be inserted directly into your core message or made accessible from your core message in the form of functional web links. To save time, these facts/links should be located, shared with the team and posted/copied for transmittal by the Fact Owners while the core message is being drafted.

During an emergency, it may be difficult to find time to develop an appropriate online format for releasing information. Developing a “dark site” or webpage prepared in advance but not viewable until made “live” prior to an emergency can assist in limiting the amount of work that has to be done in real time.

At this point, both the core message and supporting information should be approved.

Procedure to disseminate the response

5. Spokesperson & delivery preparation

The “voice” carrying the core message is as important as the message itself.

Guidance on selecting the ideal spokesperson

The ideal spokesperson:

- Has credibility with core audiences. Consider that they may be an ally, not an **[ORGANIZATION]** leader.
- Provides air cover for other leaders who need to stay focused on mission-critical obligations.
- Is one whose jurisdiction and expertise squarely covers the facts/actions/response at hand.

The spokesperson should practice delivering the written message out loud and engage in Q&A with another team member, before going public. It is important that remarks be written and followed — not delivered off the cuff — so the integrity of the strategy is kept intact. Neutral, conservative dress is appropriate.

While the spokesperson is preparing, Releasers, or other team members, will simultaneously be drafting expanded versions of the approved core message that are tailored to other internal and external key audiences.

Guidance on identifying secondary audiences

Who else will WANT to be informed? If we were them, would WE want to know?

- If there is a likelihood that they will receive inquiries, or already have, they need to be informed.
- If they are in the position to hold us accountable for our crisis response efforts, they need to be informed.

Guidance on who should interact with secondary audiences

Who has most credibility with each secondary audience - and command of relevant facts?

- One person should consistently interface with a target audience and report back common questions to the team for follow up. The person who tactically disseminates, for example, an email to parents, will be a Releaser, whereas the messenger in whose name the email is sent will be a secondary spokesperson.

Order of dissemination, generally, for a Tier 3 crisis:

1. **Fire/police** phoned, while **students and teachers/staff needing to take immediate action for their own safety** are notified first by school leader. This will happen during the fact-gathering stage. (immediate)
2. **Family members of injured parties** must be notified immediately by school leader. This will also happen during the fact-gathering stage. Photos of victims should only go to media if the families have given explicit permission. (0-1 hr)
3. **All employees/staff** are then sent a targeted message by email/text. (0-1 hr)
4. **All parents are notified by the school**; approved core message sent by email and/or robo-call. (in 0-2 hrs) If your families don't often use email, you must strive to reach them where they are. That may mean radio and TV media and/or texts.
5. **Board and media** informed by central office. (0-2 hrs) Only designated spokespersons are authorized to talk with the media. The board will want faster notice in the case of situations for which they may be held accountable, such as when legality of the network/system is itself at issue. They may want to play role in approval.
6. **Local leaders, funders, partners, elected officials** are informed simultaneously, as needed (or within minutes after parents) by the central office through a targeted message, often with a copy of the core message. (0-4 hrs)
7. Follow up as needed when new facts arise or to confirm actions taken and progress.

In some cases, the core message can simply be forwarded, introduced by a secondary audience value-connect, followed by "Please be advised of the following communication we have just sent out to families" with core message copied.

In other cases, secondary audiences will have additional concerns or values that should be addressed in their version. For example, board members or authorizers will have execution questions and may need more details about your strategy and process. The same messaging template, however, will apply.

Any written messages sent out should be "skimmable" — with key points bolded or otherwise highlighted so your audience can quickly and easily find the main points.

Have language translators ready and factor in translation time.

If a press conference is planned, prepare the location with a podium with official seal/logo displayed, backdrop and audio-visual links. Ensure that the location is appropriate for the announcement. The "look" will send a loud message.

6. Monitor progress and follow up with audiences

Send a brief, consistent follow-up communication to each audience:

- Close the loop. Reveal the outcome of actions taken and progress — and continue to do so until the situation is fully resolved.
- When new facts are uncovered, send out another follow-up message.

In ideal situations, your original outgoing message will stand for itself. A follow up is only needed if you introduced an action, the outcome of which your average audience member will reasonably want to know.

Keep in mind the 10 tips to avoid common crisis messaging pitfalls shared in the Message Development section. They still apply. The follow-up stage is another opportunity to regain trust with target audiences by demonstrating your organization's integrity and proving that you did what you said you would do.

24/7 contact information for Partners & Key Stakeholders

<u>Group</u>	<u>Name (if available)</u>	<u>Phone</u>	<u>Email</u>	<u>Fax</u>	<u>After-hours</u>
Police					
Fire					
FEMA					
CDC					
Board					
State education agency					
Authorizer/ School board					
Elected officials					
Media					
Counselors/ Social workers					
Other partners (e.g. PTA, clergy, community advocates)					

COMMON CRISIS facts to gather:

- What happened?
- Where?
- When?
- Who was involved?
- How many?
- What are their names?
- Ages?
- What went wrong?
- What caused this?
- What is currently being done?
- Did we have any prior indication that there was a problem?
- Who is in charge of the response effort?
- How serious are (injuries/fallout)?
- How was the incident discovered?
- By whom?
- When?
- To what extent do others already know about this?
- Which state and local authorities have been notified?
- When?
- Where are the victims?
- How do you know?
- Who discovered them?
- When?
- What is being done to aid them?
- Where are the perpetrators?
- How do you know?
- Who discovered them?
- When?
- What is being done to hold them accountable?
- Has anything like this happened at the school(s) before?
- When was the last incident?
- What is the school/system's record on this issue?
- Has the effort been shut down?
- For how long?
- Who is assisting families?
- What have the families been told?
- How many others were in the area at the time of the incident?
- What is happening to other students in the meantime?
- What does the media know?
- What are our legal/regulatory/charter/school board obligations?

Examples of crisis situations and responsive actions

Crisis situations	Core values	Examples of responsive actions/considerations
<p>Non-emergency: Actual injury/death</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suicide • Staff or student death • Contained fire • Accidents (e.g. bus, science lab) • Assaults 	<p>Safety, wellbeing</p>	<p>Direct staff and others not to repeat information until verified and to direct all queries to one central source</p> <p>Intervene directly with students most likely to be affected</p> <p>Document each action and follow up so there is a record of the facts as they occurred over time</p> <p>Increase available supportive counseling for students and staff</p> <p>Guide students and staff to engage in productive, appropriate responses</p> <p>In the case of a suicide: Avoid contributing to adolescent suicide contagion by inadvertently glamorizing or romanticizing the suicide through memorial activities.</p>
<p>Imminent injury/death</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bomb threat • Shooter • Natural disaster • Explosion • Medical issue 	<p>Safety, wellbeing</p>	<p>Call 911</p> <p>Notify school security</p> <p>Isolate students from the disruption</p> <p>Begin first aid</p> <p>Relay additional information about the perpetrator's location and number of victims as it becomes available. Determine if the perpetrator is still on premises.</p> <p>Institute lockdown, evacuation, shelter-in-place, lockout and/or drop-cover-hold procedures</p> <p>Use combination two-way radio/cell phones when cellular servers may be jammed and, if possible, keep one line open to your crisis headquarters office.</p> <p>Know:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sprinkler and fire alarm turn off procedures and utility shut-off valves • Map and blueprints of campus for SWAT team • Evacuation routes • Track who has been released and to whom: parents, relatives, emergency personnel, hospital (have a set of release forms on hand) • First aid supplies location • Daily attendance roster <p>Attempt to determine the number of victims and identify witnesses</p> <p>Designate staff member to accompany victim(s) by ambulance</p> <p>Secure crime scenes and limit access to campus</p> <p>Ensure supplies are available</p> <p>Prepare for a large number of students needing assistance handling emotional difficulty</p> <p>Ensure requirements for special-needs children are met</p> <p>Provide emergency transportation</p> <p>Some students may need to contact parents to be dismissed from school</p> <p>Some staff members may need to have classes covered for a short time or the remainder of the day</p> <p>Contact and have the following individuals available:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselors • Social workers • School nurse <p>Document all actions, decisions and events (e.g. what happened, what worked, what did not work)</p> <p>Work with state and local emergency management agencies to have the Federal Aviation Administration restrict air space over your site. This will prevent helicopters flying over your school at a time of chaos. Media helicopters can be very frightening to children.</p> <p>Hold de-briefings.</p>

Examples of crisis situations and responsive actions — Continued

Crisis situations	Core values	Examples of responsive actions/considerations
<p>Developing Tier 1 or Tier 2 crises that can be reasonably perceived as posing an ongoing risk to students: weapon on campus recurring drug abuse gang activities allegations of child abuse spills or exposures to hazardous substances presence of unauthorized persons or trespassers loss, disappearance or kidnapping of a student</p>		<p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical/structural recovery Operational recovery Restoration of academic learning Psychological/emotional recovery <p>Monitor mental health of students and staff, attendance, grades, and counselor’s visits Provide care for caregivers (compassion fatigue) Incorporate lessons learned from each event into future planning efforts Be aware of ‘key dates,’ such as trials, anniversaries, holidays</p> <p>In the case of a bomb threat: The person answering the phone should ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exact location of the bomb Time set for detonation Description of explosive or container Type of explosive Reason for call or threat <p>The person answering the phone should note:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Date and time of the call Exact language used Gender of caller Estimated age of caller Any identifiable accent of caller Any identifiable background noise such as music, trucks or other conversation <p>Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take no action Search without an evacuation Evacuate and search Issue an “all clear” when danger is removed <p>In the case of a medical issue: Handle student with due care, according to their individual medical needs as communicated by parents Describe training staff have had in first aid</p> <p>In the case of a natural disaster: Inform staff of immediate actions to take to secure building.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide protection and care for the occupants until help arrives according to procedures appropriate for tornadoes, severe thunderstorms, hurricane preparation and lightning threats Disable utilities in the event of structural damage
		<p>In the case of drugs or weapons on campus: Conduct reasonable searches of lockers or personal storage spaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If information leads to one suspect and the subject is now being questioned, conduct a “pat down” search of the individual with another adult present, preferably the school attendance and security officer. This type of search involves the external feeling of clothing and the inspection of purses or other hand-held carried objects. Persons should be trained to conduct the search in such a manner that it is visible to both the suspect and witnesses.

Examples of crisis situations and responsive actions — Continued

Crisis situations	Core values	Examples of responsive actions/considerations
<p>Risk of infringement on student/family rights Disruptions (walkouts, protests), Allegations of fraud, overpaid staff Discrimination Abuse of privacy Infringement on opportunities (e.g. kitchen shut down, facilities inaccessible)</p> <p><u>Any other actions [ORGANIZATION] must take to ensure its good standing, such as:</u> privacy, financial stewardship of public or philanthropic dollars, operational integrity, academic performance, compliance with all applicable state and federal laws (e.g. health code, open meetings law, public records act, code of ethics, local government budget act), actions incongruent with the board’s purpose, articles of incorporation and bylaws and charter/contracts, enforcement of school, student and employee policies, lack of ethical integrity (e.g. conflict of interest, inconsistency with school’s goals, vision and mission)</p>	<p>Safety, wellbeing, quality of education/ opportunity, equity/ fairness, respect for culture, legal, transparency/ information, accountability, choice, control, honesty, caring, empathy</p>	<p>Do not, under any circumstances, conduct a search that requires the removal of clothing other than outerwear such as coats, hats, gloves, etc. If it is believed that the suspect has a weapon hidden on his/her body, call the family and civil authorities. Call the police and turn the item(s) over to them. Take officer’s badge number and name. Assign staff to locations during passing periods/lunch periods, to provide high visibility of authority figures. Communicate that the possession (or selling or attempted sale) of any type of drug/weapon on school property or at any school-sponsored event will be treated as a serious offense. Any person found in violation of this district/school policy will be subjected to one or all of the following response actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contacting parent/guardian • suspension • arrest by law enforcement agencies • expulsion • detention • contacting juvenile authorities <p>In the case of allegations of child abuse:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report the incident to the appropriate authorities • Maintain confidentiality of the incident and the individuals involved • Inform staff members and others who have information not to discuss the incident • Investigate internally and coordinate with authorities <hr/> <p>During an HR investigation: Refer to policies, contracts, law, regulation and charter Possible options: Suspend, leave without pay, leave with pay, termination</p> <p>Other allegations: Launch an investigation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a task force. • Ask a credible third party to oversee the investigation (e.g. audit) • Conduct a listening session/tour/survey. • Provide core audience with an opportunity to be heard Frame ways they can be involved in decisions. <p>Take legal action. Create a drop-in center for more information/resources</p>

Additional Resources

Masters of Disaster, the Ten Commandments of Damage Control

<https://www.amazon.com/Masters-Disaster-Commandments-Damage-Control-ebook/dp/Bo096M8PL4>

Practical Information on Crisis Planning, a Guide for Schools and Communities

<https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/crisisplanning.pdf>

Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

<http://cecp.air.org/guide/guide.pdf>

Developed by the Youth Violence Project at the University of Virginia

Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates

http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf

Based on an in-depth study of 37 school shootings and other school-based attacks, this 2002 publication from the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education sets forth a process for identifying, assessing and managing students who may pose a threat of targeted violence in schools.

Threat Assessment at School: A Primer for Educators

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/threatassess.pdf

Published in 2004 by the National Association of School Psychologists, this offers basic information on school violence and potentially violent offenders, developing threat assessment protocols for schools, conducting threat assessment interventions, providing supportive interventions and related resources.

Bomb Threat Response: An Interactive Planning Tool for Schools

<http://www.threatplan.org>

This tool was created by the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Chemical Agents: Facts About Sheltering In Place

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/planning/shelteringfacts.asp>

The Center for Disease Control's fact sheet defines this response shelter in place, provides criteria for activating the response and guidance for doing it safely. Although it is delivered in reference to the home setting, the information will be useful for school shelter in place officials.

“School Crisis Response Initiative”

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/publications/bulletins/schoolcrisis/ncj197832.pdf>

The organizational model presented in this bulletin by the Office for Victims of Crimes of the U.S. Department of Justice is intended to guide schools and school divisions as they develop their own school-based emergency response plans.

Pandemic Influenza: Preparing and Responding to a School Crisis

http://www.ercm.org/views/documents/PandemicFlu_Allensworth.ppt

Diane Allensworth of the Centers for Disease Control presented at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools

Federal Emergency Management Agency After a Flood: The First Steps

<http://www.fema.gov/hazard/flood/aftrfld.shtm>

“After a Flood: The First Steps” is a recovery guide created by the FEMA Flood Division office.

Center for Trauma, Response and Preparedness Educational Materials

http://www.ctrp.org/resources_educators.htm

University of Connecticut and Yale University Center of Excellence resources for educators to address the mental health needs of students proactively

A Guide for Intermediate and Long-Term Mental Health Services After School-Related Violent Events

<http://www.mentalhealth.org/publications/allpubs/NMHo3-0151/page4.asp>

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency’s National Mental Health Information Center offers this brief guide.

Reactions and Guidelines for Children Following Trauma/Disaster

<http://www.apa.org/practice/ptguidelines.html>

The American Psychological Association highlights post-trauma reactions and behaviors and explores what to expect of typical elementary school students, middle school students, high school students and teachers exposed to trauma. It also offers guidelines for teachers and parents seeking to help students of different ages cope with their emotions. Accessible at

Tips for Helping Students Recovering from Traumatic Events

<http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/recovering/index.html>

In September 2005, the U.S. Department of Education published a brochure for parents and students coping with the after-effects of Hurricanes Rita and Katrina.

After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools

<https://afsp.org/our-work/education/after-a-suicide-a-toolkit-for-schools>

In collaboration with the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention offers this guide, updated in 2018, to help schools respond in the aftermath of a suicide death.

Sample talking points: Missing child

We are committed to the safety and security of every student.

- We are working closely with law enforcement officials to provide as much background information as possible to assist in the search for the child.
- We are dedicated to safe environments for children in all our schools.
- We will provide you with additional information when we have it. We encourage anyone with information to contact [insert appropriate law enforcement personnel].

Sample talking points: Allegation against staff

We are committed to maintaining the safety and privacy of [Organization] students, families and staff.

- We take any allegation of misconduct seriously.
- We have launched an internal investigation and are working closely with authorities to provide any information that is helpful.
- We will provide you with additional information when we have it.

Sample letter to families: School bus accident

Dear Parent,

We are dedicated to ensuring the safety of every student and maintaining a strong partnership with parents. For this reason, I want to make you aware of an accident that occurred this morning.

One of our school buses transporting _____ students home was involved in a traffic accident on _____ Road.

Safety of students is our first concern. Emergency medical personnel were contacted immediately. All parents of involved students were called to inform them of the incident. Four of the students were transported to XXX for observation after complaining of neck and back pain. Fortunately, these injuries were not life threatening, but we always take the proper medical precautions to ensure the safety and well-being of our students. All other students were cleared by medical personnel on scene and allowed to board another bus home. I reported to the scene and checked on the students at the emergency room. All of the students were treated and released last night.

The driver of the school bus was not injured. Local law enforcement is investigating the cause of this accident, and we will take whatever steps are needed to make sure it does not happen again. We are pleased that our transportation department has a very safe driving record, and this was an isolated incident.

Regardless, we want you to be aware as we partner with you for the safety of your child. Thank you for entrusting your child to our care. Please contact me should you have questions.

Sincerely,
School leader

Sample letter to families: Bomb threat

Dear School Family,

To keep you informed of our efforts to maintain a safe and secure campus, I am writing to inform you of an incident that occurred today at _____.

In response to a bomb threat, the high school did not open this morning until approximately 8:30 a.m. when the police declared the building safe. The telephone bomb threat was made early this morning to the Port Jervis Police Department. Word of the bomb threat was not received in time to delay or cancel classes.

When students arrived at school this morning, they were not permitted to enter the building. Students and staff remained in the bleachers at ___ field while the police and bomb-sniffing dogs searched the complex. The officers, assisted by district personnel, conducted a thorough search of the building. No bomb or explosive materials were found.

At approximately 8:30 a.m., the police declared the building safe and authorized the district to reopen the high school. As an added safety procedure, police and school staff searched the backpacks and other personal belongings of everyone as they entered the building.

Police are continuing their investigation of this incident, which I assure you, will not be treated as a prank.

We ask parents to use this opportunity to please talk to your children and explain that a false bomb threat directed toward a school in this state is a Class E felony subject to criminal prosecution.

Additionally, if the responsible person is a student, he or she will face expulsion from school. The safety and security of our students and staff is our highest priority. Our emergency procedures worked efficiently today, allowing everyone to remain safe during our response action. I want to personally commend our students and staff for their full cooperation.

Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns regarding this matter.

Sincerely,

Superintendent of Schools

Sample letter to families: Death of student or staff member

Dear Parents,

We are deeply saddened to share the news that we have lost one of the members of our school family. _____, [a student/a teacher/a staff member], died yesterday afternoon [insert brief facts about the death].

This loss is sure to raise many emotions, concerns and questions for our entire school, especially our students. Our guidance counselor and school psychologist have been available throughout the day to talk with any student who may have had a particularly difficult time dealing with the news.

Any death can be difficult for children to understand. We recommend taking time to discuss _____'s death with your children, allowing them to talk about how they feel and any fears or concerns they may have as a result of this news. If you believe your child would benefit from talking with our guidance counselor or school psychologist, please let us know.

We are saddened by this loss to our school community and will make every effort to help you and your child as you need.

Sincerely,

School Principal

Sample letter to families: weapon on campus

Dear [school name] families,

Every adult at [school name] is deeply committed to the safety and well-being of every child we serve. Key to our partnership with you in this effort is open communication. For this reason, I want to make you aware of an incident that occurred at school today.

This morning, a teacher received an anonymous tip that a student may have been in possession of a weapon. The moment we learned this information, early this morning, we took immediate steps to question the student and confiscate a knife from the student's locker. At no time was the knife brought out at school or used to threaten other students, and we have every reason to believe this student had no intention of causing harm to others.

That said, the student was in violation of both school board policy and appropriate laws. In accordance with school and district policy, we notified local law enforcement, and the student has been taken into custody.

As with all matters of student safety, we take this situation very seriously. Extensive security measures are in place to help us maintain a safe campus. As parents, you can help: please encourage your child to let a teacher or administrator know if a situation exists that could ever place them or others in danger. While peer pressure is great at this age, we want to encourage students to feel comfortable reporting any information they may have that compromises their safety or the safety of others.

As always, we appreciate your partnership in helping us maintain a safe, secure and welcoming environment where all students are free to focus on learning. Please feel free to call me at 555-5555 or email me at principal@school.edu if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

School principal

Sample text alerts: Active safety threats

Alert: (insert campus or location) is under a (insert type) alert. Administrators and staff are watching this development closely, which may affect operations and classes. Additional information will be shared as it becomes available. Please check your email, our website at www.XXXX or call the hotline at XXXXXXXX for information updates as they become available.

Closure Message: Effective (insert time/date), (insert campus or location) will close due to (insert type). All classes and operations are cancelled today (or until further notice). Information will be available on our website at XXXX, via text messages, email, by calling our hotline at XXXX and through news media announcements. Please check our website or call our hotline for updates before leaving home and before your scheduled arrival on campus.

Lockdown w/ Warning Message: Effective (insert time/date), (insert campus/location/building) will be locked down as a security measure in response to criminal activity in the school's vicinity that has come to our attention. Law enforcement are on the scene and working with other county safety officials. There will be no entry or exit of the building until an "all clear" has been declared by the site administrator. Please check our website and your email and text messages or call our hotline at XXXXXXXX for information updates as they become available.

All Clear Message: Effective (time/date), (campus/location/building) lock down has been lifted. It is now safe to enter or exit the building, and operations have returned to normal. Classes will resume at (insert time/date). Additional information will be provided as it becomes available on our web site, www.XXXX, via email and text messages and by calling our hotline at XXXX.

Empower families before crises occur

Explain family members' roles during crises before an incident occurs. Some school districts send letters home to families describing their school's expectations for their response. Other school districts have found it useful to work with local media.

Disseminate messages like this:

- **Families should rely on media outlets and the school/school district's social media channels for information during an incident, rather than calling the school**, because school phones will be needed to manage the situation.
- **Families should wait for any instructions on student release rather than rushing to the school.** It is helpful to explain to families that emergency responders need the area clear to do their jobs. Only after emergency responders determine that a safe student release is possible will families be reunited with their children. In many situations, their *children will be safer in the school building than outside or in a car.*
- **Families must try to remain calm in the aftermath of a crisis.** Children are greatly influenced by their family's sense of well-being. Be compassionate listeners when children talk about the crisis. Many children will benefit from mental health services regardless of whether they were directly or indirectly involved in the incident.
- **Return children to their normal routines as quickly as possible.** Families should adhere to the school's schedule. If the school remains open immediately after a crisis, it is important to let children return to school. Adhering to a typical routine will help children's recovery process.
- **Refer any media requests to the school system's public information officer** so they are sure to get the latest, most accurate information.
- **Attend community meetings**, which often provide information to help dispel rumors and open important lines of communication with families.

Recommended crisis communications metric setting (to incorporate into [ORGANIZATIONAL] strategic plan):

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TEAM ALIGNMENT. The entire crisis communications team agrees about what constitutes:

1. Tier 0: No crisis
2. Tier 1: Developing crisis
3. Tier 2: Low/moderate-level crisis
4. Tier 3: Major crisis

READINESS.

- A. Every member of the crisis communications team acknowledges comfort with the procedures described herein.
 1. Conduct team trainings after the team has read and digested this plan. Team members can be trained on hypotheticals conducted in conjunction with actual crisis drills or even informal table-top drills.
 2. Survey each member after the team debriefs the outcome of each procedural training to confirm continued comfort.
- B. Every team member who may need to serve as a spokesperson has gained new skills and confidence through spokesperson training.

QUICK START AT MESSAGING AVAILABLE. For each potential crisis identified above, a quick reference exists that provides the crisis communications team with a starting point, including:

- A. Value connect
- B. Relevant information [ORGANIZATION] historically knows, for example:
 1. Historical statistics/programmatic wins
 2. Larger issue context

RESPONSE TIME. In 90 percent of cases, crisis response goes out according to deadlines described in this plan.

EFFECTIVENESS. On annual survey, core family audience indicates 80 percent satisfaction with communications received from the school/school system about how issues of major concern (e.g. health and safety, natural disasters) were handled.

AWARENESS. Parents receive prebuttal communication about the existence of a new crisis communications procedure and the value the organization is placing on preparedness and keeping parents informed. Such information can be included in informational materials already prepared for parents or mentioned at parent orientations and other informational meetings. This prebuttal will enable the school system to follow up on this previously established commitment to keeping parents informed when making any forthcoming announcements.

