

Crisis/Emergency Communication Considerations

For Kern County School Districts

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Kern County
Superintendent
of Schools
...advocates for children

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS OVERVIEW

Overview

Crises range in scope and intensity from incidents that directly or indirectly affect a single student to those that impact the entire community. Crises can happen before, during, or after school and on or off school campuses. A crisis can vary with the unique needs, resources, and assets of a school and community.

Typically, a crisis is defined as something volatile, extraordinary, and potentially significant in presenting negative implications or in causing significant uncertainty about the wellbeing of the affected population. Natural threats (earthquake, floods), fire, and crime (off campus and on-campus) have left schools feeling vulnerable.

Therefore, it is a best practice to have a Crisis Communication Plan in place, which provides information and procedures for the coordination of communication for District and/or school specific incidents.

Guiding Principles When Dealing with a Crisis

- Ensure the safety of students and staff, first and foremost
- Coordinate with first responders in unified command as applicable and appropriate
- Communicate facts as quickly as possible, but never speculate
- Ensure the dissemination of ACCURATE information
- Update information as circumstances change
- Be open, accountable and accessible to all stakeholders, while also being mindful of legal and privacy concerns
- Use multiple mediums to reach as many people as possible
- Liaison with emergency response personnel and coordinate messaging as appropriate

Objectives of Crisis Communications

1. To factually assess the situation and determine whether a communications response is warranted
2. To assemble a crisis communication team that will make recommendations on an appropriate response
3. To implement immediate action to:
 - Identify constituencies that should be informed about the situation
 - Communicate facts about the crisis
 - Provide information to those who need it
 - Minimize rumors
 - Restore order and confidence
 - Safeguard the reputation of the organization



In the event of larger-scale events that might involve multiple districts and/or school sites in the county (i.e., large earthquake, wildfire, or dam failure), KCSOS EOC and the Kern County EOC will be activated, which would provide direct support to Kern County school districts.

KCSOS Representatives for the Kern County EOC:

Christian Shannon - School Liaison

661-636-4166

Rob Meszaros - KCSOS Rep for the County Joint Information Center (JIC)

661-428-5579

Steve Sanders - PIO for KCSOS EOC

661-378-8227

THE TEAM AND COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Assembling a Crisis Communication Team

The Crisis Communications Team (CCT) is made up of the Public Information Officer (PIO) and other designees who are tasked with communicating to stakeholders during a crisis or emergency situation. The team considers the impact of the crisis and any proposed responses. They work with the affected site(s), outside agencies, and other departments such as KCSOS and the Kern County Emergency Operations (if necessary) to ensure consistency in communication throughout an event.

Specifically, the CCT manages information flow during a crisis among the organization, employees, media, government agencies, law enforcement, and the public. This team tackles what message to communicate, the method(s) used to share information, and who receives the communication.

Communication Methods

Prior to a crisis, the CCT should have established channels to communicate message directly to stakeholders, including social media accounts, websites, email, messaging systems, and traditional media relations.

"All Call" Systems (i.e., Parent Square, School Messenger, Blackboard, InTouch, etc.) should be one of the preferred methods to communicate with stakeholders. The PIO or communications expert should be trained to use these platforms and training should occur annually, at a minimum, as part of the prevention and mitigation phase of emergency planning.

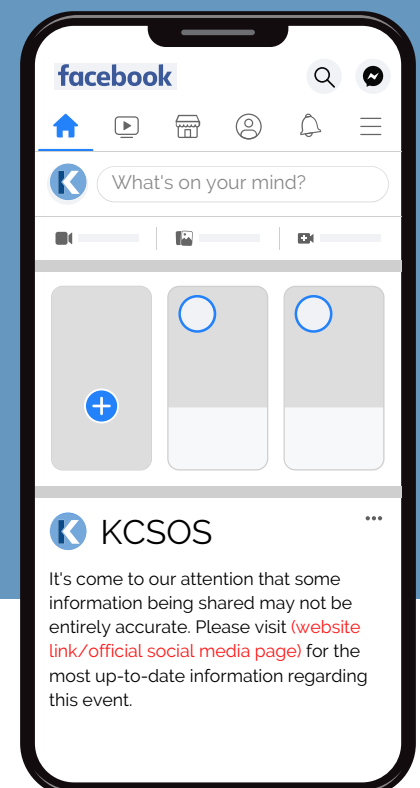
Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media accounts can also be utilized to help get the word out quickly.



SOCIAL MEDIA REMINDER

To ensure consistency and credibility, only approved Crisis Communication Team members will use the organization's social media accounts to update emergency messages.

A great example of redirecting information to a credible source after seeing misinformation online.



CRISIS COMMUNICATION BEST PRACTICES

Pre-incident

- Be prepared (Have written communications plan in place)
- Risk assessment: ID top potential threats
- ID communications staff and ensure everyone knows their role
- Develop templated communication pieces for potential situations
- Provide training for communication representatives
- Develop/update employee contact list
- ID best means of communication and procedures to implement on the fly (All call systems, website, social media, traditional media, etc.)
- Ensure you have an updated media contact list
- Establish two potential media staging areas at or near each school site
- Establish two potential parent re-unification points at each school site
- Have established policies/procedures in place for what types of situations warrant a school closure

When a crisis strikes

- Quickly gather the facts with appropriate team members (include legal)
- Assess the magnitude of event and formulate a communications strategy to fit the situation
- Outline key talking points / holding statement / official statement
- Use pre-determined communications methods to issue an initial statement (holding statement) as soon as possible
- Early communication with parents is key
- Ensure messages are accurate (Never speculate)
- Update information as circumstances change
- Use a news conference in special circumstances
- Let law enforcement take the lead with your involvement
- Activate a media staging area/JIC if necessary
- Monitor media and social media and correct inaccuracies as necessary
- Staff phones with knowledgeable person to give accurate information

Post-incident

- Conduct a crisis evaluation (What went right? What can we improve?)
- Implement necessary adjustments to crisis communication plan
- Follow-up media relations if warranted

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS LIFE CYCLE

Each phase of a crisis has its own unique informational requirement. The following chart outlines the Crisis Communication Life Cycle and identifies typical information needs of each phase.

	Pre-Crisis	Initial	Maintenance	Resolution	Evaluation
Typical Questions		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened? • Where and when? • Who's responsible • Who's to blame? • Are we safe? • What's the danger to my children? • What's being done to protect or help people? • Is anyone hurt? Sick? Dead? • Who are they? • What are you going to do about it? • Who's in charge? • What's going to happen next? • Confirm the information from reliable sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's the risk to my child and me? • What can I do to minimize the risks? • What should/can I do to help? • Why are you doing what you are doing? • What aren't you doing more/differently? • Who should I listen to? • Who's right? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why didn't the response go better/differently? • Who's responsible for getting us back to normal? • Why is it taking so long to _____? • I'm not seeing this on the news anymore. Should I still care? 	
Information Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify audiences • Develop generic messages and materials • Identify channels of communication • Exercise the plan to be sure it works • Build relationships with audiences and media now • Make sure employees know what to do if they are approached by the media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge the event with empathy • Explain and inform in simple terms about the risk • Establish your credibility • Provide appropriate courses of action (including where and how to get more information) • Commit to stakeholders to continued communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help people understand the impact of the situation and their risk • Provide background information to those who need to know • Gain understanding of and support for response • Monitor what is being said by whom and correct any misinformation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve future response by providing education about this response • Honestly examine problems and mishaps • Reinforce what worked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debrief and evaluate how the plan worked • Document the response • Revise the plan to incorporate changes based on lessons learned

IMMEDIATE AND ONGOING RESPONSE

The first 60 minutes is a critical window for crisis communication. Leaders and administrators must rally their crisis team and assemble plans to respond quickly and effectively. What is done in the first 60 minutes of a crisis will determine people's perceptions of the situation and the organization's ability to handle the problem. Use this time-window of opportunity to build trust and credibility and to establish authority over an incident. Establishing authority is vital to addressing the issues, helping first responders, and keeping people safe.



As a reference, below is KCSOS's crisis communication procedure. School districts should evaluate their own needs and develop their own system of protocols.

- 1** Notify the Communications Department as soon as possible with specifics available at the time .
- 2** Members of senior cabinet and KCSOS's communication staff meet immediately upon notification of a crisis. School principals should be included if a school site is involved. Ensure you inform appropriate team members (transportation, front desk, etc.).
- 3** Assess the magnitude of the situation, gather all relevant facts, and formulate a communications strategy to fit the situation.
- 4** Identify audiences that need information such as:
 - Those who are most affected (most likely staff and students)
 - Those who are not immediately affected but need information about safety and facts of the event (e.g. parents, Board Members)
 - Those who are not directly affected by the event but still need information (e.g. community leaders and media)
- 5** Develop messages to be communicated to each audience and determine who is responsible for delivering those messages. Circumstances will be assessed and a determination will be made if a news conference will be scheduled that may include administrators, law enforcement and first responders.
- 6** Evaluate whether Emergency Operations Center (EOC) activation is necessary.
- 7** Dispatch key personnel to EOC or incident site for support.
- 8** Deliver the initial messages as quickly as possible using the pre-identified communications tactics.
- 9** If the event has the potential for significant media interest, a dedicated media area should be established outside the emergency area where they can access school and law enforcement spokespersons and gather information and updates. Work with emergency services personnel to identify a media staging area.
- 10** After the crisis, obtain feedback and conduct a crisis evaluation. Implement any necessary adjustments to the crisis communications plan.

PIO EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

When a crisis or emergency situation arises, the PIO should:

- Contact the Superintendent or designee and the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) Coordinator (if necessary).
- Assemble the Crisis Communication Team (CCT) and assign bilingual support or translation services.
- Gather all the relevant facts, determine the need and type of responses.
- Additional resources include local county partners (BPD, Sheriff's Office, Kern County Fire Department, etc.) for mass notification options.
- Alert the Director of Transportation if busses are affected, or can assist with, a crisis.
- Inform appropriate team members (those who answer the phones & site administration) that all communication should be deferred to the CCT until further notice.
- Determine who needs to know the information. In some cases, isolating an incident to a specific group of affected individuals can mitigate further complications from the incident itself or potential legal challenges.
- Depending on who needs to know, determine the type of responses and communication channels. (Press release, press conference, news media, social media, site families only, etc.)
- Consult with your legal team for advice.
- Prepare the response and receive approval from the Superintendent or the EOC Coordinator.
- Notify stakeholders. Below are suggestions only depending upon circumstances.
- Create a fact sheet and send it to appropriate parties (those who answer the phones & site administration). Alert these parties that questions may still be forwarded to the CCT if they do not know the answer.
- Brief the media.
- Monitor media for event content, updates, and/or misinformation, and respond as needed.
- Assess the situation.
- Provide an updated statement.

MONITORING & EVALUATION

Monitoring

During an event, it's not enough to disseminate messages. It is also important to monitor what is being reported and what is being said or asked for by target audiences. This gives the opportunity to correct misinformation or to clarify and expand messages.

Post Event Evaluation

When the event is over, evaluate:

- Did all audiences receive the message in a timely manner?
- Were the messages received and interpreted in the way we intended?
- Did the channels of communication work as we expected?
- Did we effectively monitor the situation and were we able to adopt our response as needed?
- What could be improved upon?



Talking Points & Holding Statements

ESTABLISHMENT OF KEY TALKING POINTS

Establishing talking points about a crisis situation will help you respond to questions and draft additional communication pieces as the incident unfolds.

Useful points:

- Student and staff safety is our top priority.
- We are still gathering information.
- All of our students and staff are accounted for and safe.
- Our emergency procedures worked exactly as we intended and practiced.
- We will continue to update our safety plans and security measures to protect our students and staff.
- Here are some steps we are taking immediately: LIST SAFETY STEPS
- We know this is a difficult time for your family, and we encourage you to take advantage of the professional mental health service being offered by
- We will provide regular updates on our website.
- Thank you again for your involvement and commitment to our schools.



If you are looking for assistance in drafting talking point, statements, or stakeholder communications, KCSOS's communications team is here to assist. Please call Rob Meszaros at 428-5579 or Steve Sanders at 378-8227.

ESTABLISHMENT OF A HOLDING STATEMENT

It is important to be able to respond quickly, even before all of the details of the event are clear. A **holding statement** allows you to acknowledge the situation while buying time so that more complete information can be release at a later time. Moreover, A holding statement can be provided to stakeholders (parents, staff, or the media) with an initial report that sets forth the basic facts about the incident and lets people know that you are actively dealing with the situation.

HOLDING STATEMENT SAMPLE

(SCHOOL/SITE/DISTRICT) RESPONSE TO (EVENT)

The (school/site/district) can confirm that at (insert time) today at (insert location) (details, e.g., A fire broke out... / Charges were filed against... / a bomb threat was called into...).

At this time, we are still gathering information. We are working with the appropriate agencies and (what is happening, e.g., An investigation is taking place (or will take place) / The Superintendent has decided to... / We have evacuated our headquarters. All staff have been sent home pending a search of the building by the bomb squad.)

(School/site/district) would like to (assure our stakeholders/ strenuously deny the allegations/ express our sincerest condolences to the victims and their families) and assure the public that we are taking this matter very seriously. We are doing everything we can to establish the details quickly.

We understand our duty to inform the public, and it is our practice to work with the media to disseminate accurate information. We will provide more details as we gather and confirm it.

SAMPLE FAQs

What happened?

Stick to the facts you have verified: who, what, when, where. Coordinate information release with law enforcement.

How much damage?

Never speculate on the dollar amount of damage. Give factual, clear information as it becomes available (e.g., two classrooms have been damaged in the fire).

How many people were killed/injured/missing?

ONLY RELEASE CONFIRMED NUMBERS. Coordinate with law enforcement.

How can I locate a family member, colleague, or student?

Provide evacuee information numbers and locations.

How can I get updated information?

Give time and location of next briefing as well as hotline number.

How can parents and teachers receive information about how to help children deal with trauma?

Provide phone number to the County Mental Health Department.

How can I volunteer to help or provide donations?

Provide information number. Items needed now include: LIST

Why did this happen?

NEVER SPECULATE

What are you doing next?

We are assessing the situation and will determine next steps in cooperation with appropriate law enforcement. Provide information on how families are being reunited, when classes will resume, etc.

Were any policies or law violated?

We are conducting a thorough investigation into what occurred and how it can be prevented in the future.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS DO AND DO NOTS

Do:

- Do over prepare – situations may unfold quickly.
- Do confirm your facts.
- Do ask for your legal counsel's advice.
- Do show empathy and concern, but also show that you are in control.
- Do emphasize your exemplary record.
- Do be very deliberate in choosing your words to minimize misinterpretation, vagaries, and the possibility of your comments being taken out of context.
- Do tailor your message to your audience (tone of voice can make all the difference).
- Do publicize your crisis plan to show you're managing the situation.
- Do get ahead of breaking news and report your bad news.
- Do be available for media.
- Do take your time during an interview.
- Do insist that reporters respect the privacy rights of your students and staff.
- Do anticipate difficult questions and have answers prepared.
- If a press conference is necessary, do not have it in front of the school or district, and keep in mind that interviews are public record.
- If the crisis causes severe injury or death, consult the family before making a statement that includes any personal identifiable information.

Don't:

- Don't call it a crisis, and don't overreact and make it a crisis if it isn't.
- Don't say 'no comment' – it breeds a guilty perception.
- Don't say anything 'off the record' – nothing is off the record to a reporter and may be printed.
- Don't allow a third party to inform the media first about your situation.
- Don't talk about money estimates of damage.
- Don't talk about blame.
- Don't ramble.

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