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Crisis Management and Media Relations: Preparing for Media Involvement in a School Crisis

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Abstract

One of the most important elements in crisis management is working with the media. However, media relations is also one of the most overlooked areas of crisis management. This article discusses concrete methods for school administrators and spokespersons to build a positive relationship with the media, which will allow the media to cover crisis events at your school without getting in the way of your efforts to manage that crisis.

Introduction

The attention of the entire nation has been turned to the issue of violence and crisis in the public schools. While the circumstances and reactions to a crisis differ with each school, there is one constant: the presence of the media. Depending on the kind of crisis, a school can expect local, national, and even international media attention. Knowing that the press will be a part of any crisis event will help school administrators prepare for media inquiries while using the media to broadcast the most accurate information about the crisis and what is being done in response to it.

There are two attitudes commonly taken concerning the media. The first is a paranoid, “they-are-out-to-get-me” attitude. Though it may seem at times that members of the media are adversaries, this is not the most effective approach. The second option is to view the media as the best way to reach the community with the school’s message. In fact, the media may be the only way to reach those who are not closely tied to the school.

School Crisis Policies

Before addressing any media concerns, the school board should adopt a specific crisis policy to guide schools in creating campus security plans. The school board policy serves as an outline for crisis response, which will allow individual schools to fill in the details according to their respective needs. In this policy, the board lets the superintendent and individual schools know what is required in school crisis plans. Below is a sample district policy from Elk Island Public Schools (2004). Most school districts have similar policies.

“The Board’s primary concern is the safety of students and staff, and the preservation of property in the event of a crisis. The Board delegates authority, through the Crisis Response Manual, to specific employees who are expected to ensure the most effective and efficient use of resources for the maximum benefit and protection of students, staff, and facilities.”

The Crisis Response manual establishes guidelines and a standard set of protocols for dealing with a variety of crisis events to ensure that administration, staff, and communicators are familiar with roles and processes in the event of a crisis. The manual set the standard against which performance will be evaluated. The Crisis Response Manual will be reviewed annually by the Emergency Chief Commander/designate. All questions or inquiries from

Essays in Education, Vol. 15 [2005], Art. 17
the media shall be referred to the Director, Communication Services/designate without further response for comment, as per Policy JC – Media and Public Relations” (section EBC).

The School Spokesperson

As demonstrated in the board policy above, the first step in creating a media relations plan is to select a single media spokesperson for the school. This role can be filled by the superintendent or a principal. Other districts may have a public relations officer on staff who can serve in this role or assist in choosing a spokesperson. Whomever is chosen, it is important that there be one person recognized by the school staff and members of the media as the “go to” person for information regarding the school.

In order to be effective, the spokesperson should be trained in dealing with the media. This training includes public speaking, nonverbal communication, and basic journalism. More than likely, the spokesperson will not have experience in all of these areas unless he/she was hired specifically for the job based upon these qualifications. If the spokesperson is lacking in these skills, there are training options.

The first option is formal classwork. If funding is available, the spokesperson can enroll in basic speech, communication, and journalism classes at a nearby college or university. No more than three classes would be required, and these could be taken one at a time or during a single summer.

If funding is an issue, in-house training is another option. Most secondary schools have speech teachers who can train the spokesperson in public speaking and nonverbal communication skills. Likewise, most secondary schools have journalism courses whose teachers could work with the spokesperson on basic rules of journalism as well as what reporters are looking for, how to build trust with reporters, and what is most likely to be considered newsworthy.

Whatever method of training is chosen, it is imperative that the spokesperson understand the importance of these skills. Being able to speak clearly and confidently in public is obviously important for this job, but public speaking in this arena also entails being able to write press releases and formal statements. By learning what the media is looking for, the spokesperson can prepare statements and press releases that contain pertinent information and how to package them for media consumption.

What may be less obvious is the need to understand nonverbal communication. If a spokesperson’s words do not match his/her expressions, posture, and gestures, the words will not be believed. Television will capture the dissonance live and on tape, and a good portion of a newspaper article may be devoted to demeanor, not to the statements made. The spokesperson must be aware of his/her body language and of the nonverbal messages that are being sent.

Pre-Crisis Relationship

The media will be interested in school events even when there is no crisis, but their presence will be greater during a crisis situation. How well a school works with the media during an emergency will depend largely on the relationship it has with them prior to the crisis. Although schools are not solely responsible for the state of that relationship, there are actions they can take to make it as positive as possible.

The main goal is to build trust with reporters. This can be done in a myriad of ways. Understanding and working with a reporter’s needs is one way to build trust. Striving to meet deadlines is another. If it is impossible to meet a deadline, the spokesperson can make a statement that someone is looking for the information requested and that it will be made public as soon as possible. It is important to remember that a reporter who does not return with a

story, or the promise of one very soon, will not be a reporter for long.

When working with the media, it is absolutely necessary to be honest and avoid evasion and deception. Once reporters decide that something is being hidden, they will dig until they uncover a story. If the answer to a question is not known, the spokesperson should admit it and promise to find the answer. If information is requested that cannot be released, the spokesperson can explain the reason behind the confidentiality (i.e., privacy rights, on-going investigation, etc.). When members of the media trust the school to deal honestly with them, that school is in a better position to get its message out to the public.

Another way to demonstrate honesty with the media is to report negative as well as positive stories and to have the spokesperson available for questions regarding both. Reporters should not have to hunt him/her down in the event of a negative story. This will only make it look like the school is hiding from public scrutiny. The school spokesperson needs to become the best and most reliable source of information for his/her school so that reporters come to him/her first. The spokesperson can pick one of several methods to address the situation whether it is sending out a press release, making a formal statement, or, if serious enough, calling a press conference. Whatever course of action is taken, it is best to address the issue head-on and to appear to be doing the same. *Both the action and the appearance of action are important, but never think that appearing to address a problem can take the place of action. Credibility depends on the two happening simultaneously.*

In addition to the spokesperson, all campus and district administrators need to know which reporters are covering their school and which newspaper, radio station, or television station the reporters work for. Administrators, along with the spokesperson, should set up meetings with individual reporters to learn what they need. This is also a good time to let reporters know what they can expect from the school. Making each party's respective roles and responsibilities clear will enable a more productive working relationship.

Once school officials have met the reporters assigned to education issues, they should hold a meeting with all of them. This meeting will lay the foundation for designing media guidelines to be used in a crisis. The process of creating media guidelines will involve both school officials and the reporters who cover the school. However, it should be stressed that although the school wants to make it possible for reporters to cover any crisis event that occurs, the safety of students and staff will come before media considerations.

Crisis media guidelines should contain sections on print and broadcast journalism since the two mediums have different requirements. They should state as specifically as possible what the school's responsibilities are to the media (e.g., setting up a press area, arranging interviews) and what boundaries the press will recognize during a crisis.

Once the guidelines have been finalized, copies should be distributed to all local media sources. If a new reporter is assigned to cover the school, the spokesperson can make certain the new reporter receives a copy of the guidelines. It might be helpful to give them to him/her personally so that the spokesperson can explain how the guidelines were developed and ask the reporter to abide by them should a crisis occur.

Media Relations During a Crisis

If a crisis does occur on a campus which has media guidelines in place, then the best that can be done is try to follow them as long as it is safe and reasonable to do so. School officials should not be afraid to remind the press that the guidelines state very plainly that the safety of the staff and students is paramount and that information will be given to them when the school has been secured and the media spokesperson has news to announce.

If a crisis happens prior to the implementation of media guidelines, here are some basic rules to follow:

Creation of a separate press area. This should be on school grounds or near enough to the school that reporters can cover the story yet far enough away from the crisis event that they do not interfere with the restoration of order.

Preparation of written statements for all clerical staff and others who might answer the phones. These staff members should be instructed to read the statement verbatim, not to adding to or deleting from it. They should not make any personal comments or speculate on events or their causes.

Press releases. All press releases should be numbered, dated, and time-stamped. Press releases should contain the name of the person issuing them, his/her position, his/her phone number, and a brief statement of facts. When possible, try to get an updated press release to media sources close to their deadlines so that they can report the most recent facts on their next broadcast or in their next edition.

Tracking information. All information that comes in and goes out should be recorded in a media log. Also a record should be kept of which reporter receives what information.

Off the record comments. Speaking “off the record” should be avoided. Some reporters will honor this, but it can be difficult to know which ones will, so it is safer assuming that everything said will be reported.

It is important to remember that this communication and that which will come after the crisis has passed are best the opportunities a school has to reach the public with the facts of the crisis and what has been done in response to it. It is also the best shot at curbing rumors.

Sample Statement for Clerical Staff

This morning Lakeside Middle School received a bomb threat by an unknown individual. The police conducted a thorough search of the school, and no bomb was found. The school was declared safe, and we resumed our normal schedule. We have no further information on the identity of the caller, but Principal Washington has offered a reward for information that will help find and convict the caller. Questions about the investigation should be addressed to the Hanover Police Department.

Media Relations After a Crisis

Once the crisis has passed, school officials will be expected to give a full account of what transpired. The easiest way to do this is in a press conference. A post-crisis press conference needs to be held in a room with enough space to accommodate a large number of journalists because the circumstances of the crisis may bring in national or even international coverage.

Before holding a press conference, school administrators and the media spokesperson should meet and try to anticipate questions reporters are likely to ask. This will allow them to prepare for tough questions and to think of answers in advance. This exercise will also help gauge the amount of information to be reported and how ready officials are to meet with the media.

Even though the spokesperson will lead the press conference, a district representative, school administrators, and any local agencies (such as law enforcement, medical services) that responded to the crisis should be present. The spokesperson may open the press conference by recounting the facts of the event, what the school did in response to the crisis, and what measures are on-going. After giving out all information available, reporters should be allowed to ask questions. If the spokesperson is unable to answer a question, that question can be handled by an administrator or by another knowledgeable individual (counselor, doctor, police officer). The following principles are important to remember when answering questions:

Avoid speculation. If the answer to a question is unknown, a promise needs to be made to find the answer after the press conference and get it out at a later time unless it is an issue that should not be

addressed because of confidentiality or will hamper the on-going investigation.

Do not give out too much information. It is imperative to know before the press conference what can and cannot be reported. When confronted with a question that cannot be answered, the spokesperson should explain to reporters that he/she is not at liberty to discuss that and tell them why. Answering “no comment” should be avoided as this may make reporters suspicious, and such an answer will satisfy no one.

Do not lie – ever. This will destroy the spokesperson’s credibility and potentially that of the school. It is impossible to keep the truth from being revealed, so it is best to be honest from the beginning.

Do not repeat a reporter’s question before you answer it. Through the magic of editing, the speaker may find himself agreeing with a statement that he actually took issue with in his answer.

Be wary of questions that make assumptions such as “Isn’t it true that...?” Also watch out for hypothetical, “what if...” questions.

Answer only one question at a time. This may be difficult when reporters are shouting questions simultaneously. Pausing for a moment before answering is a good way to get reporters’ attention. If the reporters are known, the spokesperson can call on them by name, but he/she needs to be careful not to leave anyone out or appear to be favoring any one reporter.

If a reporter cuts the speaker off before he/she is finished answering a question, he/she can respond that that question will be answered but only after giving the complete answer to the previous question.

Keeping answers short and to the point may help prevent reporters’ interruptions; however, the spokesperson, not the journalists, decides when the answer is complete.

Be mindful of body language. Ninety-three percent of a message is transmitted through nonverbal communication. Posture, gestures, and expressions reveal more of one’s message and attitude than words do.

Avoid being frustrated or angered by reporters’ questions. Some of the questions may sound combative, particularly if the school does not have a positive relationship with the media. Before getting upset, it is important to remember that reporters have a job to do, and that job is to gather as much information as possible before a set deadline. The school’s message will come out more clearly, and school officials will represent the school better if they can remain calm during even the toughest questioning.

Finally, an announcement should be made at the press conference that anyone seeking interviews with staff or students must make their requests through the spokesperson, who will then arrange those interviews. Before students are interviewed, a signed parental consent form needs to be on file. These permission slips should be specific to the situation and not blanket permission for any event throughout the school year. Of course, the school can only control interviews that take place on campus. Staff and students are free to speak to the media at any time otherwise. This is one reason why it is critical that students and staff receive as much factual information as possible.

As soon as it is feasible, the spokesperson should arrange a meeting with members of the press to evaluate the crisis guidelines. He/she needs to be open to criticism of the plan and try to avoid personal attacks. If a reporter found a school official uncooperative, rather than focusing on that individual, the reporter could be allowed to explain what kind of cooperation was needed. Although all complaints deserve a fair hearing, the spokesperson must stand firm if addressing the problems raised would not be in the best interest of the school. While a positive relationship with members of the media is important, the school does not answer to them. The best a school can do is be fair with them, but no more than that is required.

Also at this meeting, the spokesperson can spend some time talking about the problems school officials saw. Reporters should be told if they overstepped their bounds or if something in the guidelines proved to be a hindrance to resolving the crisis. The end of the meeting should be spent brainstorming ways to improve the media guidelines.

The journalists will need a couple of weeks to think about the problems raised at the meeting and to submit suggestions before the spokesperson will be able to create a rough draft of the revised guidelines. As with the original plans, the spokesperson should try to get approval from as many members of the media as possible before implementing the new plans.

Parent Permission for Student Media Interview

I, (parent's name), give my permission for my child, (child's full name), to be interviewed by (name of station, newspaper, and/or reporter) on (date) at (time) at (location). I understand that the interview will only include question about (topic of interview).

Parent's Signature

Date

Conclusion

Since the media will be a part of any crisis event that could occur at a school, it is unwise not to prepare for their involvement. The most important thing that a school can do is build a positive relationship with reporters before a crisis and establish its spokesperson as the best source of information about the school. Earning and maintaining the trust of the media before an emergency is vital to communicating with the media during a crisis. It should never be forgotten that the media are the fastest and easiest way to get a message to the public. Cultivating a good relationship with the media is good for the school, the school district, and the community. It is well worth the effort.

Sample Media Guidelines

Realizing that cooperation is necessary in reporting the facts of a crisis event, Lakeside Middle School and members of local broadcast and print media have created the following set of guidelines, which will be used during a crisis at the school. By adhering to this plan, it is the goal of everyone involved that, simultaneously, school officials will be able to restore order to the campus, and journalists will be able to gather the information they need to report the story.

The School's Responsibilities:

The safety of students and staff is the school's primary concern, but it will not use this as a pretext to block access or to deny information to reporters when there are no legitimate safety or privacy concerns.

Provide all members of the press with the name of the school spokesperson and how he/she can be contacted (phone, fax, beeper numbers).

Designate a separate press area on/near campus so the media are close enough to the crisis to cover the story yet not so close that they might interfere with efforts to end or recover from the emergency. When possible, this area will be equipped with phone lines, electrical outlets, access to food (cafeteria, vending machines), and restrooms.

Show no partiality for one medium over another.

Provide updates as new information is learned. All press releases will be numbered, dated, and time-stamped.

When possible, provide updates close to deadlines.

Arrange interviews on campus with students (with parental permission) and staff.

The Media's Responsibilities:

Recognize that the school's primary concern is the safety of its students and staff. Cooperation with the media comes after that.

Recognize the spokesperson as the primary contact for information and on-campus interviews with staff and students.

Stay out of areas cordoned off by the school or law enforcement personnel.

Work with the spokesperson on corrections.

Special Considerations:

Radio and television coverage requires shorter, more concise statements.

Print reporters will need longer and a greater number of statements.

Television interviews will need more space to accommodate equipment.

Radio and television offer immediate reporting by interrupting regular programming.

Radio and television require more frequent updates.

Sample Press Release

Number: 1

Date: 3/4/05

Time: 11:30 am

Issued by: Theresa Wells

Position: School Spokesperson

School: Lakeside Middle School

District: Hanover Independent School District

At 9:20 this morning (3/4/05), Principal Theodore Washington received a phone call by an unnamed individual who stated that there was a bomb hidden in the school. The caller did not specify where the bomb was but did say that it was located within the main building. The caller then hung up without giving Principal Washington any additional information.

Principal Washington instructed Assistant Principal Chris Manetti to sound the alarm for a bomb threat while Principal Washington called 911. The school was immediately evacuated to the far end of the athletic field.

At approximately 9:30 AM the bomb squad (including a canine unit) from the Hanover Police Department began to search the building while Detective Sue Reynolds took a statement from Principal Washington.

At approximately 10:45, the school building was declared safe, and all students and staff began to return to class. Once everyone was back in the building, Principal Washington announced to the school that there would be a \$250

reward for anyone with information that would lead to the arrest and conviction of the caller. **Sidebar Information to Run with the Article**

What Every Administrator Must Do Today

Conduct thorough and complete assessments of school building and grounds, school climate, student population, current problems, and existing programs.

Design a set of crisis plans that address any potential crisis that could affect the school.

Create a crisis team which should include a Crisis Team Coordinator, school principal, media spokesperson, school nurse, school counselor, a school secretary, head custodian, and at least one teacher. Additional members may include parents, local health officials, clergy, and/or a social worker.

Provide staff training for members of the crisis team and for the entire school staff in the specifics of the crisis plans and outline what roles each person will play in an emergency.

Provide training for students so that they will be prepared for a crisis.

Have practice drills for different crisis situations which will not only help prepare staff and students for a crisis but will also reveal unworkable or unfeasible parts of the crisis plans.

What Should Be In Any Crisis Plan

List of emergency phone numbers.

List of crisis team members, substitutes for any unavailable members, and how they can be reached.

Specific emergency plans for specific crisis situations.

Roles and responsibilities of school staff.

Ways to Protect Staff and Students from Media Intrusions

Designate a media area and restrict reporters to that area.

Require parent permission for any student interviews on campus.

If safe and feasible, station parent volunteers at school entrances to direct reporters to the media area and to keep reporters from roaming the halls looking for an "exclusive."

If necessary, ask for police intervention. The media cannot be prohibited from reporting the story, but the courts have ruled that media presence can be restricted if it interferes with classes or other educational activities.

In the last few years, the attention of the media has been focused on the school shootings in Mississippi, Oregon, Arkansas, Kentucky, and, most especially, Colorado. Below is a list of quotes that demonstrate how these crises have changed how the school community approaches planning for crisis events.

"We've transitioned from single-victim shootings to multiple shootings – indiscriminate shootings of large numbers of people who had little or nothing to do with the events that led to the problem. There's more firepower, more victims, and a greater sense of callousness." Ronald Stephens, National School Safety Center (Helm, 1999, 19).

“Because it’s happened too often across the nation, you at least have to think, what would I do in that case? I think you have to have plan.” Michele Hummel, Superintendent, Madeira, Kentucky (Griggs, 1998).

“We’re intensifying the security effort. It will be 24 hours a day in conjunction with the Littleton Police and the sheriff’s office. And we’re working with other districts to reexamine our own security.” Scott Murphy, Littleton Public Schools Associate Superintendent of Business Services (Lloyd, 1999).

“Students and teachers were wondering, ‘Is it going to happen today?’ Children were honestly frightened. They were writing about bomb topics in their journals.” Tim Carroll, District Spokesman, Allen, Texas (Drummond & Portner, 1999).

“There are no longer any idle threats.” Gary Marx, Spokesman, American Association of School Administrators (Portner, 1999).

“...seeing someone else has done something, even something horrific like shooting people at school, may give kids the idea, and make them feel this is their escape.” Dr. Sabine Hack, psychiatrist, New York University Child Study Center (Lewin, 1998).

“Normally you think, ‘Do they have bus fare or pencil?’ You don’t think about telling your child about how best to get out of the cafeteria safely.” Saundra Williams, Parent of a high school student in Washington, D.C. (Drummond & Portner, 1999).

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