

“Communicating in CRISIS!”

Schools can better protect students...

...from internal and external threats by planning for and implementing crisis communication. The goal is to keep people safe and the public informed while maintaining the privacy of those affected.

Before a Crisis: Plan/Prepare

1. **Be proactive.** At some time—when you least expect it—a crisis will impact your school.
2. **Establish a Crisis Communication Team** (superintendent, assistant superintendent, communication director, safety officer, school nurse, building principals, teacher leaders, others).
3. **Develop a district Crisis Communication Plan.** Keep immediate crisis-response instructions simple and short (one-page or less), so they’re easy to use.
4. **Hold a tabletop exercise**, annually, to discover how well your plan works.
5. **Maintain good community relationships**, year round. They can help identify key contacts, aid communication, reduce impact, and speed recovery.
6. **Scan the environment.** When a crisis hits your community, ask: How does this impact our schools? Are we connected to this issue via staff, students, alumni, families, board, facilities, etc.?
7. **Attend crisis communication training** offered by the Michigan School Public Relations Association (MSPRA) and other groups.

During a Crisis: Act/Communicate

1. **Follow your Crisis Communication Plan.**
2. **Convene the Crisis Team.** Assess the situation and its impact.
3. **Prepare an official statement.** Organize basic facts, clearly and concisely. Add details as they become known/as the situation changes.
4. **Develop Key Messages/Talking Points** about:
 - Addressing the safety and well-being of students, families and staff as your first priority
 - Investigating the situation/cooperating with authorities in their investigation
 - Working with officials/agencies to resolve the situation/address the issue/or develop a solution

- Keeping stakeholders informed through: hotline, notification system, website, etc.
 - Meeting the needs of those who have been impacted (e.g. having counselors available)
5. **Tell receptionists/administrative assistants where to direct phone calls.**
 6. **Communicate fact-based information and key messages early and regularly** to your board, staff, parents, the community, and media through established communication channels. **Always communicate internally, first.**
 7. **Notify local media as soon as possible**—before they learn from police scanners, phone calls, or social media. This is your chance to frame the issue. (Give local media priority over national media.)
 8. **Speak with one voice.** Coordinate messages with other agencies, as needed.
 9. **Anticipate** (and help meet) **the needs of those impacted.**

After a Crisis: Appreciate/Evaluate

1. **Thank those who helped.**
2. **Determine if it was preventable or predictable.** Examine ways to address similar, future situations.
3. **Evaluate your communication response.** Improve your plan.
4. **Follow up with a positive story** to the local media, when possible.

While schools may not be able to predict a crisis, they must always be able to communicate about one— factually, quickly, and clearly. To learn more, contact your district’s communication staff.

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[From an article compiled in February 2016 for the Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB) LeaderBoard magazine by Gerri Allen, Executive Director of the [Michigan School Public Relations Association \(MSPRA\)](http://www.mspra.org) www.mspra.org.]