



Crisis Communications

Planning and Implementation Guide

This Crisis Communications Planning and Implementation Guide is created to assist you in providing timely and accurate information to your school community, including the media, when faced with an emergency or crisis situation. This Guide is designed to complement your existing Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) requirements.

Because information moves at the click of a button, your goal should not be to beat the first text message. Rather, you must strive to disseminate accurate information. Being the source of reliable information will help you build trust with staff, students, parents and the community.

Mission and Goals of a District When Faced with an Emergency:

- Protect lives and property.
- Mitigate the effects.
- Respond promptly and properly.
- Provide emergency response plans, services and supplies for all facilities and employees.
- Coordinate the use of school personnel and facilities within the school and with other agencies as needed.
- Restore normal services as quickly as possible.
- Provide detailed and accurate documentation to aid in the recovery process.
- Ensure procedures and resources are in place to provide timely and accurate information to the entire school community.

The community must know where they can: hear the facts, ask their questions, and get honest answers. When a crisis occurs, you must gather and move accurate information as quickly as possible. This Guide should help you prepare to meet this challenge.

Five Steps to Build Your Action Plan:

1. Review Policy and Procedures.
2. Review District Assignments and Responsibilities.
3. Create an Emergency/Crisis Communications Information Kit for District Administration, Site Leaders and Maintenance and Facilities Personnel.
4. Create a Communications Action Plan.
5. Conduct a Post-Incident Debriefing.

This Planning Guide is a summary only and not legal advice. We recommend that you consult with legal counsel to determine how this may apply to your specific facts and circumstances. F3 offers clients communications services when topics such as negotiations, employee matters and social media issues, capture community and media attention. For more information or assistance with communications planning, please contact the F3 Communications Department: (323) 330-6300.

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1. Review Policy and Procedures.

Update District policies and emergency procedures annually.

Consider establishing a school emergency operations plan review committee to approve and coordinate all emergency response plans.

Know your District's Official Disaster Plan (Emergency Preparedness Plan) and your District's role with other agencies in a regional disaster.

Review policy regarding media on campus.

Consider addressing student use of cell phones/mobile devices during emergency drills and in actual emergency situations.

Suggested Guidelines for Student Use of Mobile Communication Devices

To help ensure that the District and/or site work to minimize confusion and unnecessary alarm during an emergency, it is imperative that we teach students the appropriate use of mobile devices and how to issue accurate information.

Specifically, use emergency drills to educate students about the proper and thoughtful dissemination of information.

Consider these steps:

- 1) Make sure that students know they should not send any messages about the emergency until the facts are presented to them.
- 2) Facts can be provided to the student by the teacher, who will receive an email or text message from the District official.
- 3) Following the emergency drill, teachers can take a moment to discuss with students the importance of using their mobile devices and all electronic communication to distribute facts that are helpful, especially during an emergency situation. It is imperative to take time to help students understand that in an emergency situation all resources should be focused on the person(s) who need assistance. If they send alarming, and potentially inaccurate,

information electronically, it can create panic and make an emergency situation even worse.

- 4) The District should plan to distribute to all employees involved in the emergency situation a short fact-based statement that will help students give their parents/guardians essential and accurate information.

Sample messages might be:

The school is in a lockdown. Please turn to the District's website/emergency link for information.

Information will come to you through the District's All-Call System. Please listen for the message.

There was a XX at the school. We are safely away from the campus. Please plan to pick me up at XX. More information is on the District website. I am fine.

2. Review District Assignment and Responsibilities.

The individual having primary responsibility for an emergency function typically coordinates the preparation and maintenance of the portion of the emergency plan that addresses that function. Listed below are general responsibilities assigned to the District Leaders.

Superintendent or designee will:

- Appoint a District Emergency Management Coordinator to assist in planning, review and ongoing coordination and training.
- Consult with the local emergency services to analyze system needs regarding emergency preparedness, planning and education and to ensure coordination of the school plan with community emergency plans.
- Develop and coordinate in-service emergency response education and training for all personnel.
- Obtain a local school board resolution giving needed authority and support to develop school emergency operations programs and plans and to act in an emergency.
- Initiate, administer and evaluate emergency operations programs to ensure the coordinated response of all schools within the system.
- Have overall decision-making authority in the event of an emergency until emergency services arrive.
- Monitor the response during emergency situations and provide direction where appropriate.
- Serve as the Public Information Officer (if no PIO is available), and keep the public informed during emergency situations.
- Stay in contact with the leaders of other agencies working with the emergency.
- Help keep the school board informed of the emergency status.
- Request assistance from local emergency services when necessary.
- Assign resources (persons and materials) to various sites for specific needs. This may include the assignment of school personnel from other school(s) or community sites, such as community emergency shelters.

- Authorize immediate purchase of outside services and materials needed for the management of emergency situations.

Site Leaders and Teachers will:

- Prepare classroom emergency kits, including a District cell phone list.
- Participate in trainings, drills and exercises.
- Direct and supervise students toward pre-designated safe areas within the school grounds or to an off-site evacuation shelter/location.
- Request assistance from local emergency services when necessary.
- Maintain order while in student assembly area.
- Reinforce to students the importance of sending home factual information.
- Verify the location and status of every student. Report to the incident commander or designee on any unaccounted-for students and the condition of any student needing additional assistance.
- Verify location of all site staff.
- Establish a partner system for students and teachers with disabilities.
- Remain with assigned students throughout the duration of the emergency, unless otherwise assigned through a partner system or until every student has been released through the official "student/family reunification process."
- Look to District email for updates and messages that students can send home via text, etc.

3. Create an Emergency/Crisis Communications Information Kit* for District Administration, Site Leaders and Maintenance and Facilities Personnel.

The kit should include the following:

- District and Site Information.
- District's emergency situation chain of command/organization chart, with cell phone numbers for school and non-school hours.
- Complete list of names and cell phone numbers for all District administrators.
- Complete list of local and regional emergency services and contact information.
- List of local leaders and media contacts and their phone numbers. (Most COEs can provide to Districts a comprehensive list of the media who cover the area.)
- Consider languages/need for translation.

* Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) Compliant.

District/School Site Information

Describe the enrollment and employment figures.

District

The District's current enrollment is approximately _____ students of which _____ attend the District's high schools, _____ attend the District's middle schools and _____ attend the District's elementary schools. The District's staff is comprised of _____ District office staff, _____ teachers and _____ administrators. Additionally there are _____ office/support staff, _____ aides, _____ cafeteria and _____ custodial staff.

School Site

The school's current enrollment is approximately _____ students. The school's staff is comprised of _____ teachers and _____ administrators. Additionally there are _____ office/support staff, _____ aides, _____ cafeteria and _____ custodial staff.

[District /School] is made up of [NUMBER] buildings. Explanation of Buildings_____

1. The [District/School] consists of a(n) [administration building/main campus] located at [street address, city and state]. [For District plan, list the name and location of all schools in the District.] [For school plans, list any other buildings that are on the school property or for which the school is responsible.]
2. A map of the buildings annotated with evacuation routes, shelter locations, fire alarm pull stations, fire hydrants, fire extinguishers, first aid kits, hazardous materials storage, and utility shut offs is Appendix [#].

Geographical location

Geographically, the [District/School] encompasses [____ square miles] of [rural/suburban/urban] territory. The [census year] census report the population for the District as [#].

4. Create a Communications Action Plan.

Take these steps to be prepared:

- Identify your writer(s). Consider need to identify outside resources who you can engage if necessary.
- Identify District IT person(s) to assist with information dissemination via District online communications tools.
- Discuss the dual-pronged approach to communications management: (1) the superintendent or designee is at the site of the incident; and (2) District office point person staffs a District office main phone line.
- Discuss/clarify responsibilities for both on-site and District office point personnel. See **Example A**.
- Identify translation service provider(s).
- Evaluate list of all District communications modes and who they reach, such as: email/everyone; website/everyone; PA/employees; All-Call system/parents; phone tree/key leaders; meetings, when necessary/key leaders/parents/media.
- Evaluate District cell phone/emergency contact list for accuracy and insert in each classroom and school office emergency preparedness kit. Your IT team should consider collecting personal cell phone numbers of teachers and staff for use during an emergency.
- Create and maintain complete list of media that cover the District.
- Share communications plan with full administrative staff. Review the Site-to-District Notification Procedures ("DNP"). When an incident occurs at a site, the site leader should immediately implement the DNP. The call/incident report should indicate:
 - if 911 was contacted
 - the nature of the incident
 - the impact on students, staff, the facility and community
 - if emergency services are on site
 - if the media is on site
- Embed communications practices into emergency drill protocols.

- Ensure that you have communicated to all employees, parents and community leaders the District's plan/procedures for issuing information during an emergency situation. See **Example B**.
- Meet quarterly with local emergency service providers and city leaders to share/review action plans.
- Review media tips and communications action plan. **See enclosed chart.**

Example A

Immediately following the incident report, the superintendent or designee should make a judgment call on whether or not he/she belongs at the site of the incident. Clearly, in the case of life-threatening situations, the District's lead authority should get to the site.

Tip: Clarify the chain of command within the District. In cases when the superintendent/designee is out of District and/or cannot be reached, you must have policies and procedures in place that indicate clearly who has authority to take command of the situation on behalf of the District. Senior staff and the Board should be familiar with these policies and procedures.

<u>On-Site/Incident--Lead Person</u>	<u>District Office--Lead Person</u>
Establish contact with emergency services.	Set a phone line that must stay open. Give to on-site lead.
Assist in establishing a command center for emergency services.	Gather and verify facts.
Set up parent-student reunion site. Staff this site so that parents feel they have access to information.	Secure writer(s). Secure translation services, if necessary.
Notify District lead with parent/student reunion location information.	Prioritize contact list; prepare situation statement/fact sheet; determine best method for contacting key people/audiences.
Establish area for media and establish yourself as the sole contact for District information.	Issue information. Remind people to direct all calls to the District office.
Inform media of student/minor privacy obligations and FERPA responsibilities.	Record all media calls, including contact names, media services and phone numbers.
Defer to lead agencies, fire, police, etc. as the source of information on the incident.	Set online news alert on incident. Monitor media. Call and correct media, if necessary.
Provide regular updates to District lead.	When appropriate, begin preparing communications for next school day, i.e. information to parents, site administrator, office staff, teachers, etc. Consider providing messages for site to use with parents and media.

Example B

Sample language for Back to School Night announcements, school and District newsletters, District handbook and website

Parents:

Student and campus safety is of paramount importance to everyone in the XX District. We take all possible precautions to help ensure that our campuses are safe, secure and provide a peaceful learning environment.

However, we all know that unfortunate and unplanned events can occur. In the case of an emergency, we are prepared to provide to our students, staff, parents and school community timely, accurate and honest information.

As you know, information moves fast in the electronic age. One inaccurate email or text message can spark rumors, create unnecessary panic or make a real emergency much worse.

In the case of an emergency, we ask that you remember to look for accurate information from the District. We will deliver messages over these services:

- Website. The District's webpage has an "Emergency Alert" page. Our web address is XX.
- Email. If you provide an email address to the District, we will contact you through an email message in an emergency.
- Phone Calls. We can reach parents at each school site and throughout the entire district through our All-Call message system. Please be sure to provide us the phone number that we should call in an emergency.
- Local Media. We will work closely with the local media to keep our community informed of the situation.

In an emergency, we ask that you do not contact the school's main line. For the sake of student safety, we must keep these lines open for use by regional safety officials.

To help ensure campus safety and security, we have a full crisis preparedness and communications plan working with other agencies, and you have a role too: Please make sure that we have the best phone number and email address to reach you. Please also remember to turn to our official sources of information on situations, so we do not complicate an emergency with rumors.

Respectfully,
Superintendent

5. Conduct a Post-Incident Debriefing.

Following an emergency situation, take time to meet with your staff to review what worked well and where you can improve. These experiences are essential to help keep your organization prepared and confident in an emergency.

It may be advisable to consult your legal counsel before this meeting, as many emergencies and incidents create a risk of claims or lawsuits against the school district.

Keep this meeting positive to solicit optimal and candid information.

Determine timeline and persons responsible for follow-up action.

The after-action review is not an employee evaluation report. It should not be to grade success or failure of employees. There are always areas that can be improved and always opportunities to learn when examining the process.

Questions to consider

1. What did we intend to do?
2. Did we accomplish it?
3. What went well? Why?
4. What can be improved? How?
5. Do we need to modify policies/administrative regulations?
6. Was communication successful? Why/why not?

Last Point

Remember, offering thanks to those who helped manage the crisis situation is always appreciated.