

We Need to Talk!

Communication During an Incident

Ensure communication is an integral part of the emergency response plan.

By Brian N. Moore, RSBS



If you do a good job of educating your students, the media *may* cover the story, but it will be buried in the local section of a paper somewhere before the obituaries and after the latest police story. If, on the other hand, you have an emergency involving student safety, rest assured it will be front-page news and a lead story on the six o'clock broadcast.

Why do we spend so much more time planning how we are going to communicate our success at teaching kids rather than planning how we communicate our

having kept them safe? That information seems to be what the community wants to know.

As you put the finishing touches on your emergency-response plan, make sure that communications is an integral part of that plan.

First Things First

First, you need to know what constitutes an incident that may prompt school personnel to activate a special communications plan. I define *incident* as “any event that makes it impossible to teach a student.” If you shut down a school because the heat doesn’t work, you need to communicate in a different way than you would if you were announcing the latest annual state test scores.

Consider two different aspects of communication during an incident: information and message. Although they sound like the same thing, they represent two very different aspects of how we communicate. The information is the facts you are communicating; the message is why you are communicating.

To define your message, you need to keep in mind the recipients and their priorities. Simply put, parents want to know that their children are safe and what you did to keep them safe. Then, they want to know how the crisis affects them. That’s all. They don’t want to know the number of person-hours it took to clean up the chemical spill or how many outside public safety agencies responded to help.

During an emergency, school personnel’s job is simple: know where all the students are and know they are safe. So the message behind your crisis plan is simple: how you did that.

In his book *Crisis Leadership Now*, Laurence Barton does an excellent job of summing up the three main questions that must be asked in a crisis communications plan:

1. What do we know?
2. When did we know it?
3. What are we going to do about it?

When you develop your communications plan, develop it around those three questions. If you answer them

thoroughly, you will be one step ahead when it comes to managing the message.

Timing the Delivery

After you have answered those questions, you must figure out how to deliver the answers to your constituents and, just as important, when to deliver them.

Our society has become so information-driven that we feel the need to communicate with the public as soon as we know anything. Sometimes, communicating too early can backfire if we provide inaccurate information. It can also hinder the ability of the emergency management team to do its job.

I learned this lesson when we needed to close a school early because of a facility issue and were in the process of moving all the students to another location for early dismissal. Before all the students had arrived at the alternate location and had been accounted for, and before a release team had been formed to ensure that we discharged students to those with authorization, the media had already announced our move.

When our buses pulled up at the other location, we were met by a long line of parents who went impatiently from bus to bus to find and remove their kids. It took nearly an hour (and several police officers) to regain control so we could follow our emergency plan. Our communications plan should have included delivering the message and instructions *after* everyone was safely accounted for and secured in the alternate location.

The safety of your students is the primary focus of your crisis plan, and the same should be true relative to decisions about your communications plan. In my example, although the parents may have believed that they *needed* to know right away that we were relocating their children, their knowledge created a safety hazard for their children. After the incident is all wrapped up and the second-guessing starts, you are always safe in having made a decision that you and your team thought was in the best interest of the students!

Keep in mind the recipients and their priorities.

What about communicating with faculty and staff during an emergency? This is an often-overlooked but important part of your plan. Even if the crisis you are managing does not require an evacuation, faculty and staff members need to know what is going on so they can function professionally. If we fail to inform them, they are apt to imagine the worst possible scenario. And if they are busy imagining the worst, they are not focused where they need to be focused: on the students.

What's more, in today's world where students in elementary school have iPhones and send text messages to their parents in the middle of circle time, rest assured that when parents hear about a problem they will call the teacher's cell phone. The last thing they want to hear their child's teacher say is, "Nobody has told me anything."

If you have activated your emergency plan, you should take just a minute to email your staff members telling them what is going on and what you expect them to do. Such messages should not be passed along the school's public address system. Send an email and then make a brief PA announcement asking the teachers to take a moment to check their email for an important message.

Ponder and Practice

When the incident is over, you must debrief the crisis communications team, just as you do with the emergency team itself. How well did you communicate the message? How was it received? Did the parents think you could have done a better job of letting them know what was taking place and that their kids were safe? Ask the same questions of your media outlets. They can provide great input on how you can facilitate their delivering your message. Just remember that media priorities are not always the same as your priorities.

Best practices are great to try regardless of the source.

Just as a new emergency management team does at the end of training, your new crisis communications team needs to conduct a tabletop exercise to see how it would function during a real incident. We conduct monthly fire drills in schools to ensure that staff and students are ready. Your crisis communications team should hold a drill at least once a quarter to practice so it is prepared for the next incident.

Find out what other districts do when they are faced with emergencies. Best practices are great to try regardless of the source. After a crisis in another district, contact its public information officer to learn how the crisis was handled. Get his or her thoughts and ask whether personnel could have handled the situation better. You never know when that information will help you share your message in a more professional way.

Being safe means being prepared. Start planning today so you will be ready the next time.

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