School Safety Communications

A Guide to Support District Communications with Parents, Students, and the Media

District Leadership Forum

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1) How to Use This Resource

In the wake of school shootings and other incidents of school violence that have occurred across the country, district administrators increasingly face questions from concerned parents, students, members of the local media, and local government officials. These community members, especially parents, demand the district respond to two important questions:

1. **"What measures are in place in our schools to prevent or reduce the risk of crime, violence, and other safety hazards?"[1]**

2. **"Are school officials prepared to respond to and manage incidents that cannot be prevented?"[2]**

Responding to these questions provides districts with the opportunity to build trust and credibility with community members, communicate districtwide preparedness, and review current crisis communication protocol. Doing so requires that district administrators carefully consider community concerns and move from rote phrases like "school safety is our top priority" to thorough and continued conversations with stakeholders on school safety.[3] This resource offers guidance and templates to support district efforts to effectively answer both of these questions.

In the Following Pages We Explore How to:
- Communicate current safety measures across multiple channels
- Address crises that occur elsewhere
- Develop and update crisis communications plans
- Proactively work with local media to prepare for crises
- Prepare parents to find vital information in times of crisis
- Communicate with students about their role in preventing and responding to crises

At the end of this resource, you will find a **toolkit** to supplement EAB's insights on these topics. These templates can serve as a guide for district communications on student safety.

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1) Kenneth S. Trump, "Communicating Safety," *American School Board Journal*, March 2009, 30.
2) Ibid.
3) Ibid.

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2) Ongoing Communications on Safety

Responding to School Violence at Other Districts

Following School Violence that Receives National Attention, Reiterate Existing Safety Measures to Parents

School shootings or other incidents of school violence that spur significant national attention increase parent concerns about school safety. Address these concerns directly and thoroughly to reiterate district preparedness and foster trust.

Following such events, many superintendents send a districtwide email to parents that outlines the district's continued commitment to preventing and protecting its students from violence. In these letters, district administrators often include links to the district's emergency response procedures and an overview of safety measures and preventive programming.[4] To communicate compassion and preparedness, avoid using the following language in letters to parents:

- "School safety is now our number one priority."[5]
- "This was an isolated incident."[6]
- "Schools are the safest place within the community."[7]

Additionally, consider providing parents with links to resources that can guide their conversations with their children regarding school violence.[8,9] The National Education Association recommends the following when talking to students about national tragedies:[10]

- Reassure children that they are safe
- Create time to listen and be available to talk
- Review school safety procedures
- Observe children's emotional state
- Limit media exposure
- Maintain a normal routine

Letters to parents after incidents of school violence should be supplemented with ongoing communications throughout the year on the district's safety measures and efforts to prevent school violence.

See **Tool 1** on **page 15** for a sample letter to parents following a school shooting that received national attention. For additional examples, see the following letters:

- Irving Independent School District
- Washington County School District
- Township High School District 211

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4) "Responding to School Violence: Tips for Administrators," National Association of School Psychologists, 2015, https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-prevention/responding-to-school-violence-tips-for-administrators.
5) Kenneth S. Trump, "Communicating Safety," *American School Board Journal*, March 2009, 31.
6) Ibid.
7) Ibid.
8) Cindy Long, "School Shootings and Other Traumatic Events: How to Talk to Students," National Education Association, accessed April 10, 2018, http://www.nea.org/home/72279.htm.
9) "Talking to Children About Tragedies & Other News Events," HealthyChildren.org, last modified July 9, 2016, https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Talking-To-Children-About-Tragedies-and-Other-News-Events.aspx.
10) Cindy Long, "School Shootings and Other Traumatic Events: How To Talk to Students," National Education Association, accessed April 10, 2018, http://www.nea.org/home/72279.htm.

Provide Reasoning for New Safety Measures and Offer Channels for Community Feedback

Following incidents of school violence that occur elsewhere, parents often demand that districts reevaluate their safety protocols and implement new safety measures. Oftentimes, parents base their demands on media reports on popular and/or controversial safety measures that districts around the country are implementing. When responding to these inquiries, communicate that the district implements safety measures based on guidance from local law enforcement and experts on school safety. If there is a particular reason why a given safety measure is not compatible with the district, provide this reasoning to community members.

If the district opts to implement new safety measures after a crisis, be prepared to answer parent and student questions on how exactly the measures will improve school safety. When possible, provide research-based evidence to explain the additions. Because clear and open communication increases the likelihood of stakeholder buy-in, administrators should provide students, parents, and teachers the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback. Consider holding a town hall meeting at which local law enforcement or district administrators delineate the new safety measures.[11] To ensure all concerns are addressed, dedicate time for a question and answer session at the end of the meeting and share the contact information of an administrator who will be willing and available to discuss the new measures.[12]

Continue to reiterate existing safety measures even when introducing new ones. Doing so allows district administrators and school resource offers to illustrate that safety has been, and continues to be a priority within the district.

Highlighting Existing Safety Measures

Highlight Existing Safety Measures throughout the Year to Foster Trust and Credibility

Given increased parent and media scrutiny, it is no longer adequate to address school safety only when a crisis that receives national attention occurs. District administrators must dedicate time throughout the school year to communicate with key stakeholders about school safety. In doing so, administrators establish trust and credibility on the topic while educating stakeholders on school safety protocol.[13] If a crisis occurs, at the district or elsewhere, the district and the community will be better able to respond due to this ongoing communication.

Ongoing communications on school safety should highlight both preventative programming and emergency protocols.[14] This dual messaging allows districts to illustrate their commitment to preventing incidents of school violence and their preparedness to respond. For examples of prevention measures to implement and highlight, see the National Association of School Psychologists resource, Responding to School Violence: Tips for Administrators.

11) Megan Pauly, "Local School Districts, Officials Turn Focus to School Safety Following Parkland Shooting," *Community Idea Stations*, April 2018, http://ideastations.org/radio/news/local-school-districts-officials-turn-focus-school-safety-following-parkland-shooting.
12) Daniel Walton, "Parents criticize Asheville City Schools response to Parkland tragedy," *Mountain Xpress*, April 2018, https://mountainx.com/news/parents-criticize-asheville-city-schools-response-to-parkland-tragedy/.
13) Kenneth S. Trump, "Communicating Safety," *American School Board Journal*, March 2009.
14) "Responding to School Violence: Tips for Administrators," National Association of School Psychologists, 2015, https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-prevention/responding-to-school-violence-tips-for-administrators.

Channels through Which Districts Communicate Existing Safety Measures and Preventive Efforts[15,16]

Digital Communications

> **For example district safety webpages, see the following:**
> - Madison Metropolitan School District
> - Irving Independent School District

Create a dedicated webpage on the district website for safety information. Consider including:
- Tips for parents on **talking about school safety** with their children
- Instructions on where and how to receive **emergency notices**

Develop relationships with local media contacts to increase positive coverage of district safety measures:
- Send media contacts information on **violence prevention programs**
- Share **press releases** on safety measures

Leverage social media accounts:
- Post information about **existing safety measures** at the district
- Encourage parents to **sign up** for the district emergency notification system through social media posts

In-Person Communications

Discuss district safety at board meetings:
- Dedicate a portion of each board meeting to discuss **district safety measures**
- Dedicate an **annual board meeting** to discussing emergency response and crisis communications plans

Host events for parents regarding district safety:
- Host a **session on district safety** within back-to-school programing
- Hold a **roundtable** on how to talk to students about violence

Discuss school safety with students:
- Host school safety seminars to discuss safety drills and where students can **report concerns**
- Dedicate time for students to discuss **how they feel** about recent incidents of school violence

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15) Kenneth S. Trump "Strengthening School Safety Communications," *District Administration*, September 1, 2010, https://www.districtadministration.com/article/strengthening-school-safety-communications.
16) Kenneth S. Trump, "Communicating Safety," *American School Board Journal*, March 2009.

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3) Preparation for Crisis Communications

Crisis Communications Plans

Develop a Crisis Communications Plan to Guide District Communications after Incidents of School Violence

A significant body of research recommends that districts create crisis communications plans to prepare administrators for communicating in a crisis and guide leaders through effective communications if a crisis does occur. Typically, crisis communications plans are distinct from, but coordinated with, district emergency response plans.[17] For information on steps to take to build a crisis communications plan, see **page 2** of the Crisis Communications Planning and Implementation Guide.

Common Elements of Crisis Communications Plans

School Safety Personnel Roles

Crisis communications plans should inform individuals in a variety of positions across the district about their role in crisis communications. **Outline key responsibilities** by role so individuals can quickly discern the steps they need to take during a crisis.

Telephone Tree

A telephone tree allows for the efficient dissemination of information across district administrators and school staff. **Include a telephone tree** within the crisis communications plan to outline who is responsible for notifying particular individuals when a crisis occurs.

Guidance on Parent and Media Communications

Communicating with parents and the media during a crisis should not involve improvisation. **Provide clear guidelines** on how to craft concise and accurate statements to deliver to parents and the media.

Social Media Strategy

Stakeholders often look to social media for information about a crisis. To prepare district administrators to appropriately use social media during a crisis, **include protocol on social media use** within the crisis communications plan. For example, administrators should post frequent updates throughout the duration of the crisis, even if there is no new information to share. For more information on social media strategy in crisis communications, see Campus Safety's Crisis Communications in the Age of Social Media.

Explanation of Technologies

Administrators may need to use unfamiliar technologies during a crisis (e.g., emergency notification systems, walkie talkies). **Outline the basic functions** of all technologies available to support crisis communications and provide contact information for the vendor.

Plan Audit Protocol

Crisis communications plans should include up-to-date contact information and be coordinated with the current emergency response plan. Describe the **process for a plan audit** within the crisis communications plan.

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17) Kenneth S. Trump, "Strengthening School Safety Communications," *District Administration*, September 1, 2010, https://www.districtadministration.com/article/strengthening-school-safety-communications.

For more information on what to include within crisis communications plans, see United Educator's Guide to Developing a Campus Crisis Communications Plan.

For example crisis communications plans, see the following:

- **Pages 69-81** of the Model School Crisis Management Plan by the Virginia Department of Education.

- Jordan School District's Crisis Communications Plan

- New Beginnings Schools' Crisis Communications Plan

Train Administrators on Crisis Communications Plan Contents Periodically

Train district spokespeople to craft messaging that is:
- **Accurate**
- **Timely**
- **Redundant**

Crisis communications plans prove valuable only to the extent that administrators know and understand their contents.[18] District leaders and those who may be required to be a district spokesperson should be trained on how to use the plan during a crisis, their roles and responsibilities if a crisis occurs, and how to compose effective messages during a crisis. For information on common crisis communications responsibilities of district leaders, see **pages 4-6** in the Crisis Communications Planning and Implementation Guide.

District leaders should also equip district personnel and teachers with information on crisis communications. Consider providing school leaders and facilities or maintenance personnel with a crisis communications kit that includes district and school information, the emergency chain of command, emergency contacts, and a list of local and regional emergency services.[19] To educate teachers, consider dedicating three to five minutes at faculty meetings to review safety and crisis plans, including relevant communications information.[20] Encourage teachers and staff to refer media inquiries to the district spokesperson to keep messaging consistent.[21]

Finally, review the district's crisis communications plan with emergency responders and any other community partners that might be involved in executing the plan. This review allows the district to ensure that all stakeholders understand and agree on how the district will communicate about incidents of school violence.[22]

See **Tool 2** on **page 16** for a Crisis Communications Planning Checklist.

See **Tool 3** on **page 17** for Sample Role Descriptions.

See **Tool 4** on **page 18** for a Template for a Local Contact Resource Page.

18) Kenneth S. Trump, "The Post-Crisis Crisis: Managing Parent and Media Communications," *School Administrator* 69, no. 4 (2012): 39-42, http://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=22768.
19) "Crisis Communications Planning and Implementation Guide," Fagen Friedman & Fulfrost LLP, 2013.
20) Kenneth S. Trumo, "Communicating Safety," *American School Board Journal*, March 2009, 30.
21) Gary L. Sigrist et al., "Crisis Communication and the Emergency Response Plan" (presentation sponsored by School Messenger and Ohio School Public Relations Association, 2014).
22) "Responding to School Violence: Tips for Administrators," National Association of School Psychologists, 2015, https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-prevention/responding-to-school-violence-tips-for-administrators.

Parent Relations

Use Digital Communication Channels before and during Crises to Keep Parents Informed

> Consider disseminating important information on school safety in multiple languages, depending on parent needs.

Digital communications are vital to the dissemination of information to parents during an incident of school violence. However, digital communications during a crisis will only be effective if parents can find accurate information. Throughout the year, inform parents about the channels through which they should expect updates in times of crisis.[23] Many districts also instruct parents not to call the district's central line during crises, so that the line can be kept open for emergency responders.[24]

Consider emailing parents a guide to digital communications surrounding student safety. This guide can address frequently asked questions and outline the district's emergency notification system. For an example guide, see Chichester School District's Student Safety and Parent Notification resource.

Tools for Parent Communications during a Crisis[25,26]

Text Message Emergency Notification System

Develop a mass parent text message notification system and encourage parents to sign up for the notifications during back-to-school days, within parent newsletters, and on the district website's home page.

"Dark Site" Web Page

Create a 'dark site' web page that can serve as a home page during a major incident. Create a template of basic information, leaving space to input details at the time of a crisis. This webpage can be quickly updated and posted during a crisis.

Student Relations

Encourage Students to Share Information with an Adult before and during a Crisis

> Students may not think to report concerning social media posts to adults within the school community. During discussions on safety, communicate to students that threats on social media can and should be shared with trusted adults or through anonymous tip lines.

Students are often tempted to keep information about dangerous behavior to themselves. District and school leaders can encourage students to report possible threats by empowering students to make reports through a variety of channels.[27]

Cultivating a culture of safety relies on positive relationships between students and adults. All adults within the school community should be taught to field concerns from students and pass along information to the appropriate safety personnel. Students are most likely to report information about dangerous behavior if they feel that they will be taken seriously and will not be punished.[28] Consider asking teachers to educate students about the role they play in school safety during discussions of safety protocol, such as after a safety drill.

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23) Kenneth S. Trump, "The Post-Crisis Crisis: Managing Parent and Media Communications," *School Administrator* 69, no. 4 (2012): 39-42, http://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=22768.
24) Ibid.
25) Ibid.
26) Ibid.
27) Linda M. Kanan, "When Students Make Threats," *National Association of Secondary School Principals*, April 2010, 12.
28) Ibid.

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Teachers can address the following topics during such discussions:[29]

- The role students play in preventing dangerous incidents
- The channels through which students can report information about dangerous behavior
- The types of information that are important to report

Educate Students on the Appropriate Use of Cell Phones during Crises

Text messaging can lead to the spread of misinformation during school emergencies; this misinformation can hinder the ability of district leaders, parents, and members of the media to understand the situation at hand.[30] Consider using emergency drills as an opportunity to educate students about the appropriate use of cell phones during crises. For example guidelines for student use of cell phones, see **page 3** of the Crisis Communications Planning and Implementation Guide.

Some districts distribute a short, fact-based statement to teachers and other employees to share with students on this topic. This statement can help students give their parents essential and accurate information during an incident of school violence. Example statements (adapted from the Crisis Communications Planning and Implementation Guide) include:[31]

- The school is undergoing lockdown protocol. See the district website homepage for information.
- Expect a call through the district's emergency notification system with information on where to pick me up.
- We evacuated the school due to a [insert event], and I am safe. Please pick me up at [insert location]. There is more information on the district website homepage.

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29) Linda M. Kanan, "When Students Make Threats," *National Association of Secondary School Principals*, April 2010, page 12.
30) "Crisis Communications Planning and Implementation Guide," Fagen Friedman & Fulfrost LLP, 2013, 3-4.
31) Ibid.

Media Relations

Prepare to Collaborate Effectively with Media Contacts if a Crisis Occurs by Anticipating Media Needs

During incidents of school violence, the interests of the school district and the media are well aligned; both parties seek to distribute accurate information about the crisis to the community as quickly as possible.[32] Coordination and communication between district administrators and members of the media will be most effective if district administrators view and treat the media as an asset in crisis communications.[33]

Preparatory Strategies to Ensure Efficient Collaboration with Media during Crises[34]

Designate a Spokesperson
Designate an individual to deliver information to the media within the crisis communications plan. Inform any designated individuals of this responsibility and educate them on how to craft clear and accurate messages during a crisis.

Designate a Media Center Location
Designate an area for members of the media to work within that will be out of the way of first responders, but is in close proximity to school buildings. Include this information within the crisis communications plan.

Create a District Information Kit
District information kits provide basic information that can be disseminated to the media in times of a crisis. This kit might include layouts of school buildings, general district information (e.g., number of students, number of teachers), and information about district leaders.

Review the Crisis Communications Plan
Review the crisis communications plan with leaders of local media outlets. Consider suggestions from members of the media.

For more information on working with media see the Schools and Media Crisis Communications Task Force's resource, 911! A manual for schools and the media during a campus crisis.

See **Tool 5** on **page 19** for a District Information Kit Template

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32) Schools and Media Crisis Communications Task Force, "911! A Manual for Schools and the Media during a Campus Crisis," California School Boards Association, 2001.
33) Ibid.
34) Ibid.

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- Trump, Kenneth S. "The Post-Crisis Crisis: Managing Parent and Media Communications." *School Administrator* 69, no. 4 (2012): 39-42. http://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=22768.

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- Schools and Media Crisis Communications Task Force**.** "911! A Manual for Schools and the Media during a Campus Crisis." California School Boards Association. 2001. https://www.csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/ConditionsOfChildren/Safe SupportiveSchlEnvironment/~/media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/Educatio nIssues/ConditionsofChildren/SafeAndSupportiveSchoolEnv/911_CrisisComs_CSB A2.ashx.

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Tool #1: Sample Letter to Parents

This sample letter to parents can be used as a template for your district's communications with parents following an incident of school violence that occurred outside of the district. Letters to parents after such events should be supplemented with ongoing communications throughout the year on the district's safety measures and efforts to prevent school violence. The language in this sample was adapted from **page 12** of the Crisis Communications Planning and Implementation Guide and publicly available documents from Irving Independent School District, Washington County School District, and Township High School District 211.

Dear Parents,

Like you, we were shocked by the recent tragedy that took place at Central High School. Our thoughts are with Central High School and those who lost loved ones in the shooting.

Keeping your children safe while at school is our district's top priority. We take all possible precautions to help ensure that our campuses are safe and secure. However, we all know that unplanned events can occur. **The intent of this message is to help you understand all that we do to keep our students safe and to enlist your help in our work**. In the following paragraphs, you will learn about our system of safety measures:

- Partnerships with local resources…

- Visitor registry and identification pages…

- Police presence…

- Emergency Response and Communications Plans…

- Safety drills…

- Reporting procedures for parents, teachers, and students…

- Mental health services…

We encourage you to reach out with any questions or concerns regarding these safety measures. **We also ask that you encourage your children to speak to an adult if he or she hears troublesome rumors or threats**. Below are some resources that can help you in discussing violence with your children:

- "School Shootings and Other Traumatic Events: How To Talk To Students." National Education Association.
- "Talking to Children About Tragedies & Other News Events." healthychildren.org.

We are committed to working together with our students, parents, and staff members to protect the safety and welfare of our students.

Sincerely,
Superintendent Johnson

Tool #2: Crisis Communications Planning Checklist

This checklist can be used to inform your crisis communications planning. The process will typically involve district administrators, local law enforcement, and media representatives. The checklist was adapted from **page 29** of the Schools and Media Crisis Communications Task Force's resource, 911! A manual for schools and the media during a campus crisis.

Crisis Communications Planning Checklist

- ☐ Establish a crisis communications policy

- ☐ Create a crisis communications plan
  - Develop internal notification system
  - Develop external notification system

- ☐ Identify a school spokesperson
  - Provide spokesperson training
  - Connect spokesperson with media outlets

- ☐ Identify media center location
  - Identify press conference logistics
  - Establish location of "command post"

- ☐ Create pre-written materials of:
  - School history
  - Basic school information
  - Key personnel background and bios

- ☐ Prepare emergency radio agreements that detail:
  - Public instructions
  - Key personnel contact information

- ☐ Review crisis communications plan periodically

- ☐ Perform periodic audit of contact names and phone numbers

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Tool #3: Sample Role Descriptions

Consider outlining responsibilities by role within crisis communications plans. This allows individuals to clearly understand their roles and responsibilities in preparation for and during a crisis. The following sample was adapted from **page 11** of the Crisis Communications Planning and Implementation Guide.

Crisis Communications Responsibilities by Role

Immediately following report of an incident, district leaders should establish an on-site lead and a district office lead. Each individual should take on the following responsibilities:

On-Site Lead	District Office Lead
Establish contact with emergency services.	Set up a phone line that must stay open. Give to on-site lead.
Assist in establishing a command center for emergency services.	Gather and verify facts.
Set up parent-student reunion site and staff the site.	Secure a writer and translator, if necessary.
Notify district lead of parent-student reunion location information.	Prepare a situation fact sheet or statement.
Inform media of student/minor privacy obligations.	Issue information to stakeholders.
Defer to lead agencies (e.g., fire, police) as the source of information on the event.	Record all media calls, including contact names, media services, and phone numbers.

Tool #4: Template for a Local Contact Resource Page

The following is a standard template of key contact information that can be included within a crisis communications plan and distributed to school personnel that may be involved in the response to an incident of school violence. The template was adapted from **page 28** of the Schools and Media Crisis Communications Task Force's resource, 911! A manual for schools and the media during a campus crisis.

Local Contact Resource Page

Local **fire department** contact:

Name _____

Phone _____

Local **police department** contact:

Name _____

Phone _____

Local **television station** contact:

Name _____

Phone _____

Local **radio station** contact:

Name _____

Phone _____

Local **newspaper reporter** contact:

Name _____

Phone _____

Local **newspaper editor** contact:

Name _____

Phone _____

Tool #5: Template for District Information Kit

Consider creating a district information kit that can be distributed to members of the media during a crisis. The following template can be used as a starting point for the district information kit. This information can be supplemented with layouts of school buildings. The following sample was adapted from **page 8** of the Crisis Communications Planning and Implementation Guide.

Basic Information	
District name:	
District website:	
Area served by district:	
Number of schools within district:	
Number of students:	
Number of teachers and staff:	
Brief history of the district:	

Personnel Information	
Superintendent name:	
Superintendent background:	
Safety personnel name:	
Safety personnel background:	

Facility Information (repeated as necessary)	
School #1: School name and address	
School square footage:	
Main school facilities:	