EAB

How to Respond to Flashpoints on Campus

A Resource for Independent School Leaders on Building Clear and Effective Processes to Efficiently Address Flashpoints

Independent School Executive Forum

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Executive Summary: Background

What is a flashpoint?

An incident or event that causes a disturbance in the school community or media, including heightened levels of activism, media and public scrutiny, and reputational damage.

Independent schools face—and will continue to face—a range of flashpoints.

Flashpoints are the new normal—heads of school are being asked to address a wide range of incidents and events on and off campus. Flashpoints come from many different actors (e.g., schools themselves, third-party organizations or activists, and faculty, staff, or students) and span a wide range of issues.

Changing norms and expectations are raising the bar for schools' responses to flashpoints on campus.

Students and other stakeholders expect rapid actions that are consistent with their values and address the broader context of an issue, not just the event at hand. Businesses and organizations outside of schools often have greater flexibility when responding to flashpoints, resulting in responses that are quick, comprehensive, and ongoing. Meeting this standard, however, can be a challenging benchmark for most schools, given their young populations, need for privacy, and relatively limited resources.

Flashpoints have adverse near- and long-term impacts on the school community.

The stakes are high when responding to flashpoints. Underpreparing for or mismanaging a response carries significant consequences for advancement and enrollment at independent schools. Left unchecked or poorly addressed, flashpoints negatively impact the student experience, overwhelm staff and resources, and ultimately affect a school's reputation and ability to make progress on key initiatives.

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Executive Summary: Key Areas for Flashpoints

Key Area #1

Include flashpoints in your school's risk register and create plans to mitigate these potential risks.

Most schools track and manage financial, operational, and compliance-related risks. However, reputational risks are sometimes overlooked. Integrating these risks into your school's risk register and preparing appropriate risk response plans prompts earlier action to alleviate the impact of flashpoints.

Key Area #2

Create structures to consistently prepare for and respond to flashpoints.

There are several essential elements of effective flashpoint responses. Create plans to respond to potential flashpoints and convene a dedicated team to ensure your school has the structure, oversight, and processes to rapidly and holistically respond to emerging flashpoints. This enables your school to be ready to address the varied and disruptive flashpoints that could occur.

Key Area #3

Learn from each flashpoint to strengthen campus response.

Despite best efforts, flashpoints can and will still occur. Create opportunities to learn from such events so your school can be better prepared for any future flashpoints that impact the community.

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Learn from Higher Education's Success (and Failures)

Both higher education and K-12 institutions face increasing newsworthy flashpoints. From student activism to controversial speakers on campus, higher education has been on the front line of these issues for the past few years. While there are, of course, differences between colleges and independent schools, there are also similarities and overlap that offer opportunities for independent schools to learn from higher education.

Both Higher Ed and K-12 Respond to Endless Stream of High-Stakes Flashpoints…

Higher Ed Headlines

- *MIT Puts Professor on Leave Over His Ties to Jeffrey Epstein*
- *Racial Slurs, and the 15 Days That Shook Syracuse*
- *At Georgia Southern, a Book-Burning Ignites Questions About Race*

K-12 Headlines

- *A Teacher Made a Hitler Joke in the Classroom. It Tore the School Apart.*
- *Principal Addresses Anti-Semitic and Racist Behavior*
- *Students Prep For Protests: "We Have Nothing To Lose"*

…And Face Similar Pressures and Stresses

- Polarized political climate influences school environment
- Social media enables flashpoints to go viral
- Value differences widen between school stakeholders
- Heightened scrutiny from media and the public

Independent schools face many of the same challenges as their higher education peers, including a polarized political climate that influences the classroom and campus environment, as well as value differences between students, parents, faculty, staff, and alumni.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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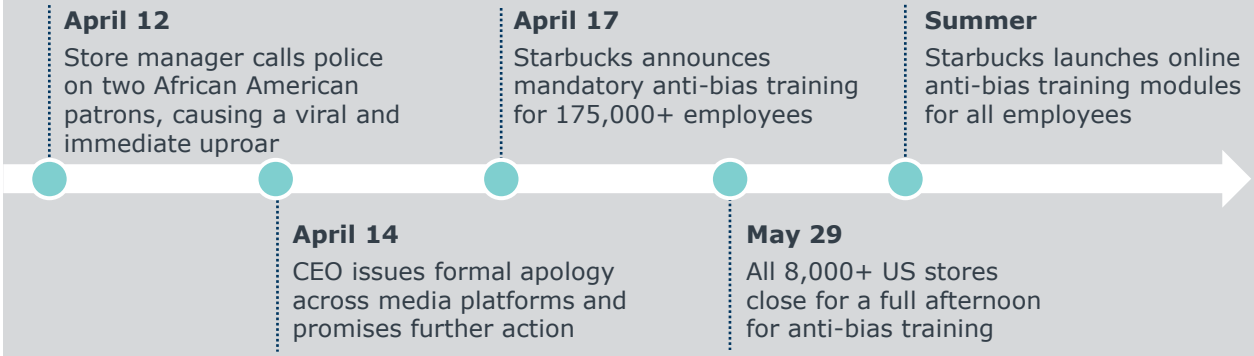
Changing Norms Raise Expectations for Schools

Businesses and other organizations often have greater flexibility than schools when responding to flashpoints, resulting in responses that are quick, comprehensive, and ongoing. For example, when Starbucks experienced a high-profile bias flashpoint in spring 2018, the company issued a quick and thorough response and took immediate action to address the incident at hand as well as address broader societal concerns of bias in the workplace.

Case in Brief: Flashpoint at Starbucks

Timeline of Key Events, 2018



What Starbucks Got Right

- **Swift apology** from senior leadership took full accountability for the flashpoint
- Transparent follow-up actions resolved the incident and **addressed underlying concerns**
- Continued emphasis on anti-bias and diversity efforts **underscore commitment and values**

This case is just one example of an emerging gold standard for how entities—including independent schools—should respond to flashpoints on campus. Meeting this standard, however, can be a challenging benchmark for most schools, given their young populations, need for privacy, and limited resources.

Source: Rick Kelly, "The Starbucks Incident: A Crisis Management Case Study," Bernstein Crisis Management, 2018; EAB interviews and analysis

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Students Set a Higher Bar for Their Schools

Increasingly, today's students, notably millennials and Generation Z, expect that the businesses and other organizations they support demonstrate values consistent with their own. These attitudes carry over to what students expect from their school, particularly around managing flashpoints on campus.

Millennials and Gen Z Expect More from Businesses and Organizations		Implications for Flashpoint Management on Campus
1 in 2 Customers will pay more for a product or brand known for its social value or community commitment	→	Today's students want schools with missions and actions that are **consistent with their values**
72% Of Gen Z'ers want to see their employers supporting racial equality	→	Today's students are **socially aware;** they want their school to make ongoing progress on systemic issues
39% Of millennials feel that businesses' top priority should be to improve society	→	Schools are expected to go beyond traditional boundaries **to address concerns in society at-large**

Source: Jay Baer, "New Research Shows How Fast Companies Have to Be in Social Media," *Convince and Convert*, 2018; Alaina Love, "Are You Ready to Lead the Purpose-Driven Generation," *SmartBrief,* Aug. 25, 2018; 2018 Deloitte Millennial Survey; "The Sustainability Imperative," Nielsen, Oct. 10, 2015; EAB interviews and analysis.

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Flashpoints Can Endanger School Brand, Reputation

Most schools recognize the stakes are high when responding to flashpoints. In the near term, consequences include heightened activism, media scrutiny, and an all-out scramble as school leaders piece together information and an appropriate response.

Flashpoints can also have a long-term impact with reverberating repercussions, such as damage to enrollment and fundraising for independent schools.

Mishandled Flashpoints Affect Key Finance Drivers for Independent Schools

Enrollment Impact

- School seen as unfriendly to students and families with certain political views
- Current families leave and prospective families look elsewhere
- School loses students and associated tuition revenue

Fundraising Impact

- Flashpoint on campus sparks outrage from alumni
- Donors question school response and current campus climate
- School loses pledge for major gift from unhappy donor

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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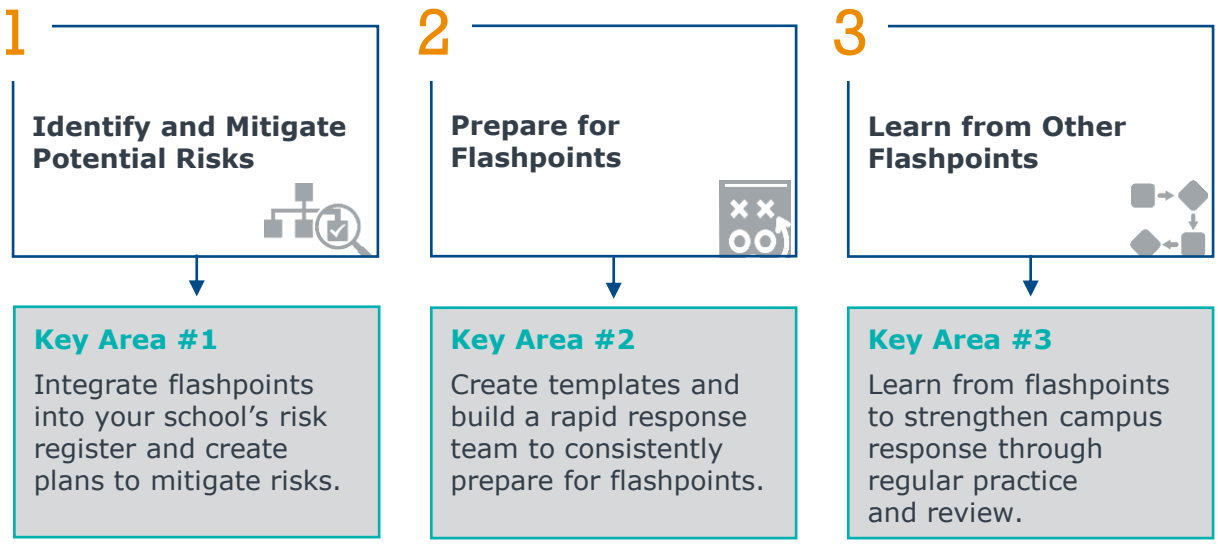
Three Key Areas for Strong Flashpoint Response

Through our conversations with heads of school and senior leaders, EAB identified three key areas schools should address to be best prepared to respond to flashpoints on campus. The following pages provide recommendations and case examples of how schools are overcoming these challenges. Regardless of your experience with flashpoints, EAB recommends that school leaders proactively discuss potential flashpoints as part of developing and refining the school's preparation and response process.



Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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Mishandled Flashpoints Present Reputational Risks

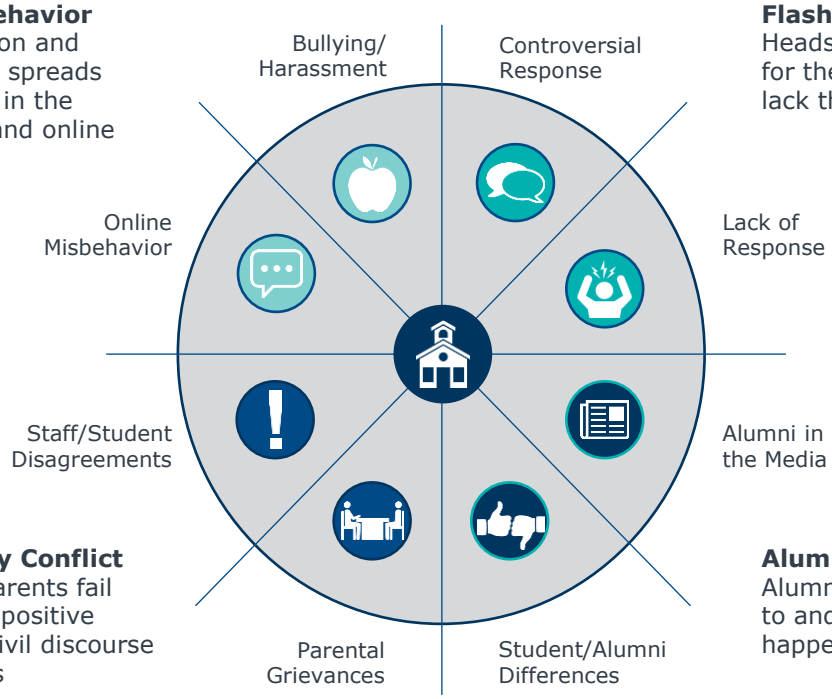
Reputational risks continue to be a blind spot for independent schools. These range from risks related to student and alumni behavior, to community conflict and incident response. Flashpoints can result in significant reputational damage to your school.

As the number and type of potential risks increase, schools need to implement a system to mitigate and prepare for these risks.

Sources of Reputational Risks at Independent Schools

Student Behavior
Social tension and polarization spreads to students in the classroom and online

Flashpoint Response
Heads face criticism for their response, or lack thereof



Community Conflict
Staff and parents fail to serve as positive models of civil discourse for students

Alumni Behavior
Alumni remain connected to and concerned with happenings on campus

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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Regularly Update Your School's Risk Register

Preparing for reputational risks requires proactive identification of potential flashpoints. A risk register allows institutions to assign risks to categories, track risk scoring, and monitor treatments. Regularly update your risk register to identify, prioritize, and address potential flashpoints. **Including flashpoints in your risk register will increase awareness of key reputational risk areas and promote early risk mitigation tactics.**

IDENTIFY RISKS	VERIFY RISKS	FINALIZE RISK REGISTER
Conduct School-Wide Workshops • Bring campus stakeholders together to identify risks to your school • Use meetings as opportunity to source and surface risks	**Use Peer Risks to Verify and Discover Risks** • Collect and compare peer schools' risk registers • Remove risks that do not apply to your school • Consider risks that may have been overlooked	**Build Risk Register** • Use risks identified from workshops and peers to build school's register • Review and refresh risk register regularly to include new risks

Find more resources on risk registers and a template for your use at EAB.com/IRMplaybook

If your school has already compiled a risk register, we recommend reviewing it through the lens of civil discourse and adding in additional risks. Use your risk register and determine which events are most likely to occur and plan accordingly.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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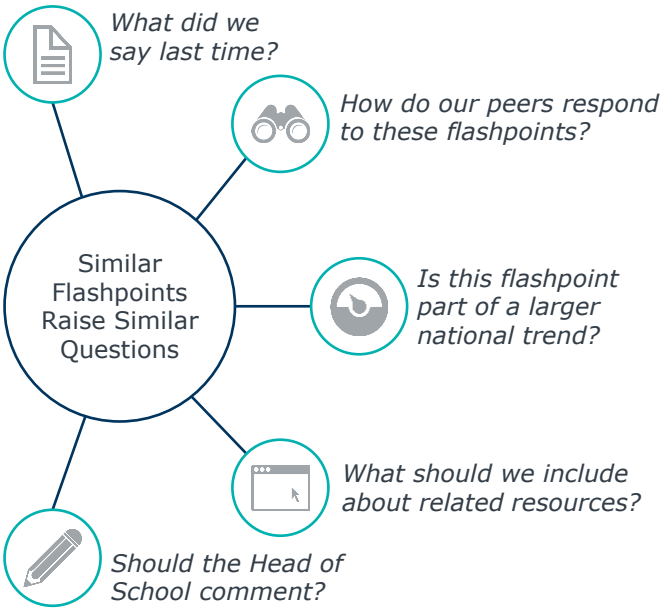
Schools Waste Time And Effort Without Clear Processes

Most flashpoint responses depend on the right person knowing the right thing at the right time. When a flashpoint occurs, administrative leaders and heads of school can feel immense pressure to quickly throw together a written response and spend precious time trying to convene the right group of peers for feedback and guidance. **Most schools do not have a standard process to build a consistent and clear school response, resulting in heads of school scrambling to generate a response or unnecessarily doubling efforts**.

Status Quo: Staff Race to Compose an Informed Response Each Time



The Result: Time-Consuming and Repetitive Work

> Every time there's a controversy on campus, I'm scrambling to pull together past statements, and I'm Googling our peer institutions to find what they're saying."
>
> *Communications Director*

> Even if we haven't had an incident on campus yet, there's no reason we couldn't be next. What can we learn from the school down the road that just had an incident in the news?"
>
> *Head of School*

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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Create Templates to Expedite Initial Response Times

The communications team at Penn State uses a template to strengthen their ability to respond to flashpoints. The team first created a list of potential issues that might impact their campus—they considered problems on other campuses, national trends, and larger societal tensions impacting higher education. The team then examined how Penn State and other institutions had responded to previous events and identified common elements of successful responses. Ultimately, the communications department drafted and approved template packages by key leaders.

Communications Team Develops Templates to Strengthen Response

PennState

1. Created a list of **recurring issues** from internal conversations, national media trends, and societal issues impacting higher education
2. Analyzed Penn State's and higher education responses to various flashpoints, identifying **common elements of successful responses**
3. **Template packages are drafted and approved** by campus leaders (president, provost, general counsel, and subject matter experts)

30 min. From flashpoint to Penn State's initial response across platforms

Key Elements of an Effective Response

- ✓ Describes what happened and acknowledges any incomplete information
- ✓ Occurs soon after a flashpoint is identified
- ✓ Reiterates commitment to mission and core values and recognizes how the flashpoint conflicts with them
- ✓ Employs an authentic and thoughtful tone, with statements from key leaders
- ✓ Details what the institution is doing in response to the flashpoint
- ✓ Points people to where they can follow up or learn more

The goal of this preparatory work and analysis is to be able to widely disseminate an initial response within 30 minutes of learning of a flashpoint.

The point of these templates is to not just have canned responses to simply pull off the shelf, but rather to have language to start with that can be shared quickly and easily. **This enables key leaders to focus on addressing the actual flashpoint, rather then spending valuable time parsing words and searching for previous statements**.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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Develop a Team to Enable Agile and Robust Responses

Effectively addressing flashpoints is a school-wide challenge that requires thoughtful preparation and discussion long before a flashpoint ever takes place. School leaders must develop a dedicated response team to respond to these types of events. The specific scope, membership, and processes for your team will likely depend on your school's unique culture, existing teams and taskforces, as well as the interests and skills of leaders. Consider these recommendations for assembling a response team for your school.

STEP 1

Determine Scope

Clarify Responsibilities

- Communications vs. tactical operations
- Specify how this group interacts with existing teams and departments

STEP 2

Identify Membership

Delineate Tiers

- Tier 1: Core members who are always activated in flashpoint response
- Tier 2: Unit-level designees and/or subject matter experts

STEP 3

Define Roles

Assign Ownership for Next Steps

- Who does what as a crisis unfolds?
- Who has final sign-off authority?
- What terrain is each member responsible for?

Key Elements of a Rapid Response Team

- Define specific parameters for when the team is activated and when they are not
- Educate school leaders and address expectations about team scope and responsibilities
- Establish internal and external communication channels to receive and disseminate information

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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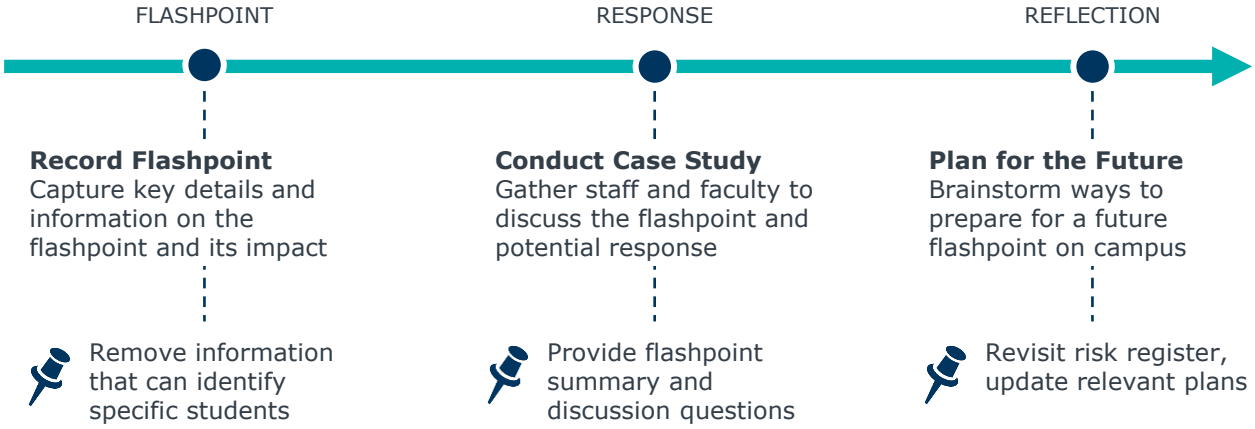
Use Flashpoints as Learning and Growth Opportunities

Despite best efforts, flashpoints can and will impact your school community. **EAB recommends that schools use these flashpoints to prepare the school community for future flashpoints and learn from each experience**. Flashpoints provide schools with the opportunity to formally assess whether existing responses need to be refined. When used as learning opportunities, flashpoints prompt schools to ask important questions about their response to such events and then determine whether any additional action, training, or support is required. This process is detailed below.



Key Takeaways from Lawrenceville's Case Study Exercise

Head of School built case using excerpts of students' language from social media exchange

Head of School led exercise with all faculty, then board of directors

Exercise allowed for all faculty to be better informed about event and discuss how to respond to similar flashpoints

Use EAB's **Case Study Compendium of Campus Flashpoints** to begin these conversations at your school.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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Research and Resources to Guide Your Next Steps

To equip schools with the information they need to better prepare for and manage flashpoints, EAB offers several briefings, templates, tools, and more. Members can access, download, and order hardcopies of these and related resources at eab.com.

Selected Resources from EAB

The Institutional Risk Management Playbook

Use this to determine how to implement a comprehensive risk management process at your school

Case Study Compendium of Campus Flashpoints

Use these case studies to prepare leadership at your school for a variety of potential campus flashpoints

Risk Register and Sample Risk List

Use this tool to assign risks to categories, track risk scoring, and monitor treatments

Developing a Faculty Speech and Expression Policy

Use this resource to identify and design clear guidelines to create a safe and consistent school experience

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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