

# COMMUNICATING THROUGH CRISIS

INTERACTIVE RESOURCE GUIDE



SAFER  
SCHOOLS  
TOGETHER



International Center for  
Digital Threat Assessment



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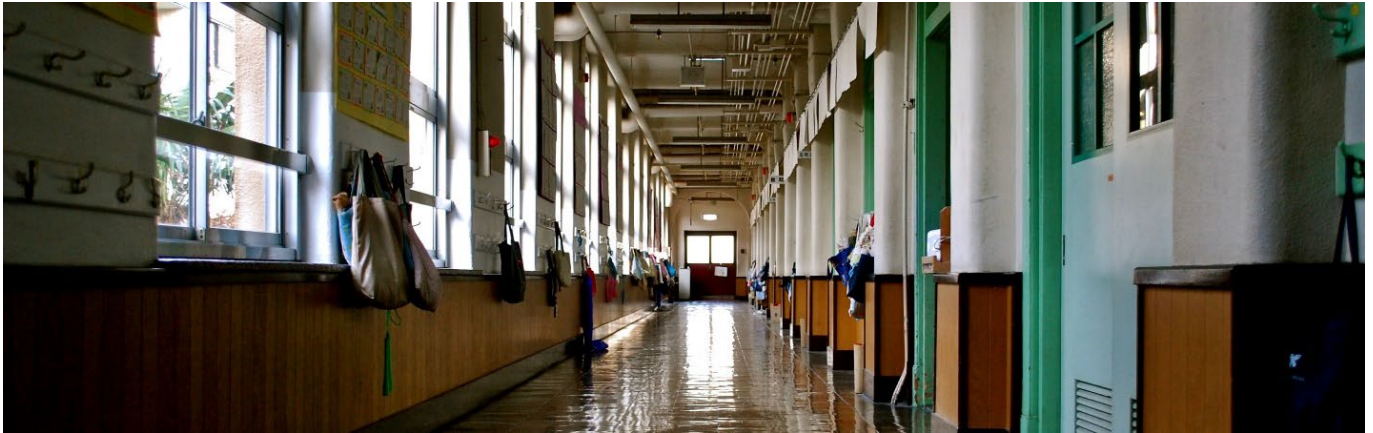
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## INTRODUCTION

When a critical incident occurs, school administrators (“school admin”) are typically the first to be notified and are not only responsible for managing the crisis, but also for informing staff, students, parents, and the community of the details of the incident.

School admins’ priority should always be to secure the safety of the school. Communication is key as students and staff need to know how to deal with the situation at hand. A critical incident can take many forms and affect or involve many diverse groups and individuals. Some key considerations can guide school admins in their communications regardless of the nature of the critical incident or the intended audience. Knowing these strategies will assist school admins in sharing the correct information with a best-practice approach.



## COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS

Communication considerations should be of utmost importance and priority when dealing with a crisis in the school community. The key objectives and considerations in preparing communications are:

### Safety

The priority of communication considerations is the safety of the school community: informing students and staff of what actions they need to take. Usually, these actions have been practiced in school drills (i.e., fire, earthquake, threat, etc.).

Once the school is secure, school admins should consider the need to communicate for the safety of others who may be affected.

- Are there any visitors inside the school?
- Does the safety risk affect a neighboring school?
- Are there any district facilities people or others scheduled to attend?

### Timely Communication & Trust

Another objective that needs to be addressed is preserving and promoting the school community's trust. Accuracy and timeliness of communication are critical to building trust.

Take the following into consideration: if parents first hear about a lockdown or critical incident from the media (i.e., the news, social media posts, a text message from a student, etc.), how would they react?

If put in this situation, parents will most likely call the school frantically while the school admin team is trying to manage the crisis. The longer it takes to provide information to parents, the more agitated parents will become and soon will suspect school admin are purposely withholding information and/or ignoring the needs of the parents. This could potentially cause a loss of trust between school admin and parents; potentially tarnishing the reputation of the school's ability to ensure the safety of students as well as keep parents informed.

It is important to inform parents accurately and promptly when responding to a critical incident. Examples of using brevity in communication efforts are:

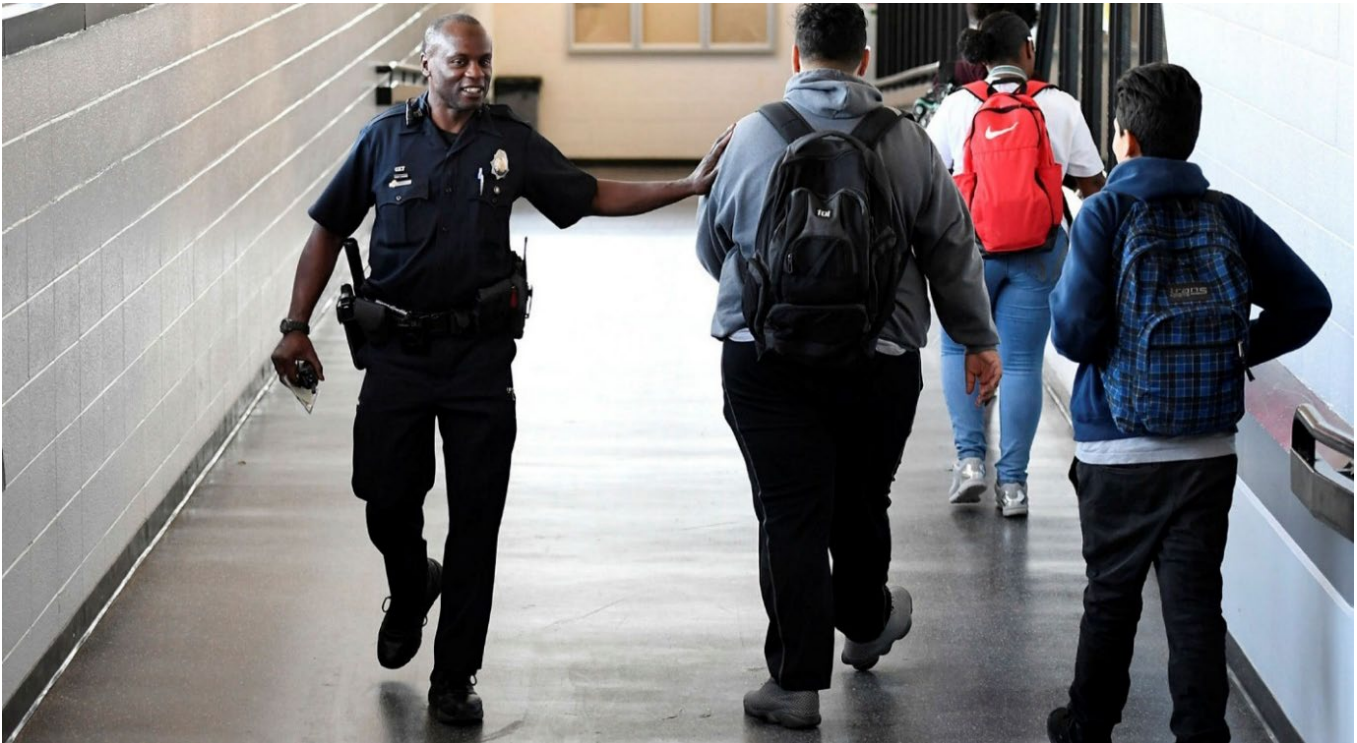
*"As a precaution, our school is in a Hold and Secure after receiving a report of a man acting suspiciously in the vicinity. Police have been notified."*

*"Police have requested our school enter a Lockdown in connection with an investigation. There is no direct threat to the safety of students or staff."*

In the above examples, the school's admin has accurately detailed what has prompted a safety risk, what the school has done in response, and provided some context for the risk in two sentences. This ensures the communication is timely and short-circuits any potential rumors that may escalate the situation.

## Support & Awareness

Other considerations for critical incident communications are support and awareness. There may be incidents that require the involvement of emergency responders or district assistance such as safe school coordinators, resource counselors, or district communications personnel. Whether support is needed or not, it's important to ensure the superintendent is notified and aware of the incident so they can advise trustees and/or the education minister, if needed.



*Photo Courtesy of Financial Times.*

## KEY MESSAGES

There are consistent themes and approaches to be mindful of when composing communication messages.

Regardless of the target audience in communications, key information in a critical incident will be the same for each audience. Communication should address the following three questions:

- What is the status of the students and staff?
- What is the nature of the critical incident or threat?
- What actions have been taken to minimize risk and manage the threat?

### Direction

Communications in the earliest stages of a critical incident response should be directive. Students and staff will need to be instructed and reminded of the actions they must take for their safety and the safety of their peers. These actions will likely have been learned through drills, but it's important to consider there may be visitors to the school who would need specific instructions.

Another consideration for direction is the potential need to direct parents. For instance, parents may have to avoid the school or be provided special instructions for student pick-up.

### Status

As circumstances change over the course of a critical incident, students and staff may need to be advised of a change in statuses, such as if a Lockdown is changed to a Hold and Secure status.

For incidents that remain unresolved for a long period, such as longer than 20 minutes, updates should be provided even if there is no change in status. It is crucial to inform students, staff, and parents that the school remains in Lockdown and is safe. This reassures the school community and indicates the incident will continue to be monitored and managed. Internally, there may also be a need to provide directions for bathroom breaks.

### Actions

Parents and other individuals will want information on how the school is responding and ensuring the safety of those located inside the school. Emergency responders and district officials will need this information as well, though in some cases, they may request more detailed information. The actions described will typically relate to the school safety protocols being followed such as a Hold and Secure, Lockdown, Evacuation, etc.

### Compassion

Critical incidents cause stress and anxiety in the school community. Communications can acknowledge this and provide some reassurance, such as in the following example:

*“We appreciate the apprehension and stress an incident like this can cause. We can assure you all safety protocols are in place and appropriate actions have been taken, and the proper authorities are involved.”*

Using language such as “as a precaution” or “there is no direct threat” can provide context and alleviate some stress.

## CAUTIONS

By nature, critical incidents are sensitive matters. The people affected are likely to be stressed; the incidents typically involve third parties, there can be investigations, some involve violence or even death, the media may become involved, and incidents sometimes have political implications. Although this may sound intimidating, being aware of potential sensitivities is how to avoid mistakes.

The more serious a critical incident, the more likely the need for assistance from those with expertise or experience in managing them becomes.

### Privacy

All individuals have a legal right to privacy. The general approach is to not identify or provide details that could identify anyone involved or connected to the incident. This is particularly important if the individual is a minor.

However, there may be instances where it is necessary to identify an individual, such as a missing student or a sudden death that the school community needs to be made aware of. Police will sometimes publicly identify an individual in connection with an investigation or issue a public warning. In other cases, an adult will consent to be identified or to identify their child. These situations generally allow the use of a name in your communications. With some exceptions, best practices in communications are to leave out names and other personal identifiers.

### Investigations

In situations that involve any kind of follow-up investigation, there is specific information that could be important in communications. Communication should only include the general information required to address the objectives. Police or investigators should be consulted to confirm the release of sensitive or otherwise confidential details that may seem relative to include in the communication effort.

### Third-Party Responsibility

Information whose accountability and responsibility falls on a third party should be addressed in communications. Some examples of this may include:

*“Police are asking parents to keep a look out for...”*

*“Firefighting officials have informed the school there is no further risk to students from the dumpster fire.”*

*“A technician from ABC Gas Company has given the all-clear for all students and staff to re-enter the building at this time.”*

Proper attribution is particularly important when it comes to public health concerns. For instance, if the public health authority asks that the school community be advised of health concerns, this communication should be provided as a self-contained letter from the health authority that can be forwarded to the appropriate audience(s) with the letterhead of the third party (in this instance, the public health authority) and should include the contact information of the third party. This eliminates the risk of having to defend or account for information that isn't a direct internal source.

## Over-Detailed Information

Communication objectives should be considered to keep the information details clear and concise. The reasons for this are:

- Time Investment – short messages are much easier and faster to prepare.
- Unnecessary Anxiety – explicit details aren't helpful and can be harmful to those experiencing anxiety.
- Inaccuracy Risks – the more details included, the more room for errors.
- Provoking Extraneous Questions – unnecessary details can promote superfluous questions and inquiries that take up staff resources and time.

To illustrate the points above, suppose a handgun was found in the school playground. One way to communicate this to parents could be:

*“Police attended the school this morning after a 1st-grade student found a loaded .44-calibre handgun lying at the bottom of the playground slide during recess and handed it to her teacher, Ms. Smith.”*

With the communication objective in mind, there is **a more efficient way** of letting parents know why they may have seen police cars on-site and perhaps why there was a Hold and Secure, such as:

*“Police attended the school this morning after a handgun was discovered on the school playground. It was secured by staff until police removed it.”*

The second communication technique outlined above is more concise, less emotionally provoking, and doesn't disclose details police may not want to be released regarding the incident. It also avoids potentially compromising the privacy of a female 1st-grade student.

Additionally, none of the additional details provided in the first example of communication are relevant to the school's accountability for the proper management of the critical incident – this includes the specific information regarding whether the gun was loaded. Any handgun, even a replica, would be assumed to be loaded and dangerous and managed in the same way. Thus, this information is not important in external communications.

One caveat to be mindful of is the details the school community is likely to be aware of or become aware of. Acknowledging some obvious details can be important to the credibility of communications to avoid the communication being perceived as “covering up” details. Best practice when gauging what information should be excluded is to be prepared to defend the decision-making in the communications when parents question the omitting of specific details.

## Unverified Information

Unverified information is especially sensitive when information is received regarding a safety threat from many different sources. Generally, official sources such as law enforcement, the board office, etc. can attribute the source of the information. However, it's important to use caution before communicating information received from “unofficial” sources, whether those be students, parents, staff, or otherwise.

When receiving a report of a safety threat, best practice is to slow down and assess all information before taking action. If there is no clear and immediate threat to safety, attempt to determine the facts before widely communicating any information. Ask for assistance from law enforcement and/or the district's school safety staff when needed.

Consider that false reports do happen on occasion due to misunderstandings, false alarms, and overreactions. Some considerations to assist in assessing an unverified report are:

- Is there an immediate, serious threat to safety?
- Were there other witnesses?
- How many reports has the school received?
- How easy or practical is this report to confirm?
- Has the witness reported to law enforcement or is the witness willing to report to law enforcement?
- Is the source typically credible?

Support from law enforcement, the school safety department, or other district resources may be enlisted when necessary to confirm the legitimacy and accuracy of the report in a timely manner before making critical decisions for communication efforts.

## Rumors

Mass communications to dispel rumors should be avoided when responding to rumors circulating in the school community that may provoke safety concerns. Communications that include unverified information can potentially spread the rumor further, causing emotional outbursts or unnecessary panic within the school community.

If rumors or speculations are heightening anxiety in the school community, however, it should be addressed. The communication can acknowledge the school is aware of a rumor causing concern and report that the rumor is unsubstantiated or has been proven false. It is best practice to avoid detailing the rumor and if absolutely necessary, describe the rumor in a very general way. A short, tactful message about the anxieties and complications caused by distributing unverified reports should be included and parents should be encouraged to contact the school directly with concerns.

*“Dear Parents,*

*We understand that you may have some concerns about the recent reports that have been circulating regarding our school. We want to reassure you that the safety and well-being of our students is always our top priority.*

*At this time, it is important to remember that not all reports are verified, and it is best to rely on official information from trusted sources. If you have any specific concerns or questions, we encourage you to contact the school directly. Our staff is always available to address any concerns you may have.*

*We appreciate your support and cooperation in ensuring a safe and positive learning environment for all of our students.”*

## Unwarranted Communications

It's important to decipher whether communication is warranted or if there are alternatives to general communication. For example, if an incident affected only one classroom, communication with the parents of the students only within that classroom may be appropriate.

Occasionally, there may be an incident in the community at large that doesn't affect the entire school. While it may be unnerving for parents and other residents to see a police arrest take place outside their home, it doesn't necessarily warrant a letter home, even if some students may have witnessed it. Issuing communications regarding an incident the school is not involved in and does not compromise school safety will most likely raise anxiety for many parents, students, and staff. Communication of this nature may also promote a perception that the incident is, in fact, associated with the school and create an expectation that the school will continue to monitor, manage, and update on this non-school-related incident.

## Media Awareness

Communications released will potentially spread to news media regardless of the medium of communication. Whether the message is sent home in a letter, posted on the school's website, or on social media, it's possible that it may catch the attention of the community at large. Although media awareness is generally a non-concern, it's important to be aware and prepared for media attention, and to always write communications professionally, sensitively, and accurately.



## Young Child Sensitivities

When navigating a critical incident, consider the impact this incident may have on young children – especially regarding the details they may be exposed to. Hearing a reference to a gun, shooting, or death, even if not directly related to the school, can be traumatizing for young children.

An attempt to avoid communications being overheard by young students is to communicate directly with parents and share the information provided to students regarding the incident, as this will help parents be consistent and supportive of their child.

## Deaths & Criminality

Student and staff deaths or criminal investigations are particularly difficult to communicate; not only because of the gravity and impact they have, but also because of legal and privacy concerns of the individual. There are circumstances specific to each incident that will need to be considered in determining what can or should be shared as well as what is appropriate to share. Because of the high sensitivity and challenges of balancing many considerations, death or criminal investigation communications should involve others with expertise or experience.

When a death occurs in the school or school community, the death should be acknowledged and communicated to students, staff, and parents by communicating how to access support and sharing any formal recognition plans, if applicable.

In the event of a death, the name may be shared in the communications, however, details of the cause of death can be very sensitive for the family of the deceased and may have an emotional impact on students – such as, in the case of an overdose or suicide. In any event, it is best practice to involve school counselors or other trauma-informed school support staff when preparing communications to the school community. It is also recommended to share the draft of the communication with the family of the deceased to ensure that no sensitive details are shared without their permission.

There may be occasions when a family member of the deceased does not wish to have any details whatsoever communicated to the school community. In this case, it's important to share how communications with the school community can assist peers and teachers of the deceased to heal and cope with the death. However, if the family member of the deceased acknowledges the possible positive outcomes of this communication and still refuses to agree to any kind of communication, it may still be essential that the school share a basic acknowledgment of the death along with the name of the deceased to address the real needs and concerns of grieving students and staff. This holds particularly true in the age of social media where the news of death has or is likely to quickly become widely known information. These circumstances become factors in planning communications both within the school community and in response to news media inquiries. If the name and cause of death are already widely reported by multiple sources, privacy concerns regarding the use of the name of the deceased may be moot. In any event, district staff should be involved in crafting these communications.

In the event of a criminal investigation, there should generally be no need for communication regarding a student or staff member's criminal investigation. Communication should be avoided so investigations and privacy are not compromised. However, there are occasions when an investigation is public or becomes known/suspected within a school community. These occasions may require the school to communicate to:

- Address safety concerns;
- Maintain school community trust; or
- Respond to escalating rumors and misinformation that affect the school community.

In any event, communications should be developed with district staff and police involvement. Care must be taken to avoid identifying in any way the individual who is the subject of the investigation. If required, acknowledge awareness of the investigation, and provide reassurance of safety in communications with the school community.

It is best practice to stress the importance of avoiding the spread of rumors and respecting the privacy of anyone who may be involved or not involved.

In the case of a criminal charge, the name and specific charges of the individual may become public information, unless the individual is under the age of 18. Criminal charges are likely to be reported in the news media, particularly when the charge(s) are related to sexual assault.

In virtually all cases, any communication regarding a criminal charge involving a staff member will be prompted by a need to reassure the school community that the school is safe. In the case of sex-related charges involving students and/or staff, parents will want to know whether their child may have been assaulted in the past. The school is not able to directly answer these questions, leave this to law enforcement and if necessary, seek legal expertise. If possible, police investigators may be able to provide some wording to address this concern, such as:

*“While the investigation is ongoing, police have informed the school that at this point, no students of [school name] have been identified as a victim.”*

*“The parents of any students that may have been victims have already been notified by police.”*



*Video Courtesy of YouTube.*

## INCIDENT COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

Critical incidents require incident communication management over the course of a critical incident.

### Messaging

Prepare communication with key messages, even if there are no specific details about the nature of the threat. This communication should be brief and concise, such as:

*“This message is to inform you that our school has initiated a Lockdown under its School Safety Alert system. There is no direct threat to the safety of our school, and all students and staff are safe. Police asked our school to go into a Lockdown as a precaution because of police activity in the area.”*

The most effective communication is short, simple to compose, and can be posted on the school/district website and distributed through other channels quickly. There is no need to compose different communication content for different audiences.

In some circumstances, specific details may need to be communicated directly and exclusively to key stakeholders such as law enforcement or district Safe Schools staff to effectively perform their duties or plan for contingencies. This information can be passed along upon request or after the initial alert has been issued.

As new, confirmed information becomes available, updates can be made to the communication message with additional details and information:

*“Police officers have confirmed their investigation is unrelated to the school and will notify us promptly when we are all clear to resume normal operation. In the meantime, dismissal is delayed. Further updates will be provided as confirmed.”*

*“We have received the ‘all clear’ from the police and dismissal is now underway as normal.”*

After dismissal, the next day, or at the time of the incident being considered finished, a final communication summarizing the incident and response should be sent, such as:

*“Early this afternoon, our school was placed in Lockdown as a precaution while police investigated an incident in the neighborhood unrelated to the school. Students and staff were kept safe. After about 40 minutes, police declared ‘all clear’ and the school resumed normal operation with a delayed dismissal time.*

*I’m proud to say all our students and staff responded appropriately and implemented the lockdown very well.*

*If you have any questions or concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact me at the school.”*

### Centralized Messaging

When managing critical incident communications, there must be **one communication source**; this can be the principal, superintendent, or district communications personnel. The information collection and messaging can involve a small group of people working together, but when communication is prepared and distributed, it must come from a single source. There are several reasons for this approach, including ensuring that:

- Information collected internally or externally is directed to the person managing the incident communications, so relevant information is not missed.
- Information can be properly evaluated and checked for consistency against what is known or has been previously communicated.
- Incident communications are verified and released when appropriate.
- There is no duplication of efforts.
- There is no conflicting information released.
- Anyone seeking official school or district communications about the critical incident knows where to get it.

Some partner communicators such as a school board chairperson or education minister can assist; however, they would receive their information and updates from the critical incident communications point person.

### Assigned Support Tasks

Workload is an important aspect to consider when managing critical incident communications. Principals have many responsibilities and communications can be assigned through the school safety or emergency preparedness team. A principal may choose to personally prepare critical incident communications and delegate distribution or delegate preparation and distribution with the principal's review and approval.



## Template Communications

Collecting and developing critical incident communication templates can streamline the critical incident communications process. Letters or online posts that were used in previous incidents can be used as templates for future incidents. Templates speed up response time by ensuring key messages are covered and provide suggestions for wording and consistent language.

Ideally, a district communications department, resource counselor, or other principals will have a collection of critical incident communications that can be shared. It is best practice for principals to save and store such communications from their school in a way that allows quick access and keyword searching to find a template that most closely relates to the current incident. Templates can be updated, improved, and expanded as part of the school's critical incident debrief.

Similar to templates, checklists of key stakeholders and communication tools can ensure no one is missed and the best tools are used. A sample of a checklist can look like this:

KEY STAKEHOLDERS	COMMUNICATION TOOLS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Students</b></li><li>• <b>School Staff</b></li><li>• <b>Parents</b></li><li>• <b>Neighbouring Schools</b></li><li>• <b>Superintendent's Office</b></li><li>• <b>School/District Reception</b></li><li>• <b>Facilities Staff</b></li><li>• <b>Trustees</b></li><li>• <b>Ministry</b></li><li>• <b>Emergency/Health Authorities</b></li><li>• <b>News Media</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>School PA System</b></li><li>• <b>School/District App</b></li><li>• <b>Social Media</b></li><li>• <b>School/District Website(s)</b></li><li>• <b>School Emergency Alert Services</b></li><li>• <b>News Media</b></li><li>• <b>Parent Letter</b></li><li>• <b>Phone Tree</b></li><li>• <b>Face-to-Face</b></li></ul>

It's important to note that some relied-upon tools may not be available. For example, if the school is evacuated, there won't be access to computers. Power outages will also impact internet access, so it's important to ensure a plan for alternative access to electronic communication tools is in place.

## POST-INCIDENT COMMUNICATIONS

In the final communication announcing the All Clear and a return to normal activities, consider a few messages to include such as:

- Acknowledging the stress and concerns many will have had as a result of the incident and showing gratitude for their patience and understanding during a difficult time.
- Giving some reassurance by providing context for the incident; pointing out the extreme rarity of the incident or unusual circumstances.
- As appropriate, reiterating there was never a direct threat to the safety of students and staff.

It is also appropriate at this time to communicate positivity within post-incident communications, such as:

*“While we were all a bit shaken by this incident, fortunately, no one was hurt.”*

*“Staff and students followed protocols and responded extremely well.”*

*“We are all proud of the students who reported a concern.”*

*“We are very grateful to the actions of (school/district staff/parents/emergency responders/etc.) in assisting the school in its response and to be safe.”*

*“Our school and district are taking steps to reduce the likelihood that such an incident could occur again”*  
**(NOTE: it is important not to use the word ‘prevent’.)**

For particularly serious incidents, consider the need for follow-up support to address the impact on the school community. The school and district counselors will be able to assist in messaging and could provide resources for families and staff to access further assistance. There may also be community brochures or other third-party resources available that can be included in communications such as child grief support strategies, “stranger danger” advice, and so on.

Another consideration after a serious incident is a parent forum. A forum is a way to exchange information and allow parents to ask questions, express concerns, or access authorities and experts, such as health, police, and others.

It’s often advisable to have a face-to-face debriefing with school staff to discuss concerns and learn how to improve future responses. Involving district staff in the meeting may be best practice.



## INTRODUCTION TO SWATTING IN SCHOOLS

Swatting, a critical concern for school safety, is a malicious act where an individual makes a false report to emergency services, typically claiming an active threat at a location, leading to the deployment of SWAT teams or heavy law enforcement response. This dangerous act not only poses a significant risk to the physical safety of students and staff but also disrupts the educational environment and causes psychological distress. Schools must be aware of swatting, understand its implications, and prepare accordingly to protect their communities.

### Defining Doxing and Its Relation to Swatting

A phenomenon that typically occurs before a swatting call is doxing. Doxing, derived from the term "dropping documents," involves researching and broadcasting private or identifying information about an individual on the internet. This practice often targets individuals in specific communities, like gaming or hacking, where anonymity is highly valued. In schools, doxing becomes a significant threat when personal details of students or staff, including their school affiliation, are exposed, potentially leading to swatting incidents. When a school community member is doxed, it not only compromises their privacy but also places the entire school at risk of swatting.

### Who Gets Doxed and Why

The typical victims of doxing are often males engaged in male-dominated spaces such as video games and hacking communities. The motivation behind doxing in these communities frequently stems from perceived injustices or grievances, where individuals seek "justice" or "revenge" against someone they believe has wronged them or certain groups. This retribution often manifests in exposing someone's private information, including their school details, to the public, making them vulnerable to further harassment or dangerous situations like swatting.

### The Role of Online Communities in Swatting and Doxing

Alarmingly, there are groups within hacking and other online communities that offer swatting and doxing as a service. These groups, operating from remote locations, can target schools thousands of miles away. The decision to target a specific school can stem from various motivations. It could be a calculated choice by someone believing that school is a justifiable target, or it could be a random selection by the perpetrator. In some cases, individuals in these communities might suggest or nominate a school as a target for swatting, either for a perceived grievance or as a twisted form of entertainment.

### Mechanics of a Swatting Call

Swatting calls, a deceptive and hazardous practice, can be executed using various methods, with Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) being a common tool. VOIP allows the caller to mask their true location and phone number, making it challenging for authorities to trace the call. This technology enables individuals to place emergency calls from anywhere in the world, appearing as if they are local. In a school context, a swatting call might falsely report an active shooter, bomb threat, or other emergencies, triggering a massive and immediate response from law enforcement.

## Preparatory Steps for Schools

To mitigate the risks of swatting and doxing, schools should focus on several key areas:

### Creating a Positive School Culture and Climate

Schools must foster an environment of respect, inclusivity, and awareness. Encouraging open dialogue about online safety, privacy, and the consequences of actions like doxing and swatting can build a more informed and conscientious student body.

### Ensuring Digital Privacy and Safety

Educating students and staff about digital privacy, including safe online behaviors and the importance of protecting personal information, is crucial. Regular training sessions like Digital Threat Assessment® and going through privacy settings on social media platforms can empower the school community to safeguard their digital footprints.

### Collaborating with Emergency Responders

Schools should proactively engage with local law enforcement and emergency services to develop response plans for potential swatting calls or bomb threats. This collaboration can include drills, sharing of best practices, and establishing clear communication channels to ensure a swift and effective response to any crisis.

### Regular Updates and Training

Keeping abreast of the latest trends in digital threats and updating school policies accordingly is essential. Regular training for staff and students on recognizing, reporting, and responding to threats, both digital and physical, reinforces a school's readiness to handle such crises.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Safer Schools Together: <https://saferschoolstogether.com/>

Raising Digitally Responsible Youth: <https://saferschoolstogether.com/social-media-awareness-parents/>



International Center for  
Digital Threat Assessment

International Center for Digital Threat Assessment®: <https://icdta.org/>

Live Virtual Training: <https://icdta.org/live-virtual-trainings/>

Module Training: <https://icdta.org/modules/>



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