

From: National Association of School Psychologists

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/neat_media.aspx

SUGGESTIONS FOR DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

FACTS OF LIFE

If something even resembling violence happens on one of your campuses, chances are the media will be there to cover it, and sometimes they will know before you will.....

We are not able to prevent crises from occurring but we can control the conditions in which we work through one and we do that through our district's crisis plan.

RULE ONE (THE ONLY RULE)

BE PREPARED

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- Have individual school and district fact sheets prepared.
 - Identify a communication center and a separate media briefing area for each campus (this should be done together with the principal and the head of school security).
 - Pick the media briefing area carefully:
 - do not pick the area based on a site map
 - the area should be easily accessible to the media
 - the area should NOT give the media immediate and/or easy access to the campus.
 - The communication center is where all internal information flows to and from.
 - Make site maps of all your schools once the communication center and media briefing areas are chosen, making sure each is clearly marked on the site map.
 - Distribute the maps to educational teams.
 - Meet with the media spokespersons from your local police and fire departments and, if you are near a military installation, the public affairs officer. Review your plan and site maps so they know where to go, plus they will know who you are and will be more likely to stay in contact with you during a crisis (establishing rapport with those teams is very important).
 - Identify your school/crisis spokesperson and do not change your choice (if you have a public relations office, they should handle this duty because it frees up school personnel and they have access to pertinent school information).
 - If possible, individual school personnel should not speak with the media.
 - In a crisis situation and after the original media release is completed, the media should be updated every half-hour for the first two hours and then hourly thereafter, even if it means telling them there is nothing new to report.
 - Later briefings should contain information regarding steps the school will be taking the following day, i.e. checking school bags, increased police presence, need to show ID, etc.

- Since a recent poll noted that more than 65% of Americans get their news from television, prepare your media releases for TV broadcast. If there is a crisis at your school, the large majority of parents will be tuning in to the TV news that night.
 - Try to be in the media briefing room before media arrive in the morning. If there is no new news, it is a good opportunity to note your district's concern for safety of the students, review steps being taken to secure the campus, etc., plus the district's record for having safe schools. These reports will make the noon news because you have established yourself as their only source of news until students come.
 - Understand that the media needs a story... let it be a controlled, child-focused story that will help restore the safety and security of the children.
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From National Association of Independent Schools

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Crisis Communications Guidelines for Independent Schools

Jane Hulbert

This document is designed to give schools a blueprint for crisis communications planning. Given the wide range of NAIS schools (boarding, day, or combination; rural, city, or suburban; lower, middle, or upper school) there is no "one size fits all" plan, but there are steps that every school can take in advance. The key to successfully managing a crisis is advance preparation.

Use these guidelines as you edit or update your own crisis plan. If you don't have a plan yet, this will help you get started. Remember, when faced with a crisis, time is against you. You must move quickly, make key decisions, and communicate to your constituents. If you don't prepare, your school will suffer more damage and it is very difficult and expensive to get your good name back once it has been tarnished.

This outline has been prepared to answer the most basic and important question in times of crisis, "what do I do if?" Whether it be a natural disaster response, difficult situations or business continuity, planning is key. Prepare, prepare, and prepare.

How to Prepare in Advance

1. DEVELOP A CRISIS PLAN

What should it look like?

A crisis plan does not have to be a binder full of charts, text, and diagrams. The plan should be user-friendly, streamlined with the right information, and it should incorporate all of the elements in numbers two through six below.

2. ESTABLISH A CRISIS TEAM

Who is on it? (Depending on the school's size and circumstances, you may want to consider some of the following staff as part of the team. You may call in other people for guidance in specific situations):

Head of school, assistant head, business manager, facilities/security, communications/development director, board chair, technology director, parent association president, legal counsel, crisis consultant, crisis coordinator.

The crisis team is a fluid group. Not all staff members need to be present for all discussions, but each person has

particular expertise that can be helpful in the creation of the plan or during an incident.

Identify a location or a "command central" where team meets – determine one location on campus and one location off campus with excellent access to telephone, computer, and fax.

3. CREATE AND MAINTAIN A PHONE LIST

Whose phone numbers should be included? This is a critical piece that *must be updated at least once every year.*

School directory - crisis team should keep one at home and one at school

Team-at-a-Glance (Internal) - pocket size phone directory with team and key people's cell/home/weekend phone numbers

Team-at-a-Glance (External) - names and phone number for the following:

Security:

Local police, sheriff, fire chief, and public information officers

Bomb squad

Alarm company

Local FEMA office

Local Homeland Security

Mayor/village president

Health:

Local health department Hospital -- directions how to get there from school

Doctor/nurse

Psychiatrist/psychologist

Poison control

Food vendors

Facilities:

Gas and electric

Telephone

Technology

Heating, cooling, plumbing

Insurance company

Phone/Internet service

Emergency management companies

Bus company

4. ESTABLISH NOTIFICATION SYSTEMS

What systems should I use?

Systems must be established in advance of a crisis that will allow you to reach constituents using multiple modalities – text, IM, e-mail, voicemail, hand mail, U.S. postal service. For an overview of the systems that schools should explore, please see "[Technology for School Contingency Planning](#)," by Dirk DeLo.

The school's website is an effective tool for communication, and this is typically where parents, students, alumni, media, and the general public go for information. In crisis times, it is helpful to insert a press/media section on the site with current information.

5. PLAN FOR MANAGING CONSTITUENTS

PARENTS

Parent Management: Parents have very specific information needs. In a crisis, parents will often descend upon the school in search of their child or call frantically seeking information. It is critical that you establish a system of responding quickly to parent needs for information in advance. In crisis times the head cannot possibly respond to each and every parent. There should be communication procedures in place for parents who call or arrive at school.

Parent Guidelines should:

1. educate parents about the school crisis plan at a parent meeting and go through the key points, especially lockdowns,
2. develop a parent crisis policy that tells parents whom to call for information, what to do if media call them, how do they obtain information if phones are down, and
3. identify parents that could be of assistance during a crisis and determine if they would be willing to be a parent point person.

MEDIA

What is a media policy and what should it cover?

A media policy defines the school's procedures for dealing with the media. This policy should be read and signed off on by each employee of the school so it is clear who can and cannot speak for the school and how to handle an inquiry that might come directly to them. Having such a policy will also protect the employees from making "off the record" gaffes that could make the crisis worse.

Media policy should state:

1. the school's general position on media,
2. what to do if the media call or show up, in crisis and non-crisis times,
3. what the employee should do if contacted by the media,
4. how to handle the ambush interview,
5. clearly who is authorized to speak to the media and identify the back up spokesperson, in the event the head is the crisis, and
6. determine a media staging area and one media liaison.

6. DEVELOP HOLDING STATEMENTS

While full messages must wait until there is an actual crisis, holding statements are messages designed for use immediately after a crisis breaks and before you have all of the facts. It is a polite way of saying "no comment," until you have all of the information. These statements can be developed in advance and can be delivered by the communications director or the head of school. An example of a holding statement to a reporter is:

"We have just learned of this situation and we're still getting the facts. I really can't give you a statement or conduct an interview until I have more information. I can confirm that our softball team has been involved in a bus accident on the way back from a competition. Give me some time to get the information and I'll do my best to call you back. What is your deadline and what is the best way to reach you?"

7. TRAIN, PRACTICE, AND HONE YOUR PLAN

Brainstorm one or two potential crises that could happen at your school and walk through them as a tabletop exercises. The head of school and the back up spokesperson should be media trained before a crisis hits.

When a Crisis Hits – What to Do

1. GATHER THE TEAM

Begin assigning responsibilities.

2. GET THE FACTS BY ASKING:

- Who is involved?
- What has happened?
- Where did this take place?
- How did this happen?
- Why did this occur?

3. DRAFT THE STATEMENT/LETTER AND INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- The facts.
- What you're doing to fix it.
- What you're doing to make sure it doesn't happen again.
- Core messages about the school and the school's good record:
 - Use an honest, empathetic tone rather than stilted legalese or educationese;
 - Don't blame others – this happened on your watch; say so.

4. DRAFT THE Q & A

A question and answer (Q & A) document should be prepared for the spokesperson by the communications director. Determine the most difficult questions and prepare clear, concise answers and rehearse with the spokesperson.

5. PREPARE THE SPOKESPERSON

The head of school should always be the spokesperson unless the head is the crisis or is not available; there should also be a back up designated spokesperson.

6. COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS

The urgency of the matter will dictate how to communicate. Options include:

- E-mail/Voicemail
- Hand mail
- Instant messaging
- Text messaging
- U.S. Postal Service
- Town Hall meeting/coffees with the head (often used as follow-up)
- Website

Communicate to your constituencies when you have verified facts and the school's position is clear. Parents need to hear about the crisis from the school first, not from the media.

7. COMMUNICATE TO THE MEDIA

The majority of the time, the school will communicate to the news media through faxed/e-mailed statements or telephone interviews. Information may be on the website. If the crisis is serious enough to warrant a press conference and broadcast interviews, the school should seek outside counsel to manage it.

8. DEBRIEF

When the crisis is over, have a post-mortem to review what worked, what didn't, and determine the effectiveness of the team and the plan.

Crisis Tips and Working with the Media

- Don't wait to see if the crisis will go away on its own. It won't.
- Don't try to manage a crisis alone. Call for help.
- Don't try to keep the media out or "kill" the story. Respond once you're prepared with the facts.
- Don't allow the media to wander around or be left alone in your school.
- Don't let the media photograph, film, or interview faculty, staff, or students without your permission.
- Do not make promises to the media. Acknowledge their deadlines and indicate you'll do your best to respond.
- Never speculate.
- If you don't know the answer, say you don't know but you'll try to get the answer.
- Don't assume the information the reporter has is correct until you have confirmed it.
- Never say "no comment." It looks like you're guilty or hiding something.
- There is no such thing as "off the record."
- Never lie to the media.
- Casual conversation with a reporter is dangerous. Keep an interview mindset at all times.
- Don't repeat the negative/misleading words.
- Do not get angry, especially if you're ambushed. Anger in any form – hand over the camera lens while you say "no comment!" – makes for great television. Simply state you're not prepared to talk at the moment; ask for the reporter's card and indicate you'll get back to them.

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