

Effective Crisis Communications

To ensure a proactive crisis communication strategy will be implemented, these eight (8) steps should be taken:

1. **Contact the Superintendent or designee and assemble the Crisis Communications Team (CCT).**
 - The Crisis Communications Team should include the Public Information Officer, Legal, Public Safety, Administration and others with critical roles in crisis communications.
 - PIO should implement an action plan to gather the information and return the school back to normal operations as quickly as possible.
2. **CCT should collect and verify all information.**
 - Collect all pertinent information and verify it's truthfulness. If information cannot be verified, it must be clearly stated that the information has not been verified or it should not be used at all.
 - CCT should monitor all media channels (radio, television, internet, print, etc.).
3. **Assess the severity of the crisis.**
 - How will this affect the school and County?
 - What damage has been caused so far?
 - Can school continue to operate during the event?
 - Will this event affect others in the community or is it isolated to just the school system?
4. **Notify school counselor/school mental health crisis team manager** about the severity of the crisis and how the mental health needs of the students may be affected to assess mental health response needs.
5. **Identify key individuals.**
 - Who is affected by this event? Students, parents/guardians, faculty, staff, visitors, the community?
6. **Implement a proactive communication strategy.**
 - The strategy should portray that the main goal of the county school board is to strive to build a safe and secure environment that creates a positive educational environment.
7. **Develop/distribute communication materials.**
 - The PIO and CCT should work to design the correct message(s).
 - Refer to Resources for Parents, Caregivers and School Staff in the WV Guide: Addressing Mental Health in School Crisis Prevention and Response: A Resource Guide for West Virginia Schools
8. **Inform parents and the media.**
 - Inform parents/guardians and the media of the facts of the case and the County School Board / Superintendent's, Principal's or other school official's response to the crisis.
 - Answer questions from these groups and keep a positive attitude when addressing the public.
 - Refer to Resources for Parents, Caregivers and School Staff in the WV Guide: Addressing Mental Health in School Crisis Prevention and Response: A Resource Guide for West Virginia Schools.
9. **Participate in Post Incident Critique.**
 - Members of the CCT should participate with other emergency responders and school administrators to discuss specific action taken during the event.

Incident Commander’s Roles & Responsibilities: (e.g. Superintendent/ designee, Principal or Public Information Officer)

- Make sure local police and fire departments are aware of the incident by calling 911.
- Alert all school occupants of the emergency.
- Prepare students for Evacuation, Lockdown or Shelter-in-Place.
- Remember people with special needs.
- Ensure students reach the assembly area.
- Contact the Superintendent or PIO.
- Form a Unified Incident Command Structure with local public safety agencies and work together to stabilize and terminate the emergency.

PIO Roles & Responsibilities:

- The PIO acts as the voice for the school(s).
- Develop and lead the Crisis Communications Team.
- Delegate roles and responsibilities to the Crisis Communications Team.
- Update the Crisis Communication Plan on a yearly basis.

PIO’s Crisis Communication Checklist:

- Call 911 if needed.
- Contact the Principal and/or Incident Commander.
- Notify the Board of Education.
- Work with the school Crisis Response Team and Incident Commander.
- Collect all relevant facts.
- Establish contact with the media.
- Establish a Joint Information Center (JIC) if necessary.
- Develop a communication strategy.
- Write the press release or communication.
- Conduct a joint press conference and deliver the press release or communication.
- Answer all questions with confirmed facts. Do not assume or speculate.
- Continue to update the Board of Education Office.

Initial Call from the Media

- The Principal of the school will immediately contact the PIO and BOE.

Proactive Messages for PIO:

- Illustrate care and concern for the students, staff and the community.
- Show that the County BOE / School is committed to resolving the problem as quickly as possible.
- Notify any victims’ families as quickly as possible and do not share any information until they are notified.
- Work with public safety agencies to ensure the same, proper message is being sent out.

- Stay positive and reassure all concerned that every possible means is being taken to resolve the issue.

Working with the Media:

Remember that the media can act as a positive communications resource and they should be used as an ally before, during and after an event.

- Only discuss confirmed information. Never assume or speculate.
- Deliver a message that is honest, illustrates empathy, concern and a dedicated effort to handle the situation with the utmost professional manner.
- Utilize facts and figures to reinforce the message. Cite outside subject matter experts and reports.
- Never use the words “no comment.” It appears as if the School/ BOE is hiding something or admitting guilt. Instead, explain that, “the School/BOE is investigating the matter and we will share any confirmed information as soon as we receive it.”
- Schedule updates telling media where and when they may receive additional information.
- Direct the parents/guardians and community to take specific actions if necessary (e.g. pick up children at a certain location, school is closed, etc.).