

# Communications - Crisis Communications Procedures 216-A



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## 1. General Procedures

### 1.1 Introduction

These procedures are designed to provide the system with guidance in communicating to stakeholders, including parents/guardians, staff, students, and media, in emergency and crisis situations. In an emergency, the safety and well-being of students, staff, and volunteers are the first priorities of the schools and the system. Additionally, the provision of factual information is of critical importance. Communications with the media, staff, parents/guardians, students, and the general public, must be accurate, timely, effective and consistent.

These procedures provide direction for communication at the site of an incident as well as within the school and through the system in general. It outlines who should provide the necessary and appropriate information, to whom the information should be directed, and how it is disseminated.

### 1.2 Media

Fires, weather-related emergencies, violent episodes, significant injuries, or other emergency/crisis situations, as well as events that are controversial in nature are often a focus of media attention. However, fear of potentially negative media reports is no reason to refuse legitimate requests for information. It is important to remember that in the normal course of affairs, the media also provides coverage of “good news” items, and in doing so helps to build the reputation of an individual school, other schools in the system and the board.

### 1.3 Planning and Resources

Not all crisis situations can be anticipated. The board’s Emergency Response Plan provides step-by-step information on how to deal with a crisis situation once it has occurred, and schools are required to develop and regularly update their own school-specific action plans.

In addition to the board’s Emergency Response Plan and their school-specific Emergency Response Plan, principals should also be familiar with the following resources:

- [Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act](#) as it relates to the media (see Appendix D).
- [Privacy Protection and Information Access Policy \(315\)](#)
  - Privacy Protection and Information Access Handbook

- [Safe Operation of Schools and Board Sites Policy \(322\)](#), [Ontario Regulation 474/00 \(Access to Premises\)](#), [Trespass to Property Act](#), [Education Act](#) (Section 305)
- [Emergency Procedures Policy \(300\)](#)
- [Transportation Policy \(304\)](#) and Inclement Weather Procedures (see Emergency Response Plan)
- [Health and Safety Policy \(406\)](#)
- [Safe Schools Policy \(503\)](#)
- [Educational Field Trips and Off-Site Activities Policy \(508\)](#)
- [Health Support Services Policy \(509\)](#) and individual emergency plans for students (filed at the school)
- [Safe Arrival Policy \(510\)](#) and the school's safe arrival procedures
- [Safety in Science and Technological Education Policy \(604\)](#)
- Crisis Response Team Procedures (Booklet available from Program Services)
- [Police-School Board Protocol \(P09\)](#)

Principals should also ensure that their staff is aware of the board's policies and procedures, the school's action plan, and these procedures so that everyone understands their role in a crisis situation.

#### **1.4 Spokespersons**

To ensure that accurate information and a consistent message is provided to the media in a crisis, there should be only one spokesperson.

In the Upper Grand District School Board, the principal, vice-principal or designate is the school's spokesperson. The Manager - Communications and Public Relations normally acts as the spokesperson for the board unless someone else is designated to do so by the Director of Education. The Chair of the Board speaks on behalf of the trustees to provide the political perspective.

At times there may be more than one spokesperson designated depending on the type of inquiries, and the need for specific expertise to respond to questions or concerns (see section 3 System-Level Response to a School Incident).

## 1.5 Post-Crisis Review

Following an emergency there should be an evaluation of the crisis response including these crisis communications procedures. It will provide the school and the system with useful information and help to improve crisis communication planning. At the school level the principal will normally review the process, and at the system level the director or designate will conduct the review. Debriefing and evaluation may involve others in the school community as well as the system, depending on the severity of the incident. In any assessment of emergency communication response, the focus should be on the improvement of the crisis communications procedures.

In order to improve crisis communication, the following questions should be answered:

- Overall, did the crisis communications procedures work?
- What worked well? Why?
- What did not work? Why?
- Was the communication accurate and timely?
- Were stakeholders kept up-to-date on a regular basis?
- What specific communication problems arose? Were they resolved? How?
- Was the communication ongoing until the situation was resolved?

**Note: The director or Superintendent of Education will determine if the situation warrants a system-level response rather than a school-based response. In cases where a system-level response is indicated, the school will be directed to refer all media inquiries to the Manager - Communications and Public Relations or another designated spokesperson.**

## 2. School-Level Response Procedures

When an emergency or crisis situation takes place at a school, or there is potential for media coverage due to a “headline” event, the principal will take the necessary emergency response actions (see Appendix A – Procedures for School-Based Incidents). Depending on the seriousness of the situation, the principal may activate the school’s Crisis Management Team and Emergency Response Plan (see the school’s Emergency Procedures Handbook).

The principal will also notify the appropriate Superintendent of Education and the

Manager - Communications and Public Relations to provide the most up-to-date information (see Appendix E – School Crisis Situation Log). The superintendent will inform the director and senior staff as appropriate, and the Manager - Communications and Public Relations if this has not been done by the school.

The Director of Education's office will notify the Chair of the Board and relevant trustees. Other trustees will be informed as required.

If the school is unable to contact the superintendent directly, an executive superintendent, the director's office, other senior administrator's office or the communications office should be contacted directly. Voicemails and emails are not appropriate.

If a superintendent of education's office or the Manager - Communications and Public Relations learn about a situation at a school, or one that could affect a school or schools, they will contact the appropriate school or schools immediately.

Similarly, the Manager - Communications and Public Relations must be notified immediately in all potential emergency situations and where there could be controversy, media or public interest, or parental concerns. Notification to the Manager - Communications and Public Relations in these cases, even if only a possibility, will ensure that the board is not caught off guard and can be prepared to respond to the media and other inquiries if necessary. When in doubt, contact the Manager - Communications and Public Relations.

The Manager - Communications and Public Relations will notify the director, appropriate superintendent, and other departments as necessary.

## **2.1 Spokesperson and Release of Information**

Where a school-level response to a situation is sufficient, the principal will act as the school's spokesperson. If the principal is unavailable, the Manager - Communications and Public Relations or designate, on request, will speak on behalf of the school. Principals have the discretion to refer the media to the Manager - Communications and Public Relations at any time.

The Manager - Communications and Public Relations or designate speaks on behalf of the board. It is critical that the Manager - Communications and Public Relations be provided with accurate, current information about the situation, on an ongoing basis until it is resolved.

All questions related to a police investigation must be referred to the appropriate police service. The Manager - Communications and Public Relations will also

contact the police to obtain and share appropriate information and determine who will release information in these instances.

In the event of a student or staff accident, the principal will notify the parents/guardians or next of kin. **However, in the event of a death, the police have the responsibility for notification of the next of kin.**

In order to maintain compliance with the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and board procedures, personal information about students or staff involved must not be released without appropriate permission (family, police, etc.). Permission must also be obtained before providing individual or group photographs or details pertaining to a child's registration at the school (see Appendix D – Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy and the Media).

## 2.2 Internal Communication Response Techniques

The principal is responsible for internal school communication. They must ensure that students, teaching and support staff, school councils, and parents/guardians are provided with timely and accurate information until and often after a situation is resolved (see Appendix F – Communication Response Worksheet). Staff who may speak with parents/guardians, the public and students should be prepared and provided with information that can be released.

Many students carry cellphones and other electronic communication devices. With easy access to cellphones and social media, students and parents/guardians may contact each other or communicate with others inside and outside of the school during a crisis situation. Some may even contact the media directly. It is important for principals to be aware of how quickly information can be spread throughout the school community.

You cannot prevent the media from interviewing staff, students, or parents/guardians off school property. As a result, what, when and how you tell those involved in the situation is an important part of crisis communication management. All information must be factual, concise and within the limits of what is appropriate and acceptable to release (see Appendix F – Communication Response Worksheet).

In a situation that takes place over an extended period of time, you may need to update people on a regular basis (daily at a minimum) until the situation is resolved.

Once the situation is resolved, the principal will prepare, or will work with the Manager - Communications and Public Relations to prepare, a letter outlining the

situation and the school's response for distribution to students, staff, and parents/guardians following an incident. Copies of all letters should be forwarded to the Manager -Communications and Public Relations for review prior to distribution, if possible.

Below are suggested vehicles for getting the word out to the various in-school audiences, and keeping the rumors and speculation confined. Ask yourself: Who needs to know? What do they need to know? When do they need to be informed? What's the best way to provide this information?

### **2.2.1 Communicating with Staff**

Include all staff members – teachers, support staff, cafeteria workers – anyone who is doing a job inside your building. This would extend to volunteers and third party operators who are on-site during an emergency or crisis situation. In consultation with the board's Crisis Response Team, your school's Emergency Response Team, school office and custodial staff can help you manage the situation, including the communications. Putting the key points/messages down on paper for your staff can help them in supporting your communications lead role. You can use your staff as a resource too – many will have very useful ideas of how to communicate with students and parents/guardians.

Suggestions:

- Brief the school immediately and review roles and responsibilities
- Hold face-to-face meetings with groups of staff and others as soon as possible (i.e., teachers, support staff, volunteers, third party operators)
- Use your school's internal email system to provide details to those not available
- Prepare teachers and others who will be providing information to students on what to say – writing it down can help them and you
- Prepare written messages for those people who will be responding to telephone inquiries
- Provide support and assistance to staff, including calling human resources to access the Employee Assistance Program, as needed
- Thank staff repeatedly for their assistance and support

## **2.2.2 Communicating with Students**

Age-appropriate communication is the key with students. The information provided will vary for elementary (K-3, K-6 and K-8) and secondary schools. Teachers speaking with students should be briefed on the situation so they can respond to questions and concerns.

- Have teachers talk to students in the classroom
- Speak one-on-one or in small groups with directly affected students
- Reassure students, provide physical and emotional support
- PA announcements (senior elementary and secondary schools), when appropriate
- Consider if large assemblies and large group meetings are appropriate, specifically at the outset of a crisis
- Meet with student government leaders
- Get students involved in any post-crisis activities
- Provide information to students about safety precautions, and about talking to the media. Remind students that they are not obligated to speak to the media if contacted
- Request and collect input from students to help prevent future incidents
- Call the board's Crisis Response Team to support students as needed
- Provide services as required through the Crisis Response Team, Counselling Services and local agencies, if warranted.

## **2.2.3 Communicating with Parents/Guardians**

The principal will ensure that the school responds to telephone inquiries from parents/guardians and the public. A brief factual summary/statement should be prepared, as well as information on processes and constraints for staff who may be dealing with the phone calls directly. The superintendent and Manager - Communications and Public Relations can assist with these activities. Requests for additional information beyond what is being released should be referred to the Manager - Communications and Public Relations.

- Notify the parents/guardians of all students directly involved in the incident as soon as possible
- Respond to phone inquiries personally, if necessary
- Take time to meet with parents/guardians who arrive at the school
- Identify staff to deal with phone inquiries
- Send a letter home to provide details on the incident and the response (provide this to staff)
- Use the school's "automated call out system" if available and appropriate
- In consultation with the board's Crisis Response Team, offer assistance in dealing with the situation and provide details on how they can help and talk to their children
- Remind parents/guardians that they are not obligated to speak to the media if contacted
- Post information for parents/guardians on the school's website or send through direct means.

### **2.3 Working with the Media**

In many situations the principal or designate will serve as the media spokesperson for the school. In an emergency or a crisis, however, principals must look first to the safety and well-being of their students, staff, and the school.

If reporters call or arrive at the school, the principal should first contact their superintendent and the Manager – Communications and Public Relations to brief them on the situation and develop key messages. If the principal is unable to contact the superintendent or the Manager - Communications and Public Relations directly, an executive superintendent, the director's office, another senior administrator's office or the communications office should be contacted directly.

The principal should provide as much appropriate information as possible. Cooperate with the media as much as possible to prevent them from seeking information from unreliable sources (see Appendix C – Communication Tips for Working with the Media).

It is permissible to tell a reporter that you can't speak with them immediately, but will do so when the situation is under control and information has been gathered. "I need time to collect information and support the students and staff" is an

appropriate response in these cases. Referring reporters to the Manager - Communications and Public Relations is also an option and may be the most appropriate response if you are uncertain or uncomfortable.

As a principal, you also have the right under provincial legislation and board policy to ask a reporter (or any other person) to leave the school property if you feel that the safety or well-being of anyone is compromised by their presence. They may choose to wait off the property and talk with any available onlookers, including staff, students, and parents/guardians, but there is very little that can be done about this type of activity.

Staff, students, and parents/guardians should be reminded that they do not have to talk to the media.

In responding to media inquiries at the outset of an emergency or as a result of an incident, the principal has the following options:

- Provide information about the incident that is accurate, confirmed, and does not compromise anyone's privacy
- Indicate that the investigation is continuing and full details are not currently available, but will be provided as soon as possible
- Refer the reporter to the Manager - Communications and Public Relations.

Additional information on working with the media is included in Appendix C. The Manager - Communications and Public Relations is also available to provide assistance and training.

## **2.4 Post-Crisis Review**

The principal can call on the superintendent, an executive superintendent, director, Manager - Communications and Public Relations and other senior administration to provide assistance in reviewing the school's crisis communication response. It is important that documentation and notes made during the crisis are available to help guide the review.

Depending on the situation that has occurred, the participants in the review can include any or all of the following:

- Principal (conducts the review)

- Key staff (e.g., members of the school's Emergency Response Team, members of the board's Crisis Response Team)
- School office and other support staff if involved in the crisis communications
- Executive superintendent(s), school superintendent
- Manager - Communications and Public Relations
- Other senior administrators and/or board staff who assisted during the situation, including the Director of Education.

It may also be useful to consult with key audiences about the effectiveness of the communication. This would include students, staff, parents/guardians, and others directly involved. They do not need to be part of the formal review, but seeking their opinions on how information was communicated to them can help a school or the system revise or develop new procedures for use in the event of future incidents. Appendices E and F are information-gathering templates that can help inform a review or evaluation.

Note: In all cases, if the Manager - Communications and Public Relations is unavailable, principals should contact the communications or director's office directly.

### **3. System-Level Response to a School Incident**

When more than one school or the system itself is affected by a crisis situation (e.g., hold and secure of a group of neighbouring schools by police, an outbreak of communicable disease, wide-spread power failure), the system, through the board office, will manage the communication response. Some single school incidents may also require this type of response. The responsibility for determining when a system-level communications action is warranted rests with the Director of Education in conjunction with the Superintendent of Education, Executive Superintendents, other senior administrative staff, as appropriate to the situation, and the Manager - Communications and Public Relations (see Appendix B – System-Level Response).

Senior administration will take into account the following in the development and management of a system-level communication response to a crisis situation.

- Determine the need to activate the board's Emergency Control Committee (Emergency Procedures Policy 300)

- Clarify the communication role of the school administration
- Evaluate the amount of additional support, if any, needed at the school to communicate with students, staff and parents/guardians, public and media
- Identify spokesperson(s)
- Determine key messages
- Coordinate with outside agencies and organizations (e.g., Police Service, Public Health, Family and Child Services)
- Identify stakeholder groups to whom the messages will be conveyed (media, staff, students, parents/guardians, trustees, school councils, emergency services, general public, business, etc.)
- Identify the types of communication vehicles to be used to inform stakeholders (media release, statements, e-mail, website, social media, staff meetings, information lines, letters home, etc.).

### **3.1 Spokespersons**

As a general rule, there should be only one spokesperson in order to ensure that a consistent message is provided. This is usually the Manager - Communications and Public Relations. However, additional spokespersons may be identified depending on the situation, the type of inquiries, and the need for specific expertise to respond to questions or concerns. Spokespersons could include:

- Director of Education
- Chair of the Board (political perspective)
- Manager – Communications and Public Relations
- Executive Superintendents
- Other senior administrators and senior staff
- School administrator

### **3.2 Working with the Media**

When a system-level response is employed, all unsolicited media inquiries to the school and board staff must be referred to the Manager - Communications and Public Relations. No staff member should feel any obligation to respond personally, nor should they respond without first discussing the situation and the nature of the information request with the Manager - Communications and Public

Relations.

The Manager - Communications and Public Relations must be notified and provided with as much information as possible (see Appendix E – School Crisis Situation Log). This provides an opportunity to identify media questions in advance, and to choose and brief the appropriate spokesperson.

When police or other authorities are involved in an investigation related to the incident, the Manager - Communications and Public Relations, based on discussions with the appropriate organization, will determine when or if it is appropriate for the school system to respond, or to refer the request directly to the authority.

### **3.3 System Management of Parent/Guardian and Public Inquiries**

When the system has assumed the responsibility for communication in a crisis situation at a school, group of schools, or across the board's jurisdiction, schools often continue to have a role to play in providing information. Parents/guardians usually try to contact the school directly when their children are affected. Members of the general public will have various information needs based on their level of involvement and may contact a school as well. Even when the system is involved, individual parent/guardian inquiries are best handled by the Principal or designate.

Since the school's first responsibility is the safety and well-being of its students and staff, the board office will play a role in providing supports such as:

- Developing messages for parents/guardians and assisting with parent/guardian meetings
- Providing board staff to assist school staff in responding to parent/guardian concerns
- Providing current and accurate information to parents/guardians, the general public and the media, through the board's website and other central resources
- Responding personally to parental concerns, through referrals from the school as necessary
- Offering and/or providing support to students, staff, and parents/guardians (if necessary) through the board's Crisis Response Team or local community agencies.

All media information requests and most general inquiries from the public at times

when the system responds to a crisis should be referred to the communications office to allow the individual school or schools involved to deal directly with their internal communities.

### **3.4 Role of the Communications Office**

In a system-level response, the communications office will work with the board and school administration to:

- Obtain information on an ongoing basis as the situation develops
- Collect relevant background materials
- Advise the director, school administration and senior administration on appropriate spokespersons, communication processes and vehicles
- Draft and prepare key messages and communication vehicles (e.g., briefing notes, media releases, website messages)
- Serve as spokesperson as determined by the Director of Education
- Coordinate media briefings and interviews
- Liaise with the media to identify appropriate spokespersons, anticipate and solicit questions to help guide responses, and provide updated information regularly
- Liaise with any local authorities (police, fire, etc.), and establish appropriate responses
- Provide information and messages to staff at the system and school level to respond appropriately to inquiries
- Respond to and log media and public inquiries
- Keep senior administrative staff and school administration up-to-date on the situation and public/media inquiries, responses and reaction
- Provide briefing notes, key messages, advice and support to spokespersons
- Establish and operate a Communications/Information Centre to provide information during the crisis situation, if necessary
- Assist in the evaluation of the response after the crisis is resolved.

### **3.5 Post-Crisis Review**

The Director of Education will lead or designate a superintendent of education or

other senior administrative staff member to conduct the review. The Manager - Communications and Public Relations will be included along with other appropriate participants who can include members of the board's Crisis Response Team, school administrators, representatives from outside agencies, and any others who can add to the review process, findings and possible recommendations for future activities and plans. In addition to addressing the general questions listed in section 1.5, the value of specific communication strategies will need to be assessed.

#### **4. Response to Community-Level Emergency**

This category could involve things like a flu pandemic, widespread severe weather situations or violent incidents in the community. In any system-wide crisis, or in the event of a community emergency, the director or designate will establish the board's Emergency Control Committee (as per Emergency Procedures Policy 300). All communication will be managed centrally. The Emergency Control Committee will work cooperatively with the lead agencies in the community (municipality, etc.) and advise school and board administrative staff of their roles and responsibilities.

##### **4.1 Post-Crisis Review**

The director or designate will lead the post-crisis review of a system-wide situation. In the event of a community emergency, the director or designate will participate, along with other board staff as necessary, in any community review of this type of emergency situation.