

# Communication Procedures

Source: Virginia Department of Education. Model School Crisis Management Plan. <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/model.pdf>

## Overview

Communication is a critical part of crisis management. School staff members and students must be told what is happening and what to do. Parents of students and families of staff members must be informed about the situation, including the status of their child or family member. Timely contact with law enforcement and other emergency services is necessary for effective response. School Board members must be kept informed and update information must be transmitted to central office and to other affected schools. The press must be informed and kept updated. Additionally, groups which are a part of the school community (PTA, advisory councils, etc.) and can assist with getting accurate information into the community are important. This chapter focuses on communication – within the school and school division, with parents and the community, and with the media.

## *When a Crisis Has Occurred*

Notifying faculty and staff of an event or crisis and keeping them informed as additional information becomes available and as plans for management of the situation evolve is critical. Some practices which school administrators have found to be helpful include the following:

### The Telephone Tree

A telephone tree is a simple, widely used system for notifying staff of a crisis event when they are not at school. A very carefully crafted statement, specifying what is and is not yet known, should be drafted before the telephone tree is activated.

### The Morning Faculty Meeting

An early, brief faculty meeting provides the opportunity to give accurate, updated information about the crisis event/situation itself and to review with staff procedures for the day, including the availability of intervention resources.

### The End-of-Day Faculty Meeting

A brief end-of-day meeting provides the opportunity to review day one, update information, and plan for day two. Misinformation or rumors can be addressed before staff members go home or into the community where they are likely to be asked about the situation.

## **School Communication**

### ***Dealing with Rumors***

Establishing reliable communications networks is critical for dealing effectively with a potentially detrimental phenomenon always present in crises: rumors. People are going to talk about an emergency and, when accurate information is not available, rumors begin. Without facts, people begin to speculate and the speculations soon come to be thought of as “facts.” Left unchecked, rumors can become more difficult to deal with than the crisis event. They may create a negative perception of the school’s ability to manage an emergency or, even worse, a belief that the school cannot provide for the safety and well-being of the children. The most effective strategy for combating rumors is to provide facts as soon as possible. Some strategies which may be helpful include the following:

1. Identify and notify **internal** groups including administrators, teachers, students, custodians, secretaries, teaching assistants, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers. These people are primary sources of information and are likely to be contacted in their neighborhoods, at grocery stores, etc. It is critical that they have accurate information because what they know (or don’t know and are speculating about) will be passed on. A faculty/staff meeting should be held before staff members are allowed to go home so that what is (and is not) known can be clearly communicated.
2. Clerical staff who answer the telephone at the school and at the central office must know which information can be shared and which information cannot be shared. They must be kept informed of inaccurate information which is circulating so they can help “correct” misinformation. Designating a few persons to answer calls helps control the circulating of misinformation.
3. Use of key communicators in the community will also combat rumors. A telephone tree or a briefing held especially for identified community representatives directly associated with the school will help spread accurate information.
4. The media can also help control rumors; ask them to provide frequent updates to the public, particularly providing accurate information where rumors need to be dispelled.
5. After the immediately crisis has passed, public meetings may be helpful. It provides an opportunity for people to ask questions and to receive accurate information. A follow-up public meeting may also be helpful in restoring the community’s confidence in the school’s ability to manage crises and to provide a safe environment.

### ***Using Technology for Communication***

Technology can be a very effective tool for communication during a crisis. Some common tools that may be used include the following:

1. **Telephone** - Although the telephone is the most commonly used communications tool in schools, most schools do not have enough lines and, worse, service is typically lost when electricity is lost. In preparing for crises it is recommended that:

- Schools should have at least one line with an unpublished number.
- The telephone company should be consulted in pre-planning; there may be unused lines in the school's control panel which can be activated if needed.
- Use standard jacks and mark them clearly so emergency service personnel can find them; the school floor plan which is part of the school's "emergency toolkit" should have the location of jacks marked clearly.

2. **Intercom systems** - Most schools have such a system; systems which include teacher-initiated communications with the office and use a handset rather than a wall-mounted speaker are most useful in an emergency. Instructions for use of the intercom system should be posted near the controls in the office area. Additionally, students should be taught to use the intercom system – the teacher may have a medical emergency or be otherwise unable to operate the system.

3. **Bullhorns and megaphones** - Often used at pep rallies and field days, battery-powered bullhorns or megaphones can also be very effective tools for communication in an emergency and should be a part of the school's "emergency toolbox." Procedures governing storage of the bullhorn in the office closet in the gym may not be an option. If one is not available (or out of batteries!) at the school, law enforcement vehicles are sometimes equipped with speakers – another good reason to include law enforcement in the preplanning process.

4. **Walkie-talkies** - routinely used in many schools, walkie-talkies provide a reliable method of communication between rooms and buildings at a single site. All staff need to know how to operate the walkie-talkie (even those who don't routinely carry them).

5. **Computer telecommunications** - a relatively new tool, the potential capability of existing computers to be used for communication both within the school and to other sites needs to be assessed as part of the preplanning process. E-mail or electronic bulletin boards may be a useful tool for updating information for staff,

central office, other schools in the affected area, and possibly for other community agencies.

6. **Fax machines** - The fax machine is a potentially valuable tool for both sending and receiving information in an emergency. In the case of off-campus accidents, for example, lists of students and staff members involved, their locations, and needed telephone numbers can be quickly and accurately communicated. Medical information, release forms, and medical authorizations can be faxed, signed, and returned in emergencies.

7. **Cellular telephones** - increasingly available and affordable, the role of cellular telephones as a communications tool needs to be carefully assessed. They may be the only tool working when electric service is out and are a particularly useful link to staff members who may be en route to or from the site of an accident or other emergency. They are increasingly being used to link the multiple vehicles transporting students and staff on off-campus trips.

8. **“Panic buttons”** - Some schools have installed “panic buttons” connected directly to the police or other emergency services. In some communities, there is an immediate response; in others, the police or fire department call the school to confirm the emergency.

9. **Alarm systems** - Bells or buzzers may be sounded in different ways to signal different types of emergencies – for example, fire, tornado, or special alert (with instructions to follow).

### ***Voice and Hand Signals***

Although not involving “technology,” voice and hand signals (and training staff and students to recognize them) are important instruments of communication in an emergency. Some signals which may be used include:

1. **Waving arms** - waving arms back and forth over head means to follow in the direction led by the teacher.

2. **Palms down** - moving arms up and down with palms toward the ground will signal students to get down on the ground wherever they are at the time.

3. **Palms out** - pushing palms out, moving arms forward and back, will signal the students to stop where they are and to stand absolutely still.

4. **Waving arms side-to-side** - moving arms side-to-side in front of the body will signal students to move away from the center of the playground and to take shelter toward the edges of the playground.

*Using Code Messages*

Some schools have established code words or phrases to notify staff of certain emergencies — particularly those requiring quick action. These are most appropriate for extreme emergencies such as armed intruder, sniper, or hostage situations, or for tornado warnings. Codes may signify certain levels of alert which require specific actions such as locking classroom doors, keeping students away from windows, or evacuation. It is important that all staff members — including substitutes — know the codes.

## TELEPHONE TREE

Once it is verified that a crisis exists, the building administrator or designee sets the phone tree in motion. When a crisis occurs during weekends, vacation periods, or when a large number of staff is away from school, it will be necessary to transmit information via a phone tree. At other times, when crises occur when school is in session, only the people outside the school building need to be contacted via telephone.

Administrator or Designee

Police Liaison as Appropriate

Superintendent

Police as Appropriate

CRT Chair or Contact Person

Media Liaison

Team Member

Team Member

Team Member

Team Member

Team Member

Team Member

Community Resource

Community Resource

Feeder School Contact

Feeder School Contact

Community Resource

Community Resource

Special Program Coordinator

Division-specific Appointee

## Communications with Parents and the Community

A very important aspect of managing crises is dealing effectively with parent reactions. Communication with parents and the community is best begun before a crisis occurs. Some useful strategies include the following:

1. Educate parents about the school crisis plan, its objectives, and the need for it. Such information can be included in the school handout or other informational materials prepared for parents, at parent orientations, or at other informational meetings.
2. Develop a relationship with parents so that they trust and feel comfortable calling school personnel in the event of crisis.
3. Develop materials that may be needed including:

- a) draft formats of letters to parents informing them of what happened,
  - b) information really: possible reactions of their child and ways to talk with them, and
  - c) how the school and school division are handling the situation.
4. Develop a list of community resources which may be helpful to parents.
  5. Identify parents who are willing to volunteer in case of an emergency, include them in preparation efforts, and include them in training.

In the event of an emergency, parents have very specific information needs. First, parents want to know their child is safe; then, parents want to know the details of the emergency situation, to know how it was handled, and to know that the children will be safe in the future. The first reactions are likely to involve *fear*. Upon learning of an incident at the school, parents are likely to descend upon the school in search of their child or to telephone, frantically seeking information. Establishing a system for responding quickly to parent needs for information is an important part of pre-planning. *Anger* is another common reaction of parents, particularly in the case of senseless acts of violence. In the event of a crisis or disaster:

1. Tell parents exactly what is known to have happened. Do not embellish or speculate.
2. Implement the plan to manage phone calls and parents who arrive at school.
3. Schedule and attend an open question-and-answer meeting for parents as soon after the incident as possible. The meeting is an opportunity for school officials to listen and respond to parent concerns (which is helpful in combating rumors and other misinformation) and to work on restoring parental trust in the school. In the event of an incident which involved damage or destruction, an open house for parents and other members of the community to see the school restored to its “normal” state helps everyone get beyond the crisis.

### **Communications with Media**

Media policy varies from one school system to another. Contact is generally channeled through one person. Most news people are sensitive, open to suggestions and interested in doing a reputable job. When dealing with the media, the following suggestions will promote clear communications:

- Deal up-front with reporters. Be honest, forthright and establish good communication with the media before problems or a crisis occurs.

- Do not try to stonewall the media or keep them from doing their job.
- The school should decide what to say, define the ground rules, issue a statement and answer questions within the limits of confidentiality.
- Identify a single information source.
- Advise school staff of media procedures.
- Advise students of the media policy. Let them know that they do not have to talk, that they can say no.
- If the crisis is a death, consult with the deceased student/staff member's family before making any statement. Explain school system policy and assure them that confidential information is being protected.

***During a Crisis:***

- Attempt to define the type and extent of the crisis as soon as possible.
- Inform employees what is happening as soon as possible.
- Designate that a central source, such as the crisis communications center, coordinate information gathering and dissemination.
- Instruct all employees to refer all information and questions to communications centers.
- Remind employees that only designated spokesmen are authorized to talk with news media.
- Take initiative with news media and let them know what is or is not known about the situation.
- When communicating, remember to maintain a unified position and uniform message; keep messages concise, clear, and consistent; keep spokesman and alternates briefed.
- Contact the top administrator or designee to inform him of the current situation, emerging developments, and to clear statements.
- Delay releasing information until facts are verified and the school's position about the crisis is clear.

- Read all releases from previously prepared and approved statements to avoid danger of ad- libbing.
- Assign sufficient staff to handle phones and seek additional information.
- Keep a log of all incoming and outgoing calls and personal contacts.
- Relieve key people from their normal duties so they may focus on the crisis.
- Express appreciation to all persons who helped handle the crisis.
- Prepare a general announcement to be given by the principal or designee. A straightforward sympathetic announcement of loss with a simple statement of condolence is recommended. Also, a statement that more information will be forthcoming, when verified, can be reassuring to students and staff. (Source: Chesterfield County Public Schools, Chesterfield, VA)

### **Tips for Working with the Media**

#### ***Don't***

- DON'T try to keep the media out or “kill” a story.
- DON'T say “no comment.”
- DON'T adlib.
- DON'T speak “off the record.”
- DON'T speculate.
- DON'T try to cover-up or blame anyone for anything.
- DON'T repeat negative/misleading words.
- DON'T play favorites among media.

#### ***Do***

- Emphasize your good record.
- Be accurate and cooperate as best you can.
- Be prepared for and prepare in advance a response to questions which might violate confidentiality or hinder the police investigation.

- Insist that reporters respect the privacy rights of your students and staff.
- Speak to reporters in plain English — not educationese.
- When asked a question and you don't know the answer, say so, then offer to find out and call the reporter back.

### **Guidelines for Communicating with the Media in Times of Crisis**

1. The *primary goal* should be to keep the public informed about the crisis while trying to maintain the privacy of students and ensure as little interruption of the educational process as possible.
2. As soon as possible, *prepare a written statement* that gives the basic facts clearly and concisely or ask the division Community Relations Director to prepare one for you. Two or three minutes spent writing down some specific points is valuable. If there is time, try to anticipate what some of the questions will be and prepare answers. News people will always want to know: who, what, when, where, why, and how. Try them out on your colleagues and see if they have any recurring questions. *Use the same facts* in dealing with all media so the story is consistent.
3. If news media personnel arrive on campus while students are in class, *guide* their *activities* so they will not disrupt the educational process. The news media can come onto the campus but should not be permitted to enter classrooms.
4. *Don't presume* to tell a reporter what is or isn't newsworthy. That decision is made by the reporters and their editors. And never — absolutely never — lie to a reporter. Tell the bad news quickly; get it over with. It may be your only chance to set the record straight. It's vital to establish our division as the best source for information on the crisis. If the media think you're hiding something, they're likely to dig hard for information from other sources and play the story more sensationally — and perhaps less accurately. Protecting and enhancing the division's credibility is important.
5. *Talk conversationally*, or you will inadvertently pitch your voice up and sound strained. If you don't understand the question, say so. Parroting the reporter's question is very dangerous on radio or video tape because the tape can be edited to sound like you concur whether you do or not. Suppose the reporter asks, "How are you handling this terrible shock?" Don't respond, "We are handling this terrible shock by . . ." Instead, respond in your own words to the effect that, "The students are continuing their usual schedules, following a morning assembly where we discussed the situation."

6. **Answer each question and then be silent.** Stick with the statement. Don't embellish it and don't respond to media pressure to chat about it. Just because a TV reporter sticks a microphone in your face or a radio reporter lets the tape run does not mean you have to fill that prolonged silence. Don't worry. . . your pauses will be removed in the editing process. If you are standing for the interview, don't back up, even through the microphone seems to be put down your throat. Plant your feet firmly and stand your ground. Suggest that everyone sit down if you need "space."

7. Remember that **conflict is news**, and reporters often frame their questions to bring out the conflict or emotion in a story. Guard your students against such intrusions if grief is involved in the response. (However, if the media wants student or community viewpoint, it may be well to arrange for them to talk to your PTA president.)

8. If a reporter asks **several questions** at once, say something like, "You've asked me several questions here. . . where would you like me to begin?" If a reporter interrupts you before you've finished answering your question, pause, let the reporter finish, and then continue your answer. Don't let the reporter get you off track or tell you when you've finished your answer. However, don't go into lengthily detail or run off with the interview either.

9. Don't let a reporter's friendly, sympathetic manner disarm you into giving him/her additional information. Don't assume any chatty comments "**are off the record**" even if you say they are. Keep in mind that the media aren't in business to help you with your communication needs: the media are in business to (1) make money and (2) disseminate news. "News" can be defined as any information of interest to the public.

10. Reporters are under constant **deadlines**, but no deadline is so important that it's worth making an inaccurate statement. If a reporter says he/she has deadline problems, ask how long you have to get the information, and then try to obtain it within that amount of time. Don't put reporters off: they will only get more insistent and abrasive if you do so.

11. It is best not to answer a query with "**No comment.**" Otherwise, the reporters may report you wouldn't answer questions or may interpret for themselves why you aren't answering. Instead, say, "I can't share that information with you right now, but I will call you as soon as I can release it." (And do call them). Or say, "I don't know the answer, but I should have it in an hour. Please call me." If you can't reveal information at all, tell the reporters why.

*Examples:* Relatives of an injured student haven't been notified yet or revealing the identity of a witness would jeopardize an investigation, etc.

12. After you provide the written statement to the media or answer subsequent questions, keep a media **log** of whom you speak to and what you give them, whether it is the basic statement or a subsequent update. This allows you to track which medium received what information.

13. Don't ask a reporter for **editing rights** or to see the story for approval before it runs. Most news media have specific policies preventing this. Reporters may well interpret these requests as insults or a slight on their competence. Don't complain to the media if you feel you were treated unfairly. You may simply draw more attention to the crisis. If *major* story details are *inaccurate* in a newspaper story, you can ask for a correction. But getting a similar correction in a TV or radio story is more difficult and must involve a giant inaccuracy.

14. The Community Relations Department should be **updated** on any emergency. The Community Relations Department will assist district or building administration in handling interviews with news media and coordinate the flow of information. (Source: Chesterfield County Public Schools, Chesterfield, VA)