

# Crisis Communications and School Safety

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## Key terms and definitions:

- ▶ **Emergency Operations Center:** An Emergency Operations Center, or EOC, is a central command and control facility responsible for carrying out emergency management and ensuring continuity during an emergency/disaster. The EOC is responsible for the strategic overview and coordination of the emergency/disaster.
- ▶ **Remote reunification purpose and process:** During an emergency, normal school dismissal may not be possible. A remote reunification process is part of a school emergency operations plan (EOP) that details actions to take before, during, and after an emergency to ensure students are reunited with their families.
- ▶ **Redundant and secure centralized communications:** Redundant communications refers to having multiple back-up means of communication and is critical in emergency preparedness planning. It is not recommended to depend on just one or two means of communication.

## When, not if: Planning for crisis response

Unfortunately, every board member should think about the topic of crisis communication. It is not a matter of *if* a local educational agency (LEA) will find itself in the middle of a crisis; it is a matter of *when* and *how well prepared it is to face it*. The following section covers strategies that can help guide governance teams and LEAs before, during, and after a crisis.

### Before a crisis – Preparation is key

The secret of successfully handling a crisis is in the preparation. Creating strong relationships, setting high expectations for transparency, and putting effective plans in place are three ways that can help an LEA be prepared for a coming crisis.

#### ***Building a foundation of trust: Creating strong relationships***

While it may not seem like the first step in preparing for a crisis, consistent and proactive community engagement is a key step in effective crisis response for LEAs. When LEA leaders are engaged

in the local community, they become the face of the LEA, develop individual relationships with community members, and increase trust in the leadership team and organization as a whole.

Trust acts as a social currency. Deposits are made with each positive interaction at a meeting, event, or over email or text. Withdrawals happen when an organization falls short of expectations, such as with the bad behavior of an employee, poor response to a crisis situation, or lack of communication in general.

It is fundamental to build trust *before* a crisis hits. In most communities, there are a number of organizations that would welcome an LEA representative at various events, meetings, or other gatherings. For example, business groups, community organizations, social clubs

and service clubs that serve your community, and most of these groups have regular meetings, social gatherings, or fundraising events that provide a great opportunity for connection. However, consistent participation in all of these groups may be challenging for just one or two leaders, LEAs may recognize participation as part of the job for administrators throughout the organization and allow time for that important work.

In addition to filling the “trust account” before a crisis to ensure support, connecting with business groups and community organizations can bring valuable opportunities to LEAs in the form of community assets that students and schools can use and additional resources before, during, and after a crisis.

### ***Setting a transparent tone starts at the top***

Another important foundation for dealing with a crisis is to create a culture of transparency throughout the organization. For governance teams, this primarily relates to how they communicate with their community before, during, and after decisions both large and small.

Setting an expectation of transparency starts at the top. Board meetings should be easy to attend, processes during the meeting should be explained, and decisions should be communicated widely. When talking about issues at board meetings, trustees should demonstrate that they are open-minded about the topic and curious about the testimony and supporting materials provided. They can also demonstrate transparency by being prepared prior to meetings, ensuring that the LEA follows open meeting laws and requirements, and providing thoughtful comments, questions, and suggestions. Board members can also create transparency by being responsive outside of board meetings, by listening, responding to emails (as appropriate), and engaging with community members at community events. This type of transparency increases trust in organizational leaders and the likelihood that the LEA will successfully navigate a future crisis with the support of LEA staff and the community.

### ***Developing a crisis communication plan***

While trust is being built through relationships and transparency, LEAs should be working toward a consistent crisis communication plan that defines the various levels of crisis, key staff roles in communicating about a crisis, and necessary communication procedures. The plan should define when actions must be taken, designate spokespersons for different incidents, specify when educational partners should be contacted, and include parameters for crisis messaging for the most probable incidents.

Once the crisis communication plan has been developed, share the plan widely and train key personnel so that they are comfortable taking the steps outlined in the plan when a crisis strikes.

## **Role of the public information officer or director of communications**

Ideally, LEAs will have an in-house public information officer (PIO) or someone responsible for communication efforts that can assist in planning and training as well as step up when a crisis hits. The PIO is one of the few generalists in an LEA, working on a wide variety of issues and with each school and department in the organization. They can assist leaders with understanding not only how internal departments might be impacted, but also how choices are likely to be interpreted by various audience groups.

Professionals with communications backgrounds also have the ability to break down complicated concepts and nuanced issues so that they are understandable. This skill set can help enormously when the crisis is confusing or unfolding in a way that is hard to predict.

One of the most important ways the PIO can assist is by their efforts before and after a crisis. In their role, they are more likely to develop trusting relationships with communications professionals in other organizations like local law enforcement and fire, as well as with area community leaders.

LEAs without the resources to hire a communications professional can still fill this important function by providing crisis communication training to leaders and administrative assistants. There are county, state, and national organizations that regularly provide this type of training and coaching assistance. Another option for LEAs is to hire an outside communication consultant. While they will likely not have local relationships, they will be able to assist in the strategic analysis of the crisis situation and develop key messages for LEA staff to communicate to the public. It is important to ensure that an outside consultant is a good fit for the LEA. For example, do they come recommended from another LEA? Have they worked with similar issues or LEAs before? Are they accredited in public relations (the highest standard in the industry)? Even when a consultant is hired, it is important that the LEA be the face in a crisis situation.

### ***Developing a community alert template***

As part of the crisis communication plan, LEAs should prepare for how they will alert the community when a security incident occurs. It is recommended that LEAs have a template webpage prepared in advance that directs inquiries to desired Emergency Operations Center (EOC) numbers and locations and clarifies the LEA-supported remote reunification purpose and process. The LEA's webpage

should also emphasize that parents and guardians should refrain from approaching the incident location. In the event of a significant incident, a natural disaster, or safety emergency, it is possible that nearby LEA (and overlapping district) schools will be placed into a secure campus protocol or even lockdown. The communication plan must prepare for this possibility and follow up on information as needed in a process that is coordinated with all relevant partners and streamed across available media platforms.

### **Plan for centralized and redundant means of communication**

A more technical aspect of developing a crisis communication plan includes attention to logistical details for communications systems such as radios, cell phones, and other alternatives, known as redundant and secure centralized communications. When LEAs have redundant and secure centralized communications that will continue to function during a crisis, it allows LEA and first responders to maintain contact when timely responses are critical. In crisis situations, local cell towers can commonly become overloaded due to higher-than-normal use. To plan for this possibility, some LEAs have implemented LEA-wide, encrypted, [Federal Communications Commission \(FCC\)](#)-licensed radio systems that are used in everyday operations but have deeper features that can be employed during an emergency. Some LEAs also share these radio systems with local law enforcement. Print materials are a secondary means of communication when email systems and connectivity are compromised.

### **During a crisis: Putting the plan into action**

It is even more important to be disciplined about effective communication in the midst of a crisis. When a crisis begins to emerge, it is time to turn to the crisis communication plan. Bringing together key personnel and reviewing the plan is one of the first steps to ensure that everyone is on the same page about how to respond to the situation. Key personnel, including governance team members, should be regularly informed about updates to the plan. Board members should work with LEA staff to regularly review the crisis communication plan to make sure it contains the most up-to-date information and ensure that scenarios, roles, and procedures are still applicable.

During a crisis, there will be enormous pressure to communicate the details of the event. It is critical that LEA leaders remain open-minded until details are confirmed. Most crises unfold over time, and, during the initial period, a lot of information will come in from a variety of sources. Being cautious and confirming details for accuracy will ensure that leaders make the best choices and communicate effectively. If asked to comment on an emerging crisis, avoid making assumptions or predictions about what has or what will happen. It is important to follow the roles and responsibilities as outlined in the crisis communication plan.

Consistent messaging will limit the opportunity for rumors and ensure that everyone with a role in responding to the crisis is informed. Clear and consistent messaging with updates as available

will help mitigate misinformation from circulating. Aim to keep updates free from acronyms or technical terms that may cause confusion. Use preplanned or scripted messages to stop the spread of misinformation.

### **Managing information during a crisis**

It is a common emergency management practice for law enforcement leadership to hold hourly press briefings for all incident updates. While hourly press briefings are likely not necessary and may not be possible for every crisis, regular press briefings can help direct the flow of community inquiries and remind staff and administration to control the exchange of information in accordance with their local partners. Failing to do so can cause a major erosion of trust and reputational damage to an LEA. It is highly recommended that all staff be trained regarding the dangers posed by releasing information that is premature, inaccurate, and/or unauthorized. Leaders should also be aware of any confidentiality requirements that apply to the particular circumstances of the incident when briefing the press or otherwise providing comment, including student and personnel record information. There will certainly be enough stress and ambiguity present for the entire LEA community, so the LEA's communications strategy and plan should attempt to mitigate these factors to the greatest extent possible.

### **Prioritize providing accurate information in a crisis**

When communicating in a crisis, it is important to provide responsive, consistent, and accurate information. Informational expectations have increased dramatically over the years in conjunction with the adoption of communication platforms that make instant information distribution possible. As mentioned earlier, there will be tremendous pressure to provide information quickly, but it is critical to ensure accuracy as well.

Acquiring and providing accurate information takes time. However, leaders can still communicate to acknowledge the situation and let families and staff know that they are working towards understanding and resolving the crisis. In fact, even when there is no new information, it can still be helpful to share when updates can be expected. Once the promise of an update is made, it is critical that it is kept, even if just to say that leaders are still working on resolving the crisis.

When an LEA has some culpability in a crisis, it is human nature to want to withdraw from public engagement. However, a gap in communication is likely to be filled by others. With the increase in social media platforms, podcasts, and blogging, anyone with an opinion about the situation will have the opportunity to share it with others. If the LEA is not providing ongoing communication of accurate information, the narrative of the crisis will begin to form with other input, and it may not be a positive narrative for the LEA. Many will decide that the lack of communication means that leaders do not care, are incompetent, or worse. Even if it is not possible to provide new information, continue to reach out to

let people know that leaders are still engaged in the situation and are working towards finding a solution or ensuring the safety of the community. For more information about using social media platforms and navigating misinformation see the "School Safety Communications Planning Guide" in the Relevant resources section at the end of this brief.

### **Know the three keys of messaging**

When communicating in a crisis, it is important to make sure LEA messaging contains the most accurate information possible. What should the message contain? It depends on the situation, but a general formula includes three elements:

- 1)** What does the LEA know about what happened?
- 2)** What is the LEA doing?
- 3)** What does the LEA want the recipient to do?

For example, a message about a bomb threat to a campus might mention when the threat was reported, the evacuation process that was followed, and where families can pick up evacuated students. Most importantly, people will want to know that students are safe.

In addition to providing the correct information, consider the tone of the message. Messages should be student-centered and demonstrate that leaders are concerned about the situation. Language should be simple. The LEA should refrain from using jargon and take into consideration the various reading levels of the audience. Messages should also be reviewed by the LEA's legal team as necessary and, where possible, translated into the languages used by families at the school or LEA.

Once the message is ready to go out, it should be sent across multiple platforms to ensure it is received and then posted in one central place for everyone to access the latest information as well as create a record of what has transpired. When messages are only posted on social media, for example, people may see messages out of order, which can cause additional confusion.

### **Coordination with community partners**

While in most situations board members should be focused on policy matters, they may wish to assist staff onsite when a crisis occurs. This might simply consist of offering to show up at a campus or office to provide a calming presence and an extra pair of hands. Board members with trusted community connections can also offer to help access any community resources needed to support students and staff.

Ideally, LEA leaders have made solid connections with local community groups, law enforcement, and first responder agencies. During a crisis, keep the lines of communication open with these groups, as they may be working on the same crisis from a different perspective and can offer support. In addition, when agencies are able to collaborate on key messages related to a crisis and provide unified communication, it helps ease community concerns

and anxiety about the crisis response. For example, if the crisis is related to police activity, it can be reassuring for area families to receive joint messaging from the LEA and police department and know that they are working closely together.

### **After a crisis**

After the LEA has gone through a crisis, it is natural to want to move on to normalcy as quickly as possible. Many crises are emotionally draining, and it can be challenging to revisit the event timeline. However, it is critical to take this reflective step because that is how an LEA can ensure ongoing improvement.

### **Ensure accountability with a focus on solutions**

No matter how well an LEA handles a crisis, there is usually at least one area that could have been handled better. Approaching a post-incident debrief with the right focus is the key to discovering new and better ways of doing things. Reviewing the timeline of events with a focus on solutions rather than blame will make participants feel less defensive and facilitate more ideas.

### **Sharing next steps**

As the crisis comes to a close, share any lessons learned to demonstrate that the LEA is committed to continuous improvement. There may be a need for a new process, investment, training, or additional or different communication to ensure student and staff safety going forward. Demonstrating transparency in sharing these lessons can help to repair or increase trust levels after a crisis.

It is not a matter of if LEAs will experience a crisis; it is a matter of when and how well prepared they are to face it. Understanding the steps that can be taken before, during, and after a crisis will help leaders and employees throughout the LEA to feel more confident when that crisis hits.

### **Questions for governance teams to consider**

Before, during, and after a crisis, board members can assist in finding the best path forward by asking reflective questions.

#### **To prepare for crisis communication around school safety incidents:**

- 1)** What is the LEA's existing crisis communication plan? Who has access to it, and when was it last reviewed?
- 2)** Who are the key staff responsible for implementing the crisis communication plan?
- 3)** Who will speak on behalf of the LEA during a crisis?
- 4)** How (and when) will staff communicate with partner organizations during a crisis?

**General communication questions to consider during a crisis include:**

- 1) Is this information accurate?
- 2) Has the LEA already communicated this information?
- 3) How does the LEA ensure that everyone (students, families, staff) has access to communication?
- 4) What do students, families, and staff need right now?
- 5) How can board members, community members, or partner organizations be helpful?

**Following a crisis, some questions about communication practices include:**

- 1) What about the communication strategy worked well?
- 2) Were there internal gaps in communication or gaps in communication with partner organizations and families?
- 3) What are the lessons learned from this incident? Include them in an updated crisis communication plan.

## Relevant resources

### California School Public Relations Association (CalSPRA)

This statewide association serves anyone who works in a communication capacity in an educational environment and provides professional development, sample templates, and valuable connections to other California communicators. [www.calspra.org](http://www.calspra.org)

### National School Public Relations Association

This national organization serves school public relations professionals throughout the country and provides online monthly and in-person annual professional development. [www.nspra.org](http://www.nspra.org)

### The National Center for School Safety (NCSS)

NCSS is a Bureau of Justice Assistance-funded training and technical assistance center at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. As a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional center focused on improving school safety and preventing school violence, the NCSS team is composed of national leaders in criminal justice, education, social work, and public health with expertise in school safety research and practice. NCSS provides comprehensive and accessible support to Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grantees and the school safety community nationwide to address today's school safety challenges. NCSS serves as the national training and technical assistance provider for the STOP School Violence Program. <https://bit.ly/3v7h5RI>

### Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS)

Emergency management planning is very important. Maximizing the strength of an education agency's plans for family reunification is an important part of the work that emergency management teams do at the K-12 level. <https://bit.ly/3P1MEOJ>

### Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS)

Collaborating With the Media: Establishing Strategic Partnerships for Emergency Operations Plans Fact Sheet. <https://bit.ly/3TANNUE>

## Relevant CSBA board policies and administrative regulations

CSBA GAMUT Policy and Policy *Plus* subscribers have access to CSBA sample policies and administrative regulations. The following are relevant to communication and safety.

- ▶ BP 0450 - Comprehensive Safety Plan
- ▶ BP 1100 - Communication with the Public
- ▶ BP 1112 - Media Relations
- ▶ BP 1250/AR 1250 - Visitors/Outsiders
- ▶ BP 3515/AR 3515 - Campus Security
- ▶ BP 3515.2/AR 3515.2 - Disruptions
- ▶ BP 3516 - Emergencies and Disaster Preparedness Plan
- ▶ BP 5020/AR 5020 - Parents Rights and Responsibilities
- ▶ BP 5112.5 - Open/Closed Campus
- ▶ BP 5131.8 - Mobile Communication Devices

Trinette Marquis, APR, has over 20 years of experience in communications, marketing, and public relations. Her work has been recognized by the National School Public Relations Association, the American Association of School Administrators, the Medical Marketing Association, and the International Association of Business Communicators. Trinette is executive director of the California School Public Relations Association and presents to national audiences on strategic public relations. She is a lecturer at California State University, Sacramento, author of *Engaging Data, Smart Strategies for School Communication*, and co-author of *The Communicating Principal*.

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