



6.0 - Communication

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DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

QUICK TIPS FOR DEALING WITH THE MEDIA:

When a crisis strikes, the media will likely come calling. Many media outlets listen to police and ambulance scanners and reporters have been known to arrive on the scene before emergency crews.

Should an emergency arise and the media call or come to your school, remember you are not alone.

The principal or designate must call the Superintendent. **In Pembina Trails School Division, the Superintendent is the spokesperson for the Division. All media contact is mediated through the Communications Officer. School personnel should refer all requests by the media to the Communications Officer.**

When a crisis strikes, the way it is handled and subsequently reported can make an organization look well prepared and capable – or the complete opposite.

During a crisis, the media can help to get your message across that all is under control, show the Division is well prepared to deal with crisis and help relay important, time-sensitive messages to parents and other key players.

Here are a few guidelines to consider when an emergency strikes:

1. One spokesperson is designated to deal with media: this will always be the Superintendent or Communications Officer. All media will be directed to the Divisional offices for updates on the ongoing incident.
2. Staff and students should be informed immediately who is the spokesperson. They should be advised that all media inquiries should be referred to the spokesperson.
3. The spokesperson's top priority during the crisis is to communicate with the media and must be kept informed of all new developments. As new information comes to light, the spokesperson should update the media.
4. The secretary or receptionist should be advised to direct all media inquiries to the Superintendent or Communications Officer at 181 Henlow Bay.
5. In many cases it is advisable to prepare a written statement for media. After the statement is read, reporters will have more questions and the spokesperson must be prepared.

The spokesperson should:

- Prepare for interviews by gathering as many facts about the event as possible. The spokesperson should know what information should be relayed to journalists, even if they do not ask. A statement such as, "One thing you may want to know before we end this interview is that ..." The spokesperson should have some point-form notes in hand with three to five points he or she wishes to get across to media. The

- spokesperson should use all media opportunities to reassure that things are under control.
- Cooperate, cooperate and cooperate. If the spokesperson does not give journalists answers, they will seek them out from other sources, who may be very willing to talk, but know little about what actually happened – and who may blame the school or school division. When schools refuse to talk to the media, they will still do the story, but it may not reflect what happened.
 - Keep a list of reporters he or she has granted interviews, the media outlet they represent and approximately what was said. (If the spokesperson needs help with this while the crisis is at its peak, someone should be designated to help. Remember crisis usually only last for a short period.)
 - Give media updates as new information is received.
 - If he or she does not know the answer to a question asked by the media, he/she should say so, and offer to get the information to the journalist as soon as possible.
 - Know what information can and cannot be released.
 - Identify a suitable area for meeting the media. Treat media as guests. Have someone escort them to the meeting area and then walk them to the door. Do not allow media to wander around the school unescorted. Be friendly and courteous, but be aware the interview starts as soon as you start talking, even if a camera, tape recorder or notebook is not in sight. Assume all dealings with the media are on the record.
 - Be honest with the media. Never lie. If information cannot be released, he or she should say that, “I am sorry we cannot release the names of the students involved in this incident.” “This matter is under police investigation and we refer you to the police for the answer to that question.” “We can’t release that information, but we can tell you that ...”
6. When an incident happens, it is a good idea to contact the president or chair of the parent advisory council. In many cases, he or she may speak to the media on behalf of the school’s parents. It may be advisable to brief the individual before speaking to the media.
 7. The media may ask to speak to students. Schools should decline this request. As always, students under 18 years of age require permission of parents. Legally, media may interview students while both media and students are on public property; for example, outside of school grounds. Administrators have no jurisdiction asking media not to interview students on their way to and from school.
 8. Someone should be assigned to monitor media – TV, radio and print. If something is reported incorrectly, steps should be taken to quickly, but diplomatically provide the correct information.
 9. Some common questions the spokesperson may be asked.
 - What happened?
 - What did you do?
 - What should you have done? (This is a tricky question. Don’t speculate.)
 - Why did this happen? Who is to blame?
 - Has this ever happened before? If so when?
 - Can we speak to the involved staff, parents, and students?

Some things you can't tell media:

- The names of students involved in incidents or accused of crimes.
 - Anything that would identify individual students.
10. If police are involved in an investigation, then comments to media should be that it is under investigation and the school or school division is unable to comment on the investigation. The police may comment. The Division spokesperson can, however, give other details. It is advisable for the spokesperson to speak with the police to ensure what information can and cannot be released.
11. Quick tips for dealing with the media during a crisis situation:
- Deal in a calm manner at all times.
 - Respond to all media promptly.
 - Give accurate information only. Do not speculate.
 - Do not speak for other organizations or people. Do not lay blame!
 - Use everyday language.
 - Keep your own staff informed. They should not have to rely on media for information.
 - Keep a media log.
 - Never say, "No comment"; instead say something such as; "I can't share that information right now."
 - Do not give "off the record" statements.
 - Watch what you say, even quietly, to others when media are close by. (Today's technology allows reporters to pick up even faint voices, and whatever a journalist hears can be reported.)

MEDIA RECORD

Date of Interview: _____

Interview in regard to: _____

Type of interview: Phone _____

In-person _____

Name of division employee interviewed: _____

Name of journalist: _____

Media outlet represented: _____

Phone number: _____

Fax number: _____

Printed information given to journalist, if any (reports, pamphlets, etc.) (attach copies if desired):

At the end of this interview, the following must be sent or given to journalist:

Synopsis of what division employee said during interview:

The completed media record form should be kept on file for future reference.

SAMPLE STATEMENTS FOR THE MEDIA

1. *Our grade 6 students were on a field trip when their bus was involved in an accident on Highway Number 1, near Headingley. Ambulances are transporting students and staff to hospital. Our vice-principal has gone to the scene. We are currently contacting parents of the students and family members of our staff involved in the accident.*

Our Crisis Response Team has gone into action, helping students and staff. We will release more information as we receive it.

The above statement shows that the school is prepared to handle incidents of this nature. Parents and family of students and staff are being advised; an administrator is at the scene and support is in place to help the students at the school deal with the crisis.

2. *A fight involving two of our students occurred during the lunch hour a block from the school. A grade 12 student was fatally stabbed in this incident. Police are currently searching for the other student involved in the altercation. The incident is under police investigation and no more is known at this time.*

Our school's crisis response plan went into effect immediately.

The Crisis Response Team has taken the following action:

- *Our Crisis Response Team met immediately upon hearing the news.*
- *A parent hotline has been established; the number is _____.*
- *A Crisis Response Team is at the school to help students and staff cope with the tragedy.*
- *Counseling for students has been arranged.*

The above statement shows that there is no abdication of responsibility even though the incident occurred off school grounds. The statement shows that the school has the ability to handle a crisis quickly. Further, the school is shown in a positive light due to its quick response in setting up the Crisis Response Team and providing counseling for students.

3. *The Crisis Response Team is at our school to help our students and staff cope with the shock and grief of the death of our student _____.*

It is natural that both faculty and students will need to deal with some very intense feelings. The death of a child is never easy for any of us.

The Crisis Response Team will help students discuss their feelings and help them cope with this loss.

If you want more information, I (Superintendent) will be available to provide updated information regarding this tragedy. I ask that members of the media respect the children and families of the schools' need for privacy. Please do not attempt to interview students or staff at this time. They need some privacy now in order to deal with their grief.

The above statement acknowledges the impact that a death can have on an entire school population and that the school is helping students and staff cope by using the Crisis Response Team.

The statement advises media that they can get more information, but asks that only the spokesperson – the Superintendent – be contacted to provide information.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Communication between School Officials and Staff Members:

School personnel will be notified when an incident occurs and kept informed as additional information becomes available and as plans for management of the incident evolve. The following practices [the list should be customized to fit your school's communication options] will be utilized to disseminate information internally when appropriate:

- Telephone Tree: A telephone tree is a simple, widely used system for notifying staff of an incident when they are not at school. The tree originates with the principal/designee, who contacts the members of the School Crisis Response Team. Team members then in turn will contact groups of staff (teachers, administrators and support staff).
- Text Messaging System/Email System: A text messaging or email system is available to provide those who are registered to receive messages with updates during an incident.
- Morning Staff Meeting: As appropriate, updated information about an incident will be presented at the morning faculty meeting. Any new procedures for the day will also be reviewed at this time.
- End-of-Day Staff Meeting: As appropriate, updated information and a review of the day's events will be presented at the end-of-day meeting. Staff will also have the opportunity to address any misinformation or rumors.

External Communications:

School principals must communicate with the larger school community on how incidents will be addressed on a regular basis. However, once an incident does occur, parents, media and the community at large will require clear and concise messages from [School name] about the incident, what is being done and the safety of the children and staff.

Communication with Parents:

Before an incident occurs, [School name] will:

- Develop a relationship with parents so that they trust and know how to access alerts and incident information;
- Inform parents about the School's ERP, its purpose, and its objectives, although detailed response tactics should not be shared if they will impede the safe response to an incident. Information will be included in [describe your school's method, e.g. school newsletter, presentation delivered at back-to-school event, etc.];
- Be prepared with translation services for non-English-speaking families and students with limited English proficiency.

In the event of an incident, [School name] will:

- Disseminate information [identify means such as via text messages, email, radio announcements, hotline, etc.] to inform parents about what is known to have happened;
- Implement a plan to manage phone calls and parents who arrive at school;
- Describe how the school and school division are handling the situation;
- Provide information regarding possible reactions of their children and ways to talk with them;

- Provide a phone number, website address or recorded hotline where parents can receive updated incident information. Inform parents and students when and where school will resume.

If circumstances warrant, after an incident, [School name] administrators may choose to schedule and attend an open question-and-answer meeting for parents as soon as possible.

Handling Rumors:

In addressing rumors, the most effective strategy is to provide facts as soon as possible. To combat rumors, [School name] will:

- Provide appropriate information to internal groups, including administrators, teachers, students, custodians, secretaries, instructional assistants, cafeteria workers and bus drivers. These people are primary sources of information and are likely to be contacted in their neighborhoods.
- Hold a faculty/staff meeting before staff members are allowed to go home so that what is (and is not) known can be clearly communicated;
- Designate and brief personnel answering calls to help control misinformation;
- Conduct briefings for community representatives directly associated with the school;
- Enlist the help of the Communications Officer to provide frequent updates to the media and to the public, especially to provide accurate information where rumors need to be dispelled.

After the immediate incident response period, [School name] may choose to conduct a public meeting as needed. These meetings are designed to provide the opportunity for people to ask questions and receive accurate information.

Communication Tools:

Some common internal and external communication tools that [School name] uses, include the following [customize to your school's resources]:

- **Standard telephone:** [School name] has designated a school telephone number as a recorded "hotline" for parents to call for information during incidents. The goal is to keep other telephone lines free for communication with emergency responders and others.
- **Cellular telephones:** These phones may be the only tool working when electric service is out; they are useful to school personnel enroute to or from a site.
- **Intercom systems:** The intercom system includes teacher-initiated communication with the office using a handset rather than a wall-mounted speaker.
- **Bullhorns and megaphones:** A battery-powered bullhorn to address students and staff who are assembling outside the school. Procedures governing storage and use will help ensure readiness.
- **Two-way radio:** Two-way radios provide a reliable method of communication between rooms and buildings at a single site. All staff will be trained to understand how to operate the two-way radio.
- **Computers:** A wireless laptop computer may be used for communication both within the school and to other sites. Email may be a useful tool for updating information for staff, other schools in an affected area and the Superintendent/Communications Officer. An assigned staff member(s) will post information such as school evacuation, closure or relocation on the home page of the school and division website.
- **Fax machines:** Possible uses include off-site access to receive and send critical information concerning students and staff members, their locations and needed

telephone numbers, including but not limited to, medical information, release forms and authorizations.

- **Alarm systems:** Bells or buzzers are in place and sound in different ways to signal different types of incidents; for example, fire, lockdown, or special alert (with instructions to follow). All school staff, students and volunteers will be trained on what the sounds mean and how to respond to them. **Whistles:** Whistles should be provided to staff in order to signal a need for immediate attention or assistance.