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Communicating Safety

When a crisis occurs, do you have a plan for letting parents, media, and the community know what is happening in your district?

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The caption under a picture of a lone wolf trying to blend in the middle of a pack of hounds reads: “When you are in deep trouble, say nothing and try to look inconspicuous.”

This advice may work well for the wolf, but it is not a good practice for school boards and administrators to follow in communicating school safety and crisis issues to parents, the media, and the broader school community.

Parents will forgive you if test scores go down one year. But they are much less forgiving if something happens that could have been prevented. As school leaders, your reputation and credibility are at stake.

Actual incidents and rumors of violence disrupt school communities. Overnight, attendance can decrease dramatically. Threats, rumored or real, can result in school clo-

tures. Student text messages and cell phone calls help to fuel rumors and misinformation, often creating more anxiety and panic than actual threats themselves.

A number of superintendents and boards have been plagued by security and crisis-related incidents that triggered local news stories that did not go away quickly. How you communicate with internal and external constituents can contribute significantly to your success in responding to, and recovering from, a school safety incident.

Getting out in front of problems

Parents send their children to school under the impression that all possible steps—from prevention to security to preparedness—have been taken. When an incident occurs,

many parents then question whether the trust they have placed in school leaders has been violated.

Effective school-community relations can be defined as “Good behavior, well communicated.” To effectively communicate about safety issues, you must make sure your schools have well-developed and exercised safety and crisis plans and your staff is trained to implement the plans.

“Getting out in front” on safety issues is also important, because parents and the media increasingly know the tough questions to ask. School board members and administrators historically have taken a “downplay, deny, deflect, and defend” approach, but that simply will not suffice today.

Parents basically want to know the answers to two broad questions:

- What measures are in place in my child’s school to prevent or to reduce the risk of crime, violence, and other safety hazards?

- Are school officials prepared to respond and manage incidents that can’t be prevented?

Prevention measures can include improvements to school climate, violence prevention programs, mental health and other student support services, proactive security measures, staff training, and numerous other strategies.

Preparedness measures include crisis plans that are well developed and exercised, staff members trained on these plans, strong partnerships with first responders and community agencies, and related efforts.

Board members, superintendents, principals, and other school representative should be able to articulate district and building-level measures that are in place at any time—before, during, or after a crisis. Telling parents and the media that school safety is “our top priority” is not enough. Parents and reporters are much more educated consumers of best practices, and generalities will not suffice.

What not to say

Proactive school leaders view communicating about safety as a positive public relations tool, not a communications disaster. By talking about safety issues before a crisis occurs, you can enhance your credibility prior to an actual incident.

What not to say can be as important as what to say. After a student died during a school-sponsored event a number of years ago, a high school principal said: “Look at the amount of times we’ve had something tragic occur and compare it to the number of times when nothing has happened. ... It’s

Safety communications tips

Stay out in front

- Model prevention, security, and preparedness best practices daily.
- Create a board subcommittee or work group on school safety.
- Dedicate board meeting time for safety updates.
- Create a school safety committee within the district and building-level parent organizations.
- Develop a crisis communications plan in addition to traditional emergency plans.
- Host parent awareness training on school and youth safety topics.
- Encourage student-led activities to promote school safety.
- Use student school newspapers to promote safety stories.
- Incorporate safety into annual professional development programs.
- Spend three to five minutes at each faculty meeting reviewing safety and crisis plans.
- Include safety communications in par-

ent newsletters.

- Create district and building Web pages with school safety information.
- Promote methods for students and parents to report concerns.

Manage rumors and threats

- Anticipate your district will someday face a fast-spreading rumor or threat.
- Have a solid crisis communications plan in place before an incident.
- Maintain well-trained threat assessment teams and evaluation protocols.
- Educate students on reporting rumors about threats to adults.
- Report threats to police and work collaboratively to evaluate the threats.
- Train administrators to monitor for and respond to rumors.
- Have and enforce policies prohibiting and/or restricting cell phone use.
- Provide accurate, timely, and redundant communications to dispel rumors.

- Avoid closing schools unless school and public safety officials believe it is required due to a credible threat.

During and after a crisis

- Provide timely updates of accurate information to key constituencies.
- Use multiple mechanisms (websites, news media, letters, mass notification systems, etc.) to communicate the same messages.
- Work with public safety and community partners to send consistent messages.
- Show compassion and support those impacted by the crisis.
- Highlight actions and plans that worked well during the response.
- Tell the truth. Acknowledge and explain mistakes and lessons learned.
- Hold community meetings and allow parent, student, and staff concerns to be heard.
- Identify steps for preventing and preparing for future incidents.

like traveling in an airplane. There are occasions when a plane crashes, but traveling on an airplane is the safest way to travel.”

This statement shows no compassion for the victim, and sends a message of a school culture of “downplay, deny, deflect, and defend,” where officials are more concerned about protecting images. This is not a message today’s parents and media expect to hear.

Some other examples of sound bites commonly used by boards and administrators include:

■ **“We have a new zero-tolerance policy against school violence.”** Zero tolerance has become such a rhetorical and political buzz phrase that it has lost meaning. It also begs the question: “What did you have before now, a 50 percent tolerance for violence?” School leaders should instead speak about specific prevention and preparedness measures in place.

■ **“This is an isolated incident.”** Amazingly, board members and administrators still use this phrase following high-profile stabbings, shootings, and even deaths. Calling a tragic act of violence with major injuries an “isolated incident” shows no concern or compassion for victims and their families or about school safety in general. Instead, it suggests more concern about protecting image over protecting children.

■ **“Schools are the safest place in the community.”** This statement is often used to downplay safety concerns after high-profile incidents. Such a statement belittles the seriousness of an incident. It also fails to acknowledge concerns and questions that parents have.

School leaders cannot always divulge details that violate student privacy rights, impede ongoing criminal and administrative investigations, or jeopardize safety. But in general, parents expect and deserve honest, truthful, and timely communications about the safety of their children at school.

Managing rumors and threats

Today’s students are part of “Generation Text” because text messaging, cell phones, e-mails, and other communications are integral to their interactions. Many parents use these methods for communicating with their children and peers as well.

Today’s tech-savvy students and parents, for better or worse, have a distinct advantage in getting their messages out much faster than do school officials. While school leaders typically need time to investigate rumors and verify information, many students and parents will forward to each other information they mistakenly believe to be true.

Bad news spreads quickly and a delay in your response can result in an expedited flooding of phone lines, hundreds of parents at the school office trying to pick up their children, and media trucks on the front lawn. A good cri-

sis communications plan can help you reduce delays and deliver timely and accurate messages when a rumor breaks.

Text messaging and cell phones also play a major role in spreading misinformation during real school emergencies, not just in times of rumors. School office phone lines are almost guaranteed to overload. Parents and media will typically be at the school doorstep in very short order. And all of this will be going on in addition to the actual crisis situation itself.

School administrators typically know that addressing parents and the media are two of the most demanding aspects of managing a crisis. Once the incident itself has ended, parent demands and media inquiries often create “the crisis after the crisis.” Depending on the incident’s nature, school leaders should be prepared to respond and discuss safety issues for weeks or even months.

Ironically, two of the weakest areas in many school crisis plans are how to reunite and communicate with students and parents and how to deal with the media. Evaluations and tabletop exercises conducted by school safety experts consistently find huge gaps in planning in these areas, and an unrealistic understanding of the scope and magnitude of what is required to manage such dynamics.

Combined with great overconfidence by school staff, problems that occur in parent and media management during a crisis can create shockwaves that will require extensive communications and confidence rebuilding with both groups in the months ahead.

Maintaining your credibility

Successful communications during and after a crisis require that you listen, respond to concerns, and show compassion. Be truthful above all else. Messages must be accurate and timely and communicated with redundancy through multiple mechanisms.

Plan to partner with credible, authoritative, and independent experts as part of your recovery process. Be prepared to work with law enforcement, fire departments, emergency medical services, emergency management agency officials, mental health agencies, local government officials, and other groups. You might want to consider hiring an independent consultant who can bring neutral opinions and expertise to your district.

The time to prepare for a future crisis is now. School safety is a leadership issue. By making prevention, security, and preparedness an ongoing district priority, boards and administrators can protect children and staff, the district’s reputation, and the credibility of the district’s leaders. ■

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