



The Complete Guide for School Crisis Communications

Preparing for and Responding to
Crises in Your District

Are you ready to weather the storm?

The K-12 environment has drastically shifted, and crisis and reputation management issues are brewing at many school districts — even with strong leadership at the helm.

In addition to managing staff shortages, mask mandate debates, and volatile school boards, school districts across the United States are experiencing acute crises impacting the school environment, health and safety, and reputation and brand.

Mental health concerns. Racism and discrimination. Employee misconduct. Suicide. Violence. Cyberattacks. COVID-19 deaths.

These topics are heavy and difficult to navigate. And, unfortunately, it's not a matter of **if** a crisis will occur, but **when**.

In the eye of the storm, endless questions, concerns, and requests can pour in at unmanageable levels from every direction on every channel. This can run your ship aground — causing slow, siloed, and inefficient responses and escalated anxiety among students and staff. In turn, community trust and engagement will suffer in the days, weeks, months, and maybe even years ahead.

This guide will help you be better prepared for future crises or help you as you ride out the storm of a crisis you're currently weathering.

Before a crisis

Amid the chaos, it can feel as if being reactive is your only choice. But the cost of doing nothing is too high. All it takes is one crisis, one missed at-risk student, one ransomware attack to change everything.

Now is the time to prepare for a potential crisis. Your first steps are to:

Identify your Crisis Response Team.

Every crisis will need to involve the superintendent and lead communicator within the district. The rest of the Crisis Response Team will look different at every district, and will change depending on the situation.

Consider the leaders of the following departments and how their roles may help you make better informed decisions:

- Human resources
- Information technology
- Legal counsel
- Operations
- Public safety
- Transportation

Create a crisis communications plan.

There are many types of crises you can and should plan for in advance. While you hope there will never be a school shooting in your district, it's best to plan for the worst.

Crisis communications plans can focus on a high level of planning — outlining what members of the Crisis Response Team should first be involved — or be extremely detailed with draft statements with placeholders for names and details.

Start with the basics, including:

- Contact information, including cell phone numbers, for all Crisis Response Team members
- A comprehensive list of district stakeholders
- Internal and external communications channels
- Internal policies and procedures
- District-level key messages
- Protocols for working with the media
- Local media contacts

A more detailed crisis plan can include:

- Prepared statements with placeholders for details needed in the event of a crisis
- Draft website announcements and social media posts
- Internal and external communications checklists



Schedule tabletop exercises.

Identify potential crisis scenarios and work through them during tabletop exercises with your Crisis Response Team.

Tabletop exercises allow the Crisis Response Team to run through various situations to discuss the roles and responsibilities of each person during a crisis. You might consider involving local first responders in exercises related to school safety.

Start by outlining common scenarios — such as school shootings, extreme weather, or student-involved accidents — and schedule monthly hour-long exercises to help the team feel prepared before a crisis occurs. These exercises can include discussions of “what-if” situations and can allow the designated spokesperson to practice making statements before they’re put in front of a news crew.



When a crisis has been identified

In the midst of a crisis, it can be hard to think straight. Some situations are unthinkable and you might have even been close to some of the people involved.

As soon as a crisis has been identified, it's important to:

Assemble your crisis team.

Each crisis will require a different set of team members who may need to be involved at different points in time. Immediately pull together your Crisis Response Team to ensure everyone is on the same page. Consider whether you need to pull in outside legal counsel or law enforcement as well.

Understand the crisis.

Sometimes the first information you receive is wrong, or you may be missing parts of the story. Speak to all involved parties as soon as possible to collect information and facts to share with the Crisis Response Team.

1. What happened or what is happening?

2. Who is involved?

3. Is there an immediate safety risk for students, staff, or community members?

4. Who knows about the crisis at this time?

5. How does this situation affect the district — immediately and in the long term?

6. How does this situation affect our teachers and staff? Can they continue to serve students?

7. How are students, parents, and guardians impacted? What will be their top concerns?

8. How does this affect the surrounding community?

Keep FOIA in mind.

Because school districts are subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), encourage the team to use discretion if the situation calls for it. It's important to not discuss opinions or assumptions, or to fuel misinformation that could be later quoted in the news. Some districts choose to collect and discuss sensitive information on phone calls or video-conference to prevent information from being quoted out of context.

Communicate the media protocol.

Make sure customer-facing staff are equipped with a media protocol that details your district's process for handling media requests. Ideally, a media protocol should be in place well before a crisis happens.

When a crisis happens, it's easy for people to become overwhelmed. Even if you've asked school staff to not speak on behalf of your district to the media, they may forget in the heat of the moment.

If the crisis is likely to become public, share how staff can best connect members of the media to district leadership in the event they are contacted for comment.

It often helps to provide brief talking points staff can use if pressured for comment. A simple set of talking points may include:

"Thanks for your question. I cannot speak on behalf of the district. If you provide me with your name, contact information, and deadline, I can share that with the correct person to help get you the answers you seek."

Collect helpful insights and continue to listen to the community.

Whether you're putting out a wildfire of misinformation or ensuring your talking points address common questions, work with your team to collect insights and information to inform your crisis communications efforts.

If you use Let's Talk!, see if there are previous dialogues involving stakeholders involved in the crisis or the topic at hand. That can help you develop responses to anticipated questions.

You also will want to see if people are discussing the crisis on social media and monitor for misinformation.

Draft a statement and key messages.

In today's 24/7 media cycle, most crisis communications experts say you have less than 30 minutes to respond to a crisis. And clear, consistent messaging is critical to managing your district's reputation.

Work with your Crisis Response Team to draft a thoughtful statement about the situation and key messages that can be used for internal and external communications. Even if the crisis isn't public yet or won't become public information, having a statement ready is better than having nothing prepared if reporters catch wind of the crisis.

Here are some questions to help shape your message:

- What do you want to say to your stakeholders?
- How can you reassure them?
- What questions will they have that you can answer at this time?



Identify issues before they escalate

By quickly identifying and prioritizing reputational risks, you can control the narrative and expertly manage public perception.

Let's Talk! gives you visibility into trending issues — helping identify, prioritize, and prevent issues from becoming a full-blown crisis. With Let's Talk!, you can:

- Use real-time data to spot trends and needs
- Set Critical Alerts to identify issues before they escalate
- Proactively make better decisions



In some cases, there may be information you cannot release. Be as clear as you can while maintaining student and staff privacy and following school and law enforcement policies.

Review media coverage.

If the media has already begun to cover the crisis, review their stories and set up a Google Alert to ensure you receive future stories immediately. As you review the articles, identify misinformation to help inform future messaging and statements.

Create a proactive action plan

Your crisis communications plan is a great starting point. Once a crisis becomes a reality, you'll find there is much more that is needed. Use your crisis communications plan to create a situation-specific action plan — even if the crisis hasn't met public ears yet.

Communicate to stakeholders.

Proactively communicate with key stakeholders as needed, such as employees, families, board members, and your greater community. You may need to develop a variety of communications with consistent messaging, such as formal letters, website banners, social media posts, phone scripts, text messages, emails, etc.

Determine who on your team will monitor Let's Talk!, social media, and other platforms. If this team member will be responding to questions, prepare approved messaging that can be copied and pasted, and determine the threshold in which comments and questions should be elevated to leadership.

Communicate to the media.

At minimum, you will need a statement to provide to the media upon request. Depending on the situation, you may consider sending a press release to the media to help prevent misinformation and — in some cases — control the narrative.

How to draft a statement during a crisis

Using confirmed facts and information you're authorized to release, draft a statement to share with local media.

Start by reassuring your audiences. For example, you may say, "Safety is our top priority."

Then acknowledge the crisis and the facts. For example, "This morning we received a report of a potential violent act through Let's Talk! and the district took action within minutes by canceling classes for the day."

In some cases, you may want to share specific administrative or school policies that support decisions made.

Address potential concerns and outline proactive actions being taken by the district to address the current crisis, and potentially to prevent future similar crises. This might include sentences such as:

- "As a precaution, our district is ..."
- "This will not affect ..."
- "After learning of this situation, we immediately ..."
- "Proactive measures to address this include ..."
- "Per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, we have ..."

Managing ongoing crisis communications

Some crises — like a severe snowstorm that causes outages — may only last a few days. Others can last weeks, months, or even years. Trust and transparency are key to successful communications, and you'll likely spend time continuing to manage the crisis even after the first waves begin to ebb.

Communicate regularly with your community.

Strong, clear, and consistent communications strengthen trust, build family and community engagement, and foster a positive school environment.

As the situation evolves or resolves, be sure to communicate updates regularly to your district community — especially if there are policy, procedure, or classroom changes that will affect students.

Update your crisis communications plan.

Once the storm has calmed, take time to reflect. What worked well? What didn't?

While you'll want to put the crisis behind you, it's important to apply what you've learned to the plan so you'll be better prepared for the next crisis.

Streamline communications before your next crisis

With Let's Talk! — the only all-in-one, enterprise-wide customer experience and intelligence platform built for education — you can:

- Automate and simplify communications
- Proactively make better decisions using real-time data
- Identify problems before they become crises
- Build community trust and support

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