

## **May 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 [rkauufman154@gmail.com](mailto:rkauufman154@gmail.com) with additional questions or comments.*

### **How often should we have conversations with parents throughout the year regarding school safety and security?**

At least twice per year is a good rule of thumb. It's likely most effective at the start of each school year, say during an open house, back-to-school or curriculum night, etc. Parents are most engaged in their child's school at the beginning of the new school year, so will likely retain the most at this time. Other times may include reminders after an extended holiday/winter break, and again in the spring as the school year is winding down. The latter, I have found, is also an opportunity for parents (and staff) to be more vigilant for students acting out, incidents and the like. The ending weeks of a school year create a fair amount of anxiety among students, and this is when we tend to see and experience more anti-social behaviors or just general misbehavior. Left untended these incidents can result in retaliation, or more egregious anti-social behavioral issues.

### **We created a "dark website" to be used in the most serious incidents of crisis. However, our principals think it might be better if this site was used for other events, like closing for bad weather. What are your thoughts? How do I convince them a dark website was created with the hopes of never using it?**

While a dark website's functionality can depend on the severity of a crisis, it is best if it is only employed in the most severe situations where it will completely replace the organization's website. This demonstrates a district-wide dedication to the issue or emergency. It may be advantageous to create a "banner" for the district's homepage for those times when school closings are necessary due to inclement weather. These banners are short-lived - as weather systems go - and require a limited message, unlike a dark website that requires more than just messaging.

If a school system wishes to a dark website for other types of incidents, creating it to run parallel to the existing site is an option. It would require you to direct all traffic and questions about the crisis to your dark site, while others interact with your normal website.

Whichever is chosen, the most important piece to keep in mind is to lead stakeholders with your homepage, especially if going with two separate websites. It's your responsibility to be clear on your website that the school district is aware of the situation, is responding to the incident, and all incident updates, communication and the like is on your dark website.

### **Which communication mediums do you provide information to parents on school safety? Web, back-to-school handouts, emails, all of the above? What is the most effective?**

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy and depends on two factors: a) what is the communication medium generally preferred by your parents (which is also going to be the most effective; and b) what is it you wish to engage or inform parents about (e.g. conversation on school safety, what to do in a school crisis, etc.).

If it is to engage, face-to-face or small group settings are best to elicit feedback and a sense of personal perspective. If it is to inform or educate, again small group discussion or presentation works best because

it invites interaction through Q&A. If it is to simply inform, back-to-school handouts are okay as long as you've already established a level of understanding with parents about your school safety efforts.

In a crisis, targeted communication to stakeholder groups - especially staff and parents - is far more effective. A targeted approach utilizing your mass notification system - voice, email and text (SMS) - reaches impacted stakeholders directly, and will be seen as more personal. Consider an internal communications mobile app to get efficient communication to your staff.

Not every stakeholder group will want to receive critical communications in the same way, and they certainly don't all use the same social media platforms for the same purposes. It's important to identify your key stakeholder groups' most preferred and useful means of communication. Include this information in your Crisis Communications Plan.

Social media platforms get information out to a broader audience, some who may not be among your stakeholders or impacted by the incident. Use of social media invites others to weigh in and comment on your information, which is ripe for negative and damaging commentary.

**It's hard to convince parents not to call or text their kids when they believe it could be the "last time" they communicate with them, no matter how much safety is at stake. If anything, we should encourage all students to keep their phones on silent and no vibrate.**

We should hold no illusions that parents will not try to communicate with their children or come to the school in the event of an emergency. However, it is important we share the key reasons why they should not try to contact their children and come to the school. When you can connect the reasons why, there will be at least a better understanding for the rationale of these requests by school authorities. And, it is likely to reduce the level of anxiety and fear, albeit marginally, when a school emergency is unfolding.