

The Post-Crisis Crisis

Managing Parent and Media Communications

BY KENNETH S. TRUMP

On matters of school safety, your plans for understanding digital tools and crafting messages that matter will make all the difference

Parents will excuse you if your school district's test scores go down for a year, but they will be much less forgiving if their child gets hurt in a violent incident at school that could have been prevented.

"I can mess up on curriculum or facilities, but if I make one mistake on school safety it is a career-ender," one Midwest superintendent told me at a conference for school administrators.

He is right. You can manage a crisis almost perfectly, but if you drop the ball on communicating effectively with parents and the news media, your reputation can be permanently

damaged in your school community.

However, if you hit some bumps along the way and your district's handling of an emergency situation is not the textbook response you would have wished, you can still survive. In fact, your credibility actually could be enhanced if your communication during and after the incident is consistently on-target.

Here's how you can make that happen.

Communicating Digitally

Student and parent use of cell phones, text messaging and social networking through Facebook and Twitter can quickly become the enemies of a



superintendent and principal. Rumors and misinformation about threats and other student safety issues that used to take hours and days to spread now goes viral in seconds.

This rapid dissemination of information and misinformation expedites the flocking of parents to the school in the midst of a crisis. The media calls begin to accumulate, and reporters and camera crews may arrive at the scene as fast as district officials and police investigators. School administrators must move quickly to manage not only the emergency itself but also the parents and press that arrive at the school's doorstep, often while the incident is still unfolding.

School leaders need to go beyond establishing prohibitions or limitations on the use of these communications tools and networks. Set your rules and communicate them clearly to students, parents and staff. But instead of running away from the

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increasing use of digital communication, we ought to embrace it and turn the technology into an asset for better managing safety and crisis messages.

Tap into parent use of cell phones and texting by using mass parent notification systems with voice and text-messaging capabilities to share

information quickly in a crisis. Many parents are using smartphones to communicate with their kids and to network with other parents. Be prepared to deliver your urgent messages to them by the methods they prefer.

Turn Twitter, Facebook and other social networks from high-risk enemies to tools you use in your district day by day and especially in a crisis. A growing number of school districts are using social networks to regularly connect with parents and the broader school community. Be sure to weave messages about your district's proactive safety, security and emergency preparedness efforts into your tweets, Facebook status updates, YouTube videos and other social networking communications.

Periodic Updates

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Golden, Colo., did a great job of updating their followers after a shooting incident at a middle school dismissal by being prepared for traditional media and social media. The district provided Twitter updates shortly after the incident started to unfold. The home pages for the school district and the particular school where the incident occurred quickly became go-to sites for regular updates.

As a part of your crisis planning, be sure to have a “dark site” web page or a dedicated block of the home page available in an emergency. This page could temporarily substitute for the district’s normal home page in the event of a major incident. The template is prepared in advance with information that would be needed regardless of the specific emergency, such as support-service contacts and how to report safety concerns, while leaving space to add details specific to the crisis.

Many superintendents and principals communicate with their school communities today by writing their own blogs or sharing a district blog with other staff. By blogging, school leaders remove the filters of traditional media and take their messages directly to parents, staff and their community. Blog posts can highlight anti-bullying prevention programs, counseling and intervention services, security and school policing, school emergency preparedness and other school safety activities.

The Duncanville Independent School District (www.duncanvilleisdnews.org) in Texas uses social media effectively. The district has an active blog, posts video on its YouTube channel, maintains a photo gallery, maintains a Facebook page and uses Twitter to communicate to its school community. As we worked with the district several years ago on a school safety assessment, school leaders used these tools to share details proactively with parents and community members about safety measures already in place and others being strengthened.

Plan, Then Train

Most schools have emergency response plans, but fewer school districts have formal crisis communication plans. The two should be separate documents but the logistics still must work hand-in-hand in a crisis.

Administrators should be trained in crisis communication. And they should know how to compose key messages and deliver them effectively from inside an elevator with two people on board or in front of a pack of journalists at a press conference or hundreds of parents at a public session. Flying by the seat of your pants because you have been lucky in doing so in the past is not a good strategy.

Your crisis communication plan should include detailed information on emergency contacts in the school district and at individual schools and how to reach them. Include information on who and how to reach local utility companies in the event you

need to shut down utilities. Include a section with information on first responders, emergency management agencies, city and county leaders, parent leadership and key communicators in the community such as clergy.

Just like an emergency response plan for a shooting, the crisis communication plan is useless if it stays on a bookshelf, never to be updated or used for training staff. Review and update the plan at least annually. Most importantly, train board of education members, cabinet-level administrators, building administrators and emergency team members on the plan.

Understanding Media

The television, newspaper and radio businesses continue to undergo major transformations. Digital media, mobile communications and immediate dispersal of information

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to a society craving instant consumption has dramatically changed local news reporting.

Local television stations are focused on more than a broadcast. Today, they produce coverage on what's called "three screens:" TV, the Internet and mobile devices. News directors must think in a totally different manner from days past — and so must educators who want to work effectively with these news organizations.

Local reporters are being transformed into MMJs — multimedia journalists, who are expected to conduct interviews on the scene of an event, shoot the video, write stories for both air and Internet and handle a live shot on air. The education beat reporter at the local newspaper may now be expected to produce a running account for the website, a longer story for the next day's edition, take photos and shoot video.

Like most school districts, news organizations are doing more with fewer staff and resources. Many reporters are working under tight deadlines with quicker turnaround times. The journalists may have limited background on the subject they are sent out to report on.

School leaders must be prepared when the media comes calling. Think video and good visuals for television. Have a written sheet of background data, demographics and information nuggets on the subject ready to hand off to reporters who come to interview you.

Devising Messages

School crisis communications should be:

- ▶ **ACCURATE** — while speed is important, accuracy in the information at the time of release is critical;
- ▶ **TIMELY** — information should be released in a timely manner once it is confirmed as accurate; and
- ▶ **REDUNDANT** — in terms of disseminating information, use multiple channels and mechanisms to reach parents in as many forums as possible.

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Parents have some pretty simple and clear expectations in what they want to know when a school safety issue arises at their child's school. In your message, you want to acknowledge the incident and/or issues; explain how and why it happened; demonstrate an understanding of those affected; identify steps taken to help the injured or aggrieved; identify methods for obtaining input and listening to community concerns; and share the steps officials are taking to correct the problem and prevent reoccurrences.

In general, parents want to know two things after a high-profile school crisis:

- ▶ What steps did you take to prevent an incident of crime and violence?
- ▶ How well prepared were you to manage the incident that could not be prevented?

If you develop your messages and communications delivery around these principles, chances are your credibility and reputation will be at a much lower risk of being tarnished.

Managing Reputations

Mistakes will happen in any school district. But missteps involving school safety, unlike some other areas of school operations, can have a devastating impact on the reputation of a school district and the credibility of its leaders.

The Centers for Disease Control, in its risk communication training, recommends three core prin-



Kenneth Trump

ciples for crisis and emergency risk communications:

- ▶ Be first;
- ▶ Be right;
- ▶ Be credible.

The CDC also identifies empathy, action and respect as three pillars of successful communication response in a crisis.

My golden rule of damage control is simple: If you mess up, fess up and fix it up!

Culture Changing

School leaders must work to change decades of a culture in K-12 education where parent and media communications on school safety, security and emergency preparedness have been reactive, not pro-active. Today's rapidly evolving world of digital communications, multimedia journalism and information-hungry members of the school community require a new approach to communication.

Embrace the new tools and mindset of community on the front end, and your school district's safety and the reputation of its leaders can prevail. ■

KENNETH TRUMP is the president of National School Safety and Security Services in Cleveland, Ohio, and the author of *Proactive School Security and Emergency Preparedness Planning* (Corwin Press). E-mail: kentump@aol.com