From Terrorism to Tornadoes:
The Roles of P.R. and Media in Crisis Communication

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Abstract

"Tried and true" communication rarely works during today's crises, as seen in the aftermath of 9 / 11, Hurricane Katrina, and recent school shootings. This paper analyzes how key opinion leaders, PR practitioners, and educators are attempting to reach many internal and external audiences, including media and the community.   Using K-12 schools as a focal point of case studies, the authors use a modified standard model for public relations and communications assessment -- the RACE (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation) framework – to expand theory development. This is "research that supports and advances the practice" through analyses of over 100 case studies and we present findings and recommendations in an accessible language directed at those in K-12 audiences. Our research design includes: An institutional analysis of public relations, K-12 schools and communities; qualitative and quantitative analyses of news stories and press materials produced by media, school districts, and government agencies; website analyses of media, school districts, and government agencies; and, an extensive survey (with follow-up interviews) of key opinion leaders in education and communication. Results indicate that although crisis communication plans are increasingly embedded in school environments, leaders do not usually follow the oft-repeated edict to tell it all, tell it fast, and tell the truth. Well-designed plans are often buried under other notebooks and new faculty are not trained about basic procedures. Findings demonstrate that groups which view public relations strategies as essential communication more often overcome crises and quickly restore credibility and reputation.

What counts as a crisis in today's schools? And how are you going to talk about it?

"Tried and true" communication rarely works today's crises, as seen in the aftermath of 9 / 11, Hurricane Katrina, and recent school shootings. This research-based project explores how schools can best deal with today's crises, with practical tips on how to deal with the growing fear that campuses are no longer safe havens. Examples of on-campus "crises cases" include:
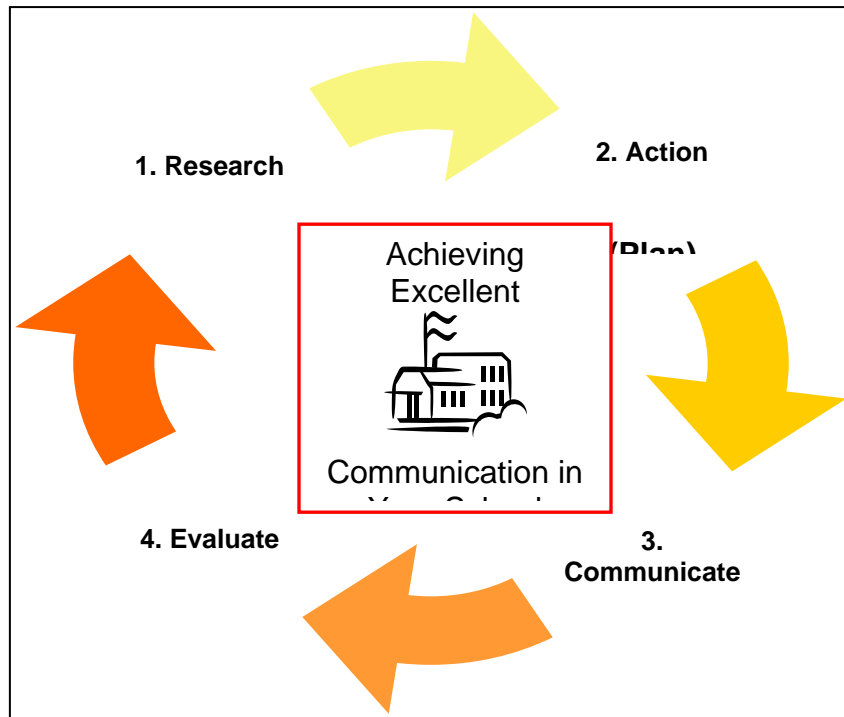
- Human crises: violence and shadows of terrorism (such as shootings, death threats, and gangs);

- Natural crises: tornadoes and hurricanes (plus arson and other facility damages); and,

- Abstract crises: structural changes in families, politics, and security (including confidential and legal issues such as crime, punishment, and equity)

Though grounded in theory, this project focuses on the real-world practice of crisis communications. It is not a scholarly dissection of case studies and academic theories; rather, it

goes from theory to practice, beyond the usual analyses about school teams and crisis-preparedness. It offers tips and templates for how to communicate before, during, and after a crisis, with evaluation samples that turn "lessons learned" into best practices. **By following this project's approach, a school leader could divvy out responsibilities and involve a team of people in creating an entire communication plan tailored for multiple audiences.** The case studies and recommendations answer the current questions as identified by surveys of key opinion leaders. Through analyses of existing products, campaigns, and plans, we demystify the mystery of how schools can act and react in emergencies.

Knowledge Base

We are interested not only in the content and effects of crises upon education, but also in the power relationship between the community, media and schools. Our basic assumption – that communication theories must regularly be tested and adjusted to suit specific environments – seems especially relevant as colleges and K-12 districts deal with new security mandates. We build upon existing literature by recommending a crisis inventory and an "open and honest" policy – in school communication with its audiences; as sampled in the reference section, we include an annotated bibliography for foundational research and resources. We also modify a standard model for public relations and communications assessment: the RACE (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation) model, depicted below, with a continuous monitoring step.

The illustration at left depicts the communication planning process through essential steps – **Research** of existing policies, **Action** of creating a new plan, **Communicating** the plan; and **Evaluating** the process. Thus, not only does this book lead school leaders toward an embedded crisis communication plan, but they are also left with a continuous evaluation piece that updates their plan.

One of the basics of effective crisis communication is an evaluation of how information flows between schools and target audiences. Media covering schools, for instance, usually exhibit a top-down hierarchy of information flows. Simply, media receives information, then "frames" it for readers/viewers so that it flows down from the source. In contrast, public relations efforts are communications between specific publics and organizations, often with a give-and-take of information rather than a top-down flow of media. Finally, interpersonal communication between different publics may seem to be an equal flow of information;

however, even an in-service workshop displays hierarchies that depict how different leadership roles and opinions shift.

Our research design includes: An institutional analysis about public relations, K-12 schools, educational communities, and crisis communication; Qualitative and quantitative analyses of news stories and press materials produced by media, school districts, and government agencies; Website analyses of media, school districts, and government agencies; A survey of 30 superintendents that forms the basis of this prospectus; And a survey of key opinion leaders in the field of education, communications, and crises that builds upon the initial survey findings.

Findings

It's a slippery slope: What should a leader say to the press about a crisis?

On one hand, you need to get information out as quickly as possible when rumors are afloat and reporters are knocking down your door. On the other, you run the risk of being misquoted or set up as a cause of the crisis, with increased media coverage that focuses on your school's shortcomings.

It's true: Journalism is greatly changed from old-school traditions and definitions of what's newsworthy and objective. You're racing to disclose news that's honest, reduces tension, and also restores public faith. The press is racing for readers and headlines. Bad news travels fast, and the press loves bad news. Today's shrinking newsrooms and budgets have ushered in a <u>new</u> model of information, one that forces you to question whether staying silent is ever the best way to go. But before we talk about <u>what</u> you should say to the press, let's look at how today's media operates.

HOW MEDIA WORKS, so you can make sure your voice is heard

Unless <u>you</u> use the press to push out your information, others will grab your space. In fact, any silence may be taken as an admission of guilt by the bellowing voices that take up your air time and press ink. Perhaps the most important media tip, besides the usual advice about body language and word choice (see pages ----), is to realize exactly how a flow of information works today in our media.

Teacher

Top-down information flow in a traditional classroom
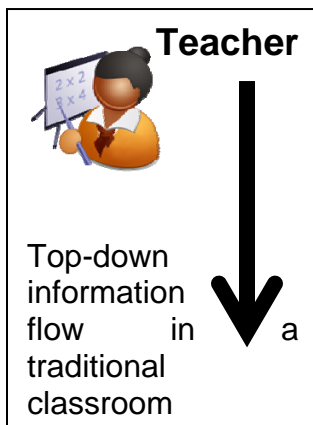
First, think about a classroom: Information flows from a teacher to the students in a top-down model with occasional modifications. A history teacher might lecture about the Civil War, or a mathematics instructor demonstrates board problems while students take notes. Although students may ask questions or add opinions, rarely does the information change.   The Civil War lesson content remains the same, and the multiplication tables don't change when students propose another version of truth. It's a top-down flow of information that is uncontested and unchanged.

Media used to work much this way. A reporter would interview a source, write up the story in a way that readers and viewers would receive, and public opinion would form truth. However, times have greatly changed, especially media's reliance on "elite" sources for information and "framing" stories that resonate with readers in terms of accepted definitions of culture, news value, and other strategies. Not only do your audiences actively search for information – via the Internet and
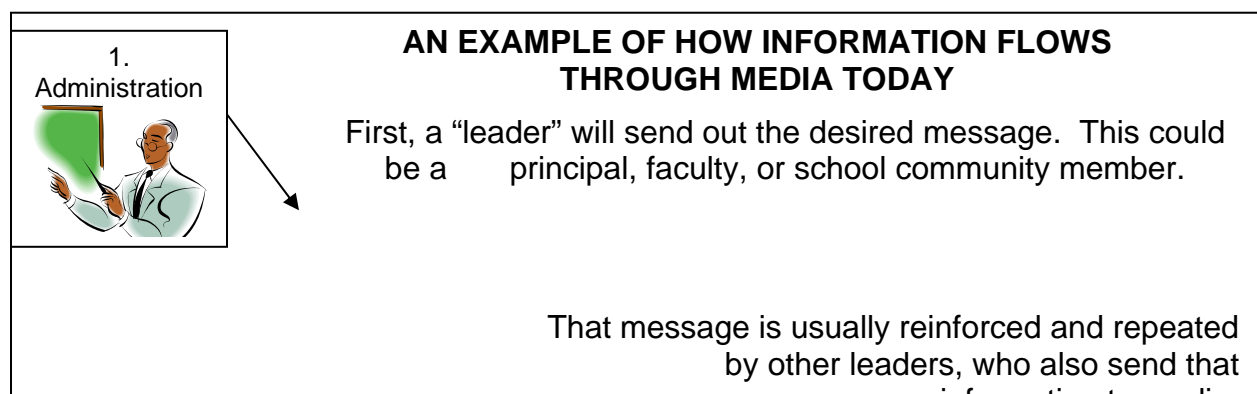
cell phone texts and photos – they also expect you to maintain transparent, continual communication that demonstrates strong leadership and credibility.
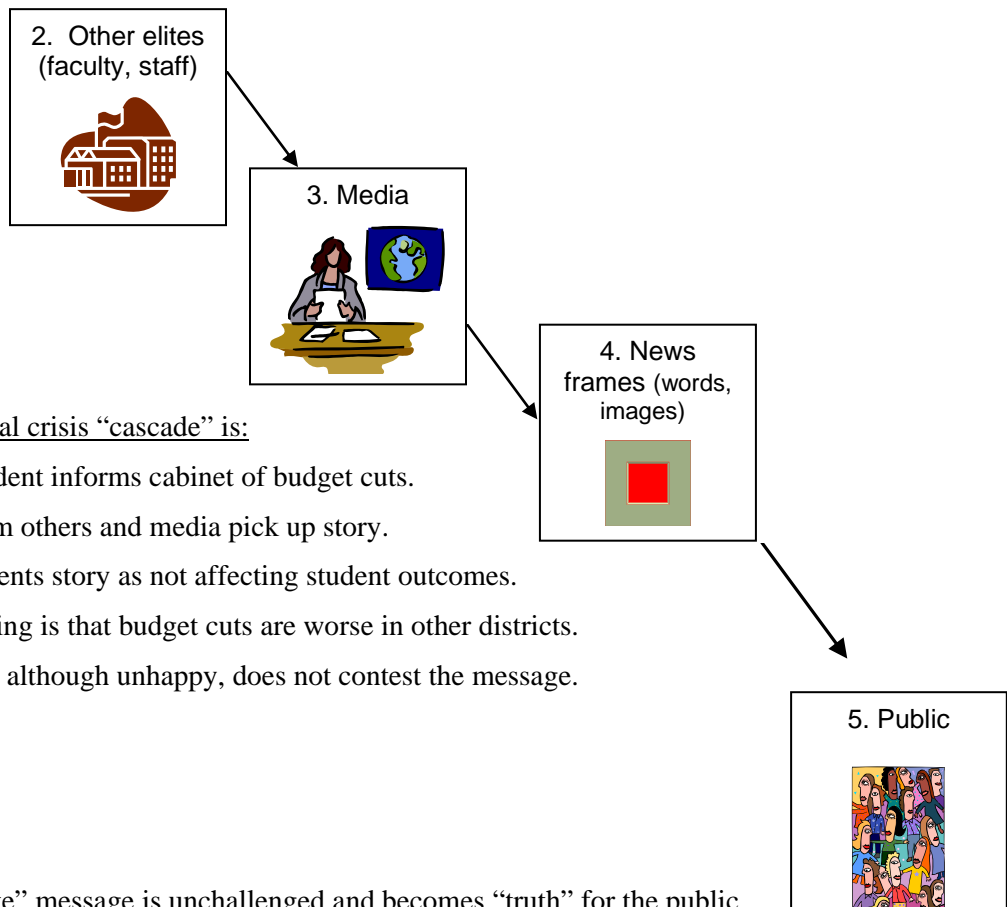

ONLINE NEWS @ SCHOOLS

In this era of FaceBook, blogs, Twitter, and other social media, anybody can be a reporter and create information that may be believed. People will quickly turn elsewhere if they can't get news from you, so make sure you're addressing specific audience needs and quash rumors via the Web. Always monitor your website, during times of crises and calm, for easy access to positive information about your school.   _Tip:_ *Most visitors in search of information rely on first impressions, especially during a crisis when they're frantic for news. You'll cut down on phone calls if a designated webmaster adds continual news and timeframes for future updates on your school's home page. This strategy also lessens suspicions that you're tongue-tied or stonewalling. You might even consider building a "dark" website to activate only in the case of emergencies.*

Whether you're dealing with online or traditional media, today's information isn't flowing from the top down like it used to. Instead, it flows like a waterfall, flowing down like a cascade rather than shooting from the top down to various audiences (Entman, 2003), demonstrated here:

1.
Administration

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW INFORMATION FLOWS THROUGH MEDIA TODAY

First, a "leader" will send out the desired message. This could be a   principal, faculty, or school community member.

That message is usually reinforced and repeated by other leaders, who also send that

2. Other elites (faculty, staff)

3. Media

4. News frames (words, images)

5. Public

EXAMPLE

One school financial crisis "cascade" is:

1. Superintendent informs cabinet of budget cuts.
2. They inform others and media pick up story.
3. Media presents story as not affecting student outcomes.
4. News framing is that budget cuts are worse in other districts.
5. The public, although unhappy, does not contest the message.

Result: The "elite" message is unchallenged and becomes "truth" for the public.

As seen above, media receives news from "elite" sources and then "frames" it; in this case, media chose to emphasize the lesser impact of budget cuts on students. And, because the public received a message and did not respond, the news stopped there, until the next budget crisis.

BUT…suppose the cuts WERE serious enough to affect students. In 2008, a number of districts, including the 1600-student Monson Public School District in Massachusetts, announced that faculty positions would be cut, as would "extra" services such as sports and library programs. The district faced angry parents demanding funding restoration, even though cuts were deemed unavoidable. Eventually, the bad news was accepted and the news cycle ended.

REAL LIFE: New York City Department of Education's Budget Cuts, 2008

However, when New York City Mayor Bloomberg released plans in February 2008 to cut the Department of Education's budget by over $450 million, few could have expected the massive protests over the elimination of literacy, tutoring, and afterschool programs, and reduction of

assistant principal positions. In comparison to the Monson District's model of information about budget cuts, the cascade of news about NYC schools looked like this:

      1.   MESSAGE FROM THE ADMINISTRATIVE ELITE (Mayor)

Blaming a worsening economy, Bloomberg proposed a city-wide cut to principals that was announced via email stating that their school would immediately lose 1.75% of their budgets. Stating that the cuts would have "no impact whatsoever," the Mayor said that he knew "of no organization where you couldn't squeeze out 1.7% or even a lot more."

      2. SENT TO PRINCIPALS, WHO SENT OUT A DIFFERENT MESSAGE

Principals were told via email to consult their school's computerized budget system the next day to learn how much money they would lose. Rather than enforcing the Mayor's planned financial strategies, the principals turned to their media, faculties, staff, families, and communities to contest the message and demand the restoration of funds for important services.

      3. TO MEDIA, WHO DID NOT EMPHASIZE THE MAYOR'S MESSAGE

Media coverage – from the *New York Times* to foreign newspapers – focused on the growing protest movements springing up around the city, and liberally quoted the growing chain of email complaints from school principals.

      4. AND FRAMED STORIES OPPOSING THE ELITE SOURCE

News stories were framed in an anti-Bloomberg context, describing the budget cuts as a "draconian" and "irresponsible" mid-year action. So, instead of using words and images to support Bloomberg's message, media frames supported the principals' reaction.

5.   FOR THE PUBLIC, WHO CONTESTED THE INFORMATION
(and resent a different news frame, effectively eliminating the Mayor's communication).

After receiving the news, the public reacted with fury, eventually launching protests (including a tech-savvy Facebook group and Kids Protest website) that received national and foreign press coverage.   Thus, an elite (Bloomberg) set off a cascade of information without solidifying the message with the second tier of other leaders (school principals). And, because those principals were doubly insulted by receiving the news via email, and publicly shamed for not "squeezing out" money, they passed a different message to media and the public that did not reinforce Bloomberg's news.

In this case, the cascade of information did not trickle down with the elite message; rather, the news landed in the laps of an irate public who protested rather than accept the cuts. This set off a counter-cascade against Bloomberg, with multiple groups gathering global publicity against the New York City Department of Education. Bloomberg was not widely quoted again as an elite source, with the public and school staff voices drowning out the Mayor's message.

By the end of June, Bloomberg withdrew his proposal and school funding was restored.

His critical errors: Perceived silence, plus the strength of opposing viewpoints

that received media attention and succeeded in switching the message.

This model of "cascading" news has been tested on many issues, ranging from political and global issues (President Bush and the Iraq War) to school district news (fired principal drums up community support to win reinstatement) and illustrates two concepts.

First, the most successful communication is approved through each level of the cascade; if Mayor Bloomberg, for example, had approached the principals and won a consensus about the need for budget cuts, rather than impersonally emailing them and then publicly scoffing at their reaction, the message might have been better received. Even though they would not have liked the news, they might have gone along with the message and strategy.

Second, "No comment" is rarely the best route to take. Whenever media approaches, think before NOT issuing any reaction to a request. As shown in the cascading model, if information is not contested --- if you choose to remain completely silent – the media has no choice but to frame it according to the initial source and can possibly label you as uncooperative. And, in the midst of a crisis, you want to maintain a spirit of cooperation with all audiences to maintain their trust and support.

So, that's how media works. Now let's turn to exactly what the media wants to know when a crisis hits. You'll then be able to anticipate how to answer their questions in a way that manages the crisis and controls any bad news. And, since there is always print and air time to fill, it might as well be filled by your message.

WHAT EVERY JOURNALIST WANT TO KNOW and <u>will</u> ask you about a crisis

Journalists nearly always ask the following questions. They follow the five Ws and an H: What, When, Where, Why, Who, and How. In the case of a crisis, here is what you'll be asked:

WHAT?	What exactly happened? Were there any deaths, damage, or injuries?
WHEN?	When did it happen? Is it still going on? If so, when will it be over?
WHERE?	Where did it happen? Could the danger or damages move elsewhere?
WHY?	Why did it happen? Has it happened before?

WHO?	Who or what was involved? Who or what is responsible?
HOW?	How was this not predicted? How will you prevent this from happening in the future?

How you answer these questions sets the tone for your credibility and leadership during this and future media dealings.

REAL LIFE: Student suicide at Mira Loma High School (Sacramento, CA)

Here is an example of how an <u>early</u> and <u>honest</u> flow of information from your school can control a situation; in this case, a tragic suicide attempt by a high school during school hours. Within 24 hours, Mira Loma High School and the San Juan Unified School District provided information that was clear, timely, compassionate, and which suited multiple audiences.
The following timeline of school communications shows a common thread: Clear, straightforward language that focused on the incident, how it affected people, and its remedy. By answering the five Ws and an H, the San Juan Unified School District also moved the issue forward without waiting to be asked for answers.
These are the statements posted on the district and school websites.

**September 15, 2008) (Reprinted with permission of
San Juan Unified School District)**

<u>Posted on the school website within hours of crisis:</u>
Good Morning: This is Rich Nichols, Vice Principal, Mira Loma High School.
I want to inform you about an incident that happened on campus today. At approximately 10:30 this morning there was an apparent suicide attempt by a student in a bathroom on campus. A handgun was involved and has been recovered by the Sheriff's Department and we are confident it was an isolated incident and all other students are safe. The student's family has been notified. Classes will remain in session for the remainder of the day. Crisis counselors are on site and will be available to students, staff, and parents. Please check the district web site at www.sanjuan.edu for further information and updates.

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**<u>SAME-DAY UPDATE on district website:</u> Incident at Mira Loma High School
Classes have resumed as normal.
Counseling staff is on hand for all students, staff, parents.**
Update: 2:59 p.m.
No after school activities have been cancelled. Today's scheduled water polo game will continue as scheduled. Counselors remain available on campus today and will also be available tomorrow for students, staff, and parents as needed. Today's event was a tragic incident. The Mira Loma High School and San Juan Unified communities extend their sympathies to the family of the young man.

UPDATE ON THE TRAGIC INCIDENT OF SEPTEMBER 15

A student was critically injured by a self inflected wound on campus yesterday morning, September 15th. The student is currently on life support at San Juan Mercy Hospital. On Monday and Tuesday Counselors were available to assist students in addressing their needs as a result of this tragic incident. We will continue to offer assistance to students as needed. As of the end of the school day today September 16, we have received no news as to any changes in the student's medical status. We extend our thoughts and prayers to the family as they face this very difficult situation. Each day we will update the website with any new information available to us.
_____
The final note was announcing a public celebration of life for the student, serving as a traffic advisory and note to parents about sensitivity for the situation.

Now let's take a look at what was said and how the media received this information and framed this real-life crisis. This communication flow illustrates how the major newspaper in the area, the *Sacramento Bee*, continued the district's messages about the isolated incident being no threat to school safety.

- FIRST DISTRICT/SCHOOL STATEMENT: Readers learn that the crisis was isolated and all other students are safe; they also know to check the district's website for messages.

- SAME-DAY *BEE* COVERAGE: "APPARENT SUICIDE ATTEMPT AT MIRA LOMA HIGH."

  District quote: The boy had been in class this morning and excused himself to go to the restroom, San Juan Unified School District spokesman Trent Allen said.

- SAME-DAY DISTRICT UPDATE: The district repeats its emphasis on "safety" by stating that no   classes or activities are cancelled; however, counseling is available.

- NEXT-DAY DISTRICT UPDATE: The message focus moves from school safety to recovery and   healing. By promising daily updates, the district also keeps down rumors.

- NEXT-DAY *BEE* COVERAGE: "Mira Loma student apparently shoots self on campus."

  District and law enforcement quotes: "We view this as an isolated incident. There was no danger to others," Allen said. "We were never in a lockdown situation."

  "There is no criminal investigation. There doesn't seem to be any reason for one," said Sgt. Tim Curran, the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department spokesman. "We don't believe anybody was targeted. No students were targeted or threatened."

This is an example of clear, quick, and transparent crisis communication: By responding quickly and compassionately, the district and school district's message helped to "contain" the crisis and alleviate community fears about school violence spreading.

However, it is never easy. "This is an example of an office's worst fears," commented Allen while still monitoring the news and public reaction. "We had to respond quickly with the facts, but also be respectful of the family."

> ***Choosing a Spokesperson:***
> *Anybody in the hot seat must commit to be the first and best source to keep bad information from pouring into a reporting vacuum.*
> *(Heath, 2006)*

How to deal with media

WHO'S TALKING? While speaking for the district, Allen also fulfilled a crucial role in any crisis communication plan: that of spokesperson. As mentioned in earlier, each school should designate a primary spokesperson to rely on during a crisis, somebody who can speak before media and the public with confidence and credibility. The highest-level administrator should speak first to the media and public after a crisis, with subsequent reports coming from others.

WHERE ARE YOU TALKING? A nervous community doesn't want to hear about a crisis from a suited spokesperson sitting behind a formal desk. Go close to the crisis scene, with rolled-up shirtsleeves, and you'll prove to your viewers and readers that you're not detached from the crisis.

WHAT ARE YOU SAYING? Before you get into any specifics, know the best responses to media requests:

1. We know what happened and here is all the information we have. OR

2. We don't know everything at this time but here's everything we have right now. We'll let you know as soon as we learn anything more. OR

3. We don't know yet but we'll find out and tell you as soon as we learn anything.

(Fearn-Banks, 2007)

Those three responses will buy you time to get a handle on the crisis; and, while the journalists won't be thrilled with having to wait, you'll hand them pre-assembled press kits about your school. (See pages ---) As for content, your information to media must echo your key messages to other audiences, so make sure they are unified and focused.

WHY ARE YOU TALKING? Communication about a crisis works to disclose information and also reduce rumors and negativity. Before you call a press conference or talk to media, make sure that your message is helpful and needed.

- Are you updating the public with new information or resources?

- Are you presenting a new perspective that replaces TV shots and photos of the crisis scene?

- Are you sympathetic toward victims and supportive of any heroes?

- Finally, are you assuring the public that you are continuing your efforts to remedy the crisis?

HOW ARE YOU SAYING IT? You probably won't have time for anything but email or phone calls during a crisis. However, newsrooms are accustomed to a certain format, so use these guidelines when you send out any media alerts.

FOR INTERNET-READY NEWS RELEASES: Follow this order (and never send an attachment)

1. Write a succinct subject line that quickly sums up the situation.

2. Follow with your contact information (name, email/fax, plus 24/7 phone number during crisis).

3. Write no more than five paragraphs, with no more than three short sentences in each, and no more than 200 words in the entire release.

4. Refer readers to your website for more information (and make sure it's there).

<u>FOR FAXED OR MAILED RELEASES:</u> Follow this order and use letter head or white paper, double-space with 1.5" margins, with 12' Times New Roman font; follow this order beginning at the left-hand top corner:

1. CONTACT: (Name of media contact, with email / fax plus 24/7 phone number)

2. FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (Leave space for an editor to pencil in notes)

3. A BOLDFACE HEADLINE (Your key message at a glance)

4. A dateline (e.g. Las Vegas, NV: April 15, 2009)

5. The story, with a clear summary lead paragraph that is no more than five lines of text.

<u>FOR MEDIA ALERTS:</u> To signal a news conference, this one-pager follows the five Ws:

1. WHO: Name of your school/district, with a few background sentences

2. WHAT: Exact reason for the information session about the crisis

3. WHY   Reason for news media to cover this information

4. WHEN: Time of the event

5. WHERE: Location of the event

6. CONTACT: All information above; note that the phone number is the event-day cell

Reminder: Proofread all releases and double-check your information.

Media will recognize the above formats as coming from a source that respects their traditions and needs. And, if you present a clear, easy-to-understand message that's free of jargon and emotion, the newsroom will continue to pass along your faxes and emails as

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REAL LIFE: FORMING PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL MEDIA

Richard Simpson, Conejo Valley Unified School District

"The unique and perhaps most challenging case in CVUSD was the famous 'Hitler speech' given by a fifth grader at Westlake Elementary as part of the Public Speaking Celebration. Fall-out from that was on all the TV stations and in the media throughout the world. It was a three-month control and healing process."

TIP: Follow Simpson's lead and work closely with local reporters toward a close working relationship. Then, when crises hit, there is a trusting protocol such as school sources returning calls in a timely manner and media requests with clear questions and deadlines.

Some educators, such as administrators at Louisiana State University, set up "code words" with media to identify official spokespeople in case of a crisis, such as a school closing. This helps protect a school against false information being publicized, and also assures the reporter about source credibility.

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newsworthy items.

<u>**CASE IN POINT: Murder in the 8th Grade (*Newsweek*'s cover story, July 28, 2008)**</u>

Students gather around a makeshift memorial at E.O. Green on the day they learn of Larry's death, Feb. 14, 2008. Reprint permission pending from *Newsweek*.

E. O. Green Junior High School, Oxnard, CA

On February 12, 2008, 8th grader Larry King, 15, was allegedly shot by a classmate, Brandon McInerney, 14, after Larry spread rumors about them being a couple. Initial media coverage focused on the crisis as a hate crime, given that Larry was openly gay and sometimes wore makeup, high heels, and jewelry. By the time he was taken off of life support and died on Valentine's Day, E.O. Green and the Oxnard community were entering one of the worst nightmares of crises, a tragic event that brought up the decades-old ghosts of the Matthew Shepard murder as well as the Columbine school shootings.

Published four months later, a *Newsweek* cover story reads as a superb feature, drawing in readers with attention to reactions and causes rather than the shooting itself. Messages from the school are nearly ignored in this and other media coverage, with major emphasis on reactions from the students and gay activist groups.

<u>Information flow</u>: The crisis received global media coverage, including *The Sun* (England); *Sunday Mail* (Australia); *Boston Globe*; *Los Angeles Times*; *Washington Post*; *New York Times*; and many other outlets. A review of media coverage at the start of the crisis (February 12, the day of the shooting) until a month after the July 28, 2008, publication of the Newsweek article shows gaping holes in communications from the school. For instance, several stories mentioned faculty seemingly confused about how to handle the issue of student sexuality, with one teacher giving Larry a prom dress, another enforcing a no-makeup rule, and others concerned about the boy being a classroom distraction.

Stories about the Larry King shooting mostly quoted fellow students, followed by community members, church spokespeople, and parents. While stating that school teachers were commanded not to speak to the media, some faculty members were quoted about receiving mixed messages from administration.

Media framing of school district as responsible/ not responsible:

- Superintendent Dannenberg: "School officials definitely were aware of what was going on, and they were dealing with it appropriately." Under long-established case law, the student was legally entitled to wear makeup, earrings, and high-heeled boots.

- Carolyn Laub, executive director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network: "The tragic death of Larry King is a wake-up call for our schools to better protect students from harassment at school."

- Deputy Public Defender William Quest: "Educators were so intent on nurturing King while he explored his sexuality that they overlooked the turmoil caused on campus. Teachers were 'repulsed' by administration's failure to take action."

Media framing of Larry King as the victim/perpetrator:

- "They teased him because he was different," Marissa Morena, 13. "But he wasn't afraid to show himself."

- "If Larry had flirted with the other boy, that can be very threatening to someone's ego and their sense of identity," said Jaana Juvonen, a psychology professor at the University of California.

- Headline in the *Advocate*, bimonthly gay newsmagazine: "Who's to Blame? We told Lawrence King he had the right to express his sexuality. Did we send him to his death?"

Columbine, Crisis Communication, and Today's Schools:

It's been over 10 years since two students in Littleton, CO, carried out a planned campus assault that left 15 dead and 28 injured. Whether your school has 100 or 10,000 students, prepare for a media onslaught in case of violence; in the case of Columbine, national media were already in the area awaiting a murder trial verdict and quickly ran to Littleton when the news broke.

The Larry King shooting underlies the ultimate challenge of crisis communication: What do you do when you can't say anything – for issues of legality or sensitivity – and are instantly blamed for the tragedy?

This case was a horrific tragedy involving many issues – sexuality, violence, and miscommunication, to name a few – and the media jumped to frame the issue as the school's indecision and fault, citing an email sent to all faculty just before the shooting which called for increased tolerance. And, because the administrators had to abide by legal rules of confidentiality, *Newsweek* noted Principal Joel Lovstedt denied requests for interviews, yet unnamed teachers were quoted about how school leaders refused to intervene. There is also a photograph of the vice principal who mentored Lawrence and is described as the public defender as, "a lesbian vice principal with a political agenda."

Time and *Newsweek* magazines are examples of the national media that Dr. Glenn Muschert, sociology professor at Ohio's Miami University, analyzed after the 1994 Columbine High School shootings.

His study finds that media coverage bred a culture of fear nationwide that defies logic.

Muschert said the fear created from Columbine fuels a misperception of how violence affects the country's youth.

(Purdue News Service photo/David Umberger, reprinted with permission)

Wrapping It Up

Proactive media relations build credibility before, during, and after a crisis. If you tell it all, tell it fast, and tell it truthfully, your message will be favored. Help the media with their job: Remember the five Ws and an H that creates a story. Choose your message and how you deliver it carefully: A news release posted to your website will inform the media and reassure the community better than a mailed one.

TO DO FOR YOUR SCHOOL'S CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN:

1) Review your current media strategy.

- Do you work through the district's Public Information office or does press regularly visit your school for stories?

- Hidden resources: Who on your faculty or staff already have relationships with media?

- What is the protocol for visiting media? If, for instance, all visitors go to the front desk upon entering schoolgrounds, do not change that policy during a crisis.

2) Compile lists of key media, unless your district's office already has one.

- Ask staff and faculty for recommendations about media they trust for information.

3) Prepare your identified media spokesperson(s) by arranging a one-hour meeting to go over:

- Guidelines for spokespeople;

- Briefing for interviews and news briefings;

- Types of news releases and for the news media during specific types of crises;
- Processes for contacting the spokesperson(s) in the event of a crisis.

Talking points: How would <u>you</u> talk to the press?

<u>(Harrold Independent School District, Texas,110 students)</u>

teachers to carry guns at school. A global media blitz ensued -- including Reuters (U.K.) – with multiple quotes from Superintendent David Tweatt, who linked gun-free zones with an increase in recent school shootings. Relevant snippets:

"When you make schools gun-free zones, it's like inviting people to come in and take advantage," he told FOXNews.com. "When the federal government started making schools gun-free zones, that's when all of these shootings started," he said to the press. "Why would you put it out there that a group of people can't defend themselves? That's like saying 'sic 'em' to a dog,"

Some states are moving toward allowing classroom firearms with a school's permission. If a reporter calls to ask if your school allows teachers to pack heat, what would you say?

Key words:
Gun-free school zones; Homeland security; 2nd Amendment; campus proximity to police and sheriff offices; student safety; gun-caused injuries.

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