

June Webinar A Parent's Guide to School Crisis Response Question & Answer

A sampling of questions (and responses) from webinar participants. Questions are edited for brevity. Feel free to email rk Kaufman154@gmail.com with additional questions or comments.

How do you deal with the challenge of reducing an important message to 140 characters for text messaging?

Create the structure of response or holding statements in advance and fill in the appropriate information once the incident occurs. Statements should acknowledge the incident, provide known facts and commit to sharing more info as it becomes available.

Statement structures:

- Alert: Initial statement (who, what, when and where ... hold on how and never why)
 - *"SCHOOL is experiencing an emergency situation of an unknown nature. The school is (RESPONSE PROTOCOL) and emergency personnel are on scene. We will share additional information as it becomes available. Please check the (WEBSITE) for frequent updates. Specific instructions for parents only will be shared via email, voicemail or both."*

- Inform: Priorities and actions
 - *"We have implemented our emergency response plan and working with (NAME OF AGENCY) to determine what happened, and further impacts on (NAME OF SCHOOL). Parents of children impacted by this incident will be contacted directly with additional information on next steps ..."*

- Reassure: Goal to reduce level of anxiety
 - *"The health, safety and well-being of our students and staff is our highest priority. We are doing everything we can at this time to manage the incident and provide support to all impacted. We are working with law enforcement to ensure the safe release of students and staff from the school. Please be patient as we gather more information to share with you as it becomes available."*

Note that text messages provide a quick and easy to meet the demand for efficient communication. However, its short and abbreviated messages may not provide a clear picture of what you're trying to convey in an initial message. It also may be limited to persons who have opted in to receive text messages. This number is very small compared to the total population of persons expecting information in a school crisis. Text messages provides an initial message to alert stakeholders of an issue/incident followed by an "action call" to go to your website or some other platform for more information.

If you are waiting on your district team to complete a crisis response plan, what are some steps you can take in preparing a crisis communications plan without it?

While a crisis communications plan is an integral part of a crisis response plan, it is fundamentally a standalone guidance and reference tool. A well-developed and consistently updated crisis communications plan ensures your school system has the infrastructure in place to respond as needed to a range of natural or human-caused incidents.

Here are the steps to guide you in developing a crisis communication plan:

Step 1: Develop policies and standards

- Guiding principles that apply in every crisis scenario

Step 2: Objective or purpose of crisis communication plan

Step 3: Crisis communications team and operations

- Identify members and areas of responsibility, including spokesperson(s) and backups.
- Contacts of local, state and national persons/groups (they can provide support electronically from afar or as boots on the ground).
- Determine location for a Crisis Communication Center, usually within the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). Identify and assemble equipment and technology needs.

Step 4: Identify stakeholders (internal and external; primary and secondary)

- Not an exhaustive list of all publics, only those most impacted by a crisis.

Step 5: Communication Procedures

- How will organization communicate during and post-crisis? What incidents trigger the plan? Who activates the plan?
- Crisis identification (verify the crisis and quickly gather facts)
- First step actions
- Monitoring and notification systems (analysis informs ongoing messaging)
- Traditional and social media management

Step 6: Communication Response Options

- Response (or holding) statements
- Key messages
- Fact sheet (daily w/ latest updates)

Step 7: Communication Channels

- Mass notification
- Social media
- Website (consider use of a Ghost site)
- Press conference
- Media interview(s)

Step 8: Important Reference Materials and Websites

- Social media login information and details
- School layout maps
- Contacts and checklists
- Media and communication task log

Step 9: Test your plan

- Activate plan as part of a practice drill or table-top scenario. Assess and update plan accordingly.

- Post-crisis review, including communication analysis, evaluation of traditional media and social media
- Debrief with Crisis Communication Team

Remember, it is not the communication team's responsibility to resolve the crisis, though their actions can contribute to a quicker resolution. That's management's job, as identified in a crisis response plan.