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ready-to-use NEWS

Review and update your crisis communications plan

The coronavirus has put many districts squarely in the middle of a looming crisis situation. This illness is contagious and it is spreading fear in communities around the country. By the time you are in the middle of a crisis, it is too late to write a crisis communication plan.

Adding to the fear about what we know, is fear of what we don't know. Scientists are sharing new discoveries about this new sickness every day. And new cases are showing up with connections to schools via people who work there or have had contact with people who do.

Most districts are getting guidance on crisis communications for this event from state health or education agencies. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. This is a good time to borrow materials and plans to adapt and use in your district. Lean on your peers for tips and share information about what you are doing. This lightens the load for overworked staff and ensures consistent messaging about risks and prevention practices.

The key is to use a plan — have some guidelines ready to go when you need them. A good crisis response can build trust. Not having a plan can add to the stress and chaos of the situation.

Crisis communication planning

After this crisis subsides and you have time to assess, take a look at your crisis plan and revise it for the next event. Use your lessons learned and follow best practices to develop a plan that will help you manage a difficult situation with less stress and confusion.

Crisis communications have three distinct phases: before, during and after the crisis. Take care to plan for and implement your plans at each phase to build and maintain trust with your community.

Before

Preparation is key to a calm response to situations that arise. Set up your systems, define your audiences, and assign roles for crisis response. Include input from stakeholders and be clear about who does what.

Define what and how you will communicate:

- Set up communication channels for students, families, staff and the community. Establish trust by sharing information regularly and communicating where to find updates in the event of an emergency.

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(Over)

- Inform parents about your safety protocols and how they will receive information during an incident. Assure them that student safety is the priority in any situation.
- Post information about safety plans and parent tips on the website.
- Develop a special button on the district home page— “In case of emergency” or “Safety News” — that you can activate with updates during a crisis.
- Create a checklist for communicating about the crisis. It will help you remember the plan during a high-stress situation. It will be useful for others to implement if you are absent.
- Define roles and assign primary and secondary staff as backup for very specific roles and tasks.
- Establish a regular social media presence and build your following.

During

When a crisis occurs, keeping parents up to speed is critical. Remember, the safety of their children is in your hands and out of their control. Regular communication reassures them of their children’s safety and makes them less likely to add to the chaos at the school.

Use an automated parent notification system to send out a mass communication to parents very quickly. Many of these systems allow districts to simultaneously send an email, text message and phone call. In addition, post the information to your district website’s home page and social media pages. If you have a mobile app, send out a push notification with details.

Once you have additional or updated information that can be released, make sure to update all of these communication portals. Determine who will communicate. Identify who to communicate with. Use local media to help get the information out.

Forward the school phones to a central call center. Many parents (and nosy neighbors) will likely try to call the school and/or the district office during a crisis to find out information. This can tie up phone lines and burden staff. In addition, school staff likely won’t be able to answer phones during an emergency. Streamline the process by having all of that school’s phone lines rerouted temporarily to the district office. Then, staff several phones at the district office with staff members who have the latest information and a scripted response to provide to callers. If possible, have three to four staff members ready to help out in this situation so that all calls are answered quickly.

Communicate clearly. Don’t overshare — make sure your audiences, especially parents, have the information they need but don’t speculate about details. Be consistent with messages. Use social media wisely. Worried parents may react to inaccuracies or rumors they see on social media. A rush to the school to pick up children causes panic and can interfere with emergency response. Be sure to interact with users on social media. You can reduce misinformation by correcting errors in real time on social sites.

After

Plan a debrief meeting to discuss what went right – and what went wrong. Once a crisis has been resolved and the dust has settled, it’s time for the district to debrief and determine the lessons learned and what might change in the safety plan for the potential next time around — hoping, of course, that there isn’t a next time around.

Parents should be represented in the debrief process. Afterward, all parents should be told that the district has done this due diligence follow-up work. This is particularly important if the response to a crisis didn’t go as planned or as well as district staff would have hoped. Parents

will want to know what the district is doing to remedy the situation and make sure it doesn't happen again.

Be transparent. Reassure the public by continuing to communicate after things calm down. Communicate about the results of the after-crisis review and any corrections the district plans to take. Continue to engage your public on social media. Acknowledge and correct mistakes and then continue to share social media posts about your district.

Contributed by Jay Remy, communications consultant