

COMMUNICATING THROUGH CRISIS

SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS



SAFER
SCHOOLS
TOGETHER



International Center for
Digital Threat Assessment

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DISCLAIMER

Prior to any public communication you must:

1. Confirm the information you are conveying is accurate and any facts you are sharing are confirmed facts.
2. Receive permission from parents/caregivers prior to publicly releasing any information about a minor.

WORRISOME/THREAT-RELATED BEHAVIOR

Sample #1

Dear Parents/Caregivers:

We are aware some of you may have heard about an incident that we have been responding to at our school. Recently, a safety concern was brought to our attention that involved threat-related behavior. As this information was worrisome in nature, we contacted local law enforcement.

Law enforcement believes there is no threat to our school community, but due to the ongoing investigation and privacy considerations, this is all we can share at this time. We do want to assure you that all staff and students are safe. We take every precaution to ensure the safety of all of our students and staff members.

Please contact us if you have questions or concerns regarding your child.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

Sample #2

Dear Parents/Caregivers:

Recently a student(s) brought a safety concern to our attention that involved other student(s) in our school community. As this information was worrisome in nature, local law enforcement was contacted, and they have initiated an investigation. As a result of this concern, you may have noticed an increase in law enforcement presence on school property.

Law enforcement believes there is no immediate threat to our school but as this is an ongoing investigation, this is all we can share at this time. We do want to assure you that all of staff and students are safe.

If you have any other questions or concerns, please contact us directly.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

Sample #3

Dear Parents/Caregivers:

Recently, a safety concern that involved threat-related behavior was brought to our attention. As this information was worrisome in nature, we contacted local law enforcement.

The health and safety of all students and staff in our school is our priority.

Students and parents/caregivers in the community may be talking about the situation through social media. It is important that you have accurate information to dispel any rumors you may hear relating to the incident.

We stress again that the health and safety of our students and staff is our top priority.

If you have any information pertaining to the incident, please call the school office or local law enforcement.

Thank you for your support and assistance in keeping our school community safe for everyone.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

Updated Message

Dear Parents/Caregivers:

As you may be aware, a student(s) recently brought a safety concern to our attention that involved other student(s) in our school community. As this information was worrisome in nature, we contacted local law enforcement and they initiated an investigation. The media has reported that one youth has been charged with the intent to discharge a firearm. Several conditions have been put in place. Law enforcement believe there is no immediate threat to our school.

We want to assure you that all staff and students are safe. Law enforcement continues to work closely with us as we ensure the safety of all students and staff in our school community.

We will pay close attention to anyone who may be struggling or seem fixated on this recent incident. We know that the power of positive, meaningful human connection is one of the best violence prevention strategies that we can utilize. We encourage you to contact us if you see a shift in your child's behavioral baseline. Counseling and support services will be available to students, staff, and others affected by this incident.

If you have any concerns regarding your child, please contact us directly.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

Sample Message to be posted on the School's Website

As you are aware, a safety concern was recently brought to our attention that involved threat-related behavior at *(Insert Name of School)*. We immediately contacted local law enforcement. The threat was determined to be low risk and immediate steps were taken to address the concern and ensure appropriate supports were in place for all affected by the incident.

Multiple rumors and misinformation about the incident continue to circulate and create some uncertainty at the school. We want to assure you that all staff and students are safe.

We take every precaution to ensure the safety of our students and staff, and we take any potential threat very seriously. Law enforcement continues to work closely with us as we respond to any form of threat-related behavior.

Students and parents/caregivers are reminded of the importance of communicating rumors, misinformation about an incident, and evidence of threat-related behavior to school administration.

If you are a parent/caregiver of a student at *(Insert Name of School)*, please contact school administration if you have further questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

(Insert Superintendent's Name)

OFF-SITE INCIDENT INVOLVING INJURED STUDENTS

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

By now, many of you are aware of the concerning incident that occurred on *(Date/Time)* involving student(s) from our *(Insert Name of School District)* schools. The victim(s) are all in stable condition and expected to recover.

We have activated our critical incident response team, which is available to support students, families, and staff after this alarming incident. Due to law enforcement investigations and privacy considerations, this is all we can share at this time. We do want to assure you that all students and staff are safe. We take every precaution to ensure the safety of your child and our staff members.

If your child is not comfortable bringing their concerns to the attention of an adult in our schools, they can access our anonymous reporting tool *(Insert Link)*.

Please contact us if you have questions or concerns regarding your child.

Sincerely,

(Insert Superintendent's Name)

SOCIAL MEDIA CONCERNS

Sample #1

Dear Parents/Caregivers:

We are aware some of you may be hearing about a concerning screenshot that is circulating online. This screenshot is not connected with the threat-related incident that occurred last week.

As this information was worrisome in nature, we have contacted law enforcement.

Currently, there is no direct threat to our school. We want to assure you that we take every precaution to ensure the safety of our students and staff members. Our anonymous reporting tool provides another way to report concerning behavior *(Insert Link)*.

As you may appreciate, both incidents involve local law enforcement investigations; therefore, we cannot share any additional information at this time. Out of an abundance of caution, we will have an increased law enforcement presence at the school throughout the day.

Please get in touch with us if you have questions or concerns regarding your child.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

Sample #2

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

We are aware you may be hearing about an incident that we have been responding to at our school. Recently, a safety concern was brought to our attention that involved racist comments made online. As this information was very concerning, we contacted local law enforcement.

Our school district has a code of conduct in place to ensure our schools remain free of racism, targeted hate, discrimination, bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, intimidation, threatening and violent behaviors. We strive to help students understand and respect their differences and create schools free of discrimination, bullying, harassment, intimidation, and violence.

Please contact us if you have any questions or concerns regarding your child.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

EMPLOYEE ISSUE

Sample #1

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

Our school district has become aware of serious concerns regarding an employee. We are fully cooperating with local law enforcement. We are unable to share any additional information at this time and seek your support in respecting the privacy of those involved.

We want to assure you that the school district takes every precaution to ensure the safety and well-being of our students and staff members. Supports are being made available to anyone who may need them.

If you believe you have information regarding the concerns circulating, please contact the *(Insert Name of Local Law Enforcement Agency)*.

Sincerely,

(Insert Superintendent's Name)

Sample #2

Dear Parents/Caregivers:

As you may be aware, the school district was informed of a situation on *(Insert Date/Time)* regarding an employee who works at *(Insert Name of School)* and was taken into *(Law Enforcement Custody or Charged with ___)*.

The school district is deeply concerned with the serious nature of the matter. Student safety is our primary concern, and we are fully cooperating with local law enforcement.

We have counselors and support services available for students and staff who may be affected and require additional support.

Students and parents/caregivers can contact school administration if there are specific needs for support.

Anyone with further information is asked to please contact the *(Insert Name of Local Law Enforcement Agency)*.

Sincerely,

(Insert Superintendent's Name)

TRAUMATIC INCIDENT

SAMPLE MESSAGES TO PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

Sample #1

Dear Parents/Caregivers:

Many of you may be aware of a serious incident that resulted in the loss of one of our students yesterday. We are cooperating with local law enforcement as they investigate this matter.

We know this may be difficult for many of our students, staff, and community members. A wide range of reactions and feelings is normal. It is not unusual to see an elevation of behaviors, including anxiety, sadness, and even threat-related behavior during this time.

If you feel your child appears to be affected in any way, please contact the school, as we have appropriate supports in place for all concerned.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

Sample #2

Dear Parents/Caregivers:

We are sorry to inform you that a staff person/student/friend, *(Name)*, at *(School Name)* has passed away on *(Insert Day/Date)*. *(Insert what information can be shared about the cause and circumstances of the death)*.

Death can be difficult for us to understand, especially when it is sudden. We may feel a variety of emotions: shock, sadness, or confusion. What is most important is that we care for and support each other.

The Crisis/Trauma Response Team at *(School Name)* has made plans to respond to the emotional needs of all students *(Spell out what is being done: grief counseling, classroom debriefing, and referrals to support service staff and community-based organizations)*. Students have been informed and staff members will be available to provide support as needed.

If your family has experienced a death or similar loss recently, the death of *(Name)* may bring up feelings about that death. Please let your child's *(Teacher or Counselor)* know if there is any additional information the school should be aware of so we can provide the support your child needs.

An unexpected death may be disturbing to you as well as to your child. For this reason, we want you to know of our care and support.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

Sample #3

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

It is with deep regret that we inform you about a recent loss to our school community. On *(Date)*, *(Name of Deceased)* *(Insert brief facts that can be shared about the cause and circumstances of the death)*. This loss is sure to raise many emotions, concerns, and questions for our entire school, especially our students.

Counseling support is available for any student who may need or want help, or any type of assistance surrounding this loss. We encourage you, as parents/caregivers to also use our resources.

We have enclosed some information that may be useful to you in helping your child at home. If you would like additional information or need assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

We are saddened by the loss to our school community and will make every effort to help you and your child as you need.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

SAMPLE MESSAGE TO STUDENTS

This information should be given to teachers and/or other staff to read to students at a designated time (*eg. Home Room, First Period, Start of day in an Elementary School*).

It is with sadness that we need to inform you about a loss to our school community. On *(Date)*, *(Name of Deceased)* *(Insert brief facts that can be shared about the cause and circumstances of the death)*.

We understand that many of you may have upsetting feelings and questions about *(Name of Deceased)*. We will try to answer any questions that we can. If you would like, we will take the remainder of this class period to talk about what has happened. At times like this, it is okay to have many different feelings, including sadness, anger, and disbelief. It is okay to cry. Together, we can talk about whatever you may be feeling or want to talk about. If we cannot answer your questions, or you would like to talk to someone privately, there is a support room available *(Location of Support Room(s))*. Anyone who would like to go to talk to someone in the support room(s) may do so now. *(Possibly Issue a Pass)*.

Determine which students would like to go to a support room. Ask the remaining students if they have any questions or comments they would like to share.

If there isn't a lengthy discussion you may wish to consider an alternate lesson plan (e.g., quiet seat work, reading etc.)

SAMPLE MESSAGE TO STAFF

Dear Staff,

We are aware that some of you may be hearing about a concerning incident involving some of our students on *(Day)*. The victims are all in stable condition and expected to recover. The suspect is in custody.

Due to law enforcement investigations and privacy considerations, this is all we can share at this time. We do want to assure you that all staff and students are safe. We will continue to take every precaution to ensure the physical and emotional safety of our students and staff members.

We need to be mindful that we are in a critical period. Critical periods are predictable time frames for increased threat-related behavior that will extend at least two weeks beyond extensive media coverage and social media content related to this incident. It is important to stay hyper-vigilant when receiving any reports of individuals exhibiting worrisome behaviors or who may be struggling at this time.

Remind students that if they are not comfortable bringing their concerns to the attention of an adult in our schools, it is a great time to remind them of our anonymous reporting tool *(Insert Link)*.

SAMPLE MESSAGE TO PARENTS/CAREGIVERS REGARDING MEDIA

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

In recent days, an article published through a local media outlet reported concerns regarding a specific student issue. While we are unable to respond to the details of any student matter, we would like to provide a more general response regarding our approach to providing care and support to students in our school community.

The school district is dedicated to ensuring the safety and emotional well-being of all our students. We approach all situations mindful of individual circumstances and best practices for safety and well-being. We continue to approach each student issue from a lens of empathy and care. We will continue to support students in our district through the outstanding leadership and professionalism of our educators and will work with our community partners to continue to respond to student needs on a case-by-case basis.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

SCHOOL COMMENT TO MEDIA REGARDING LAW ENFORCEMENT INVESTIGATIONS

The school district takes this matter very seriously and is addressing the situation. This incident has been referred to local law enforcement. The school district is cooperating with law enforcement to ensure that the investigation is not impeded or jeopardized. Because this involves an investigation and the privacy of young children, the school district is unable to provide further comment.

SWATTING INCIDENT

SAMPLE MESSAGE IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING INCIDENT

Our school has gone into lockdown as a precaution due to a reported, though unverified, threat called into law enforcement. Students and staff are being kept safe while law enforcement investigates the authenticity of the threat.

SAMPLE MESSAGE TO PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

We are reaching out to you to address a situation that unfolded at our school today. An anonymous individual placed a fake emergency call to our local law enforcement - an act known as "swatting". This is not just disruptive, but it is also dangerous and illegal. We can assure you that all staff and students are safe.

Immediately after the call was made, we initiated our established protocols for such situations, which involves close coordination with law enforcement agencies and other community partners to determine the nature of the call. As a result of this, you may have noticed an increase in law enforcement presence at our school. It was quickly determined that the call was a false threat.

Student safety is our highest priority. We understand that incidents of this nature can be unsettling, and we are committed to providing support to those who may be affected. If your child seems disturbed by this incident, we encourage you to reach out to us so we can provide additional support. Counseling and support services are available to students, staff, and others affected by this incident.

Thank you for your patience and understanding as we work through this. We remain committed, as ever, to ensuring the safety, security, and well-being of our students, staff, and school community.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

SAMPLE MESSAGE TO STUDENTS

This information should be given to teachers and/or other staff to read to students at a designated time (*eg. Home Room, First Period, Start of day in an Elementary School*).

As you know, our school was in lockdown today with many emergency responders present on school property.

Our school was the target of a "swatting" incident, which is a false report, or a prank involving an anonymous call to law enforcement that leads to the dispatch of emergency services. This is a serious and illegal act and can potentially put others in danger.

Law enforcement responded quickly and determined that the call was a false threat. We are working closely with law enforcement and other authorities on this matter.

It's natural to feel worried or uneasy after incidents like this happen. If you want to talk about how you're feeling, or if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to talk to your teachers, counselors, or any trusted adult in the school. Remember, it's okay to express your feelings and ask for help when you need it.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

SAMPLE MESSAGE TO STAFF

Dear Staff,

We want to inform you about an incident that occurred at our school today. A false emergency call was made to local law enforcement, a practice commonly known as "swatting". This is a serious and illegal act that is disruptive and can potentially place lives at risk.

We are relieved to let you know that it was quickly determined by local law enforcement that this was a false threat, as well as assure you that all staff and students are safe. We have been in close cooperation with law enforcement and other community partners while we navigate the situation.

In the wake of this incident, some of our students might feel a heightened sense of anxiety. We encourage you to offer support and reassurance as needed as well as emphasize the importance and serious nature of emergency services.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

SAMPLE MESSAGE TO PARENTS/CAREGIVERS REGARDING MEDIA

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

You may have seen or heard about the recent "swatting" incident at our school in the media. While we are unable to provide detailed information about the ongoing investigation, we can assure you that we take this incident extremely seriously and are working closely with law enforcement. All staff and students are safe.

The safety and well-being of our students is our top priority. We will continue to maintain a safe and supportive environment for your child, working closely with our community partners to address incidents like this.

Sincerely,

(Insert Principal's Name)

SCHOOL COMMENT TO MEDIA REGARDING ONGOING INVESTIGATION

The school takes this "swatting" incident very seriously and is fully cooperating with local law enforcement in their ongoing investigation. Given the nature of the investigation and in the interest of maintaining the privacy of our students and staff, we will not be providing further comments at this time. We appreciate your understanding.

LAW ENFORCEMENT'S COMMENT TO MEDIA REGARDING ONGOING INVESTIGATION

Law enforcement takes "hoax or swatting" incidents very seriously. Due to the nature of the threat, as well as language used, we are confident the anonymous call was in fact a false threat. It is a standard practice to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of investigations until they are concluded. We understand the public's interest and will provide updates when appropriate and in accordance with the law.

APPENDIX A: MEDIA, COMMUNICATION AND CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE

**erase Ensuring Safe & Caring Manual, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/erase>*

Many schools and districts have comprehensive critical incident response plans and teams. However, we have found a gap in staff knowledge as to what it was and what it actually looked like. It is important for staff to have this information as it increases their sense of safety and lowers their anxiety when critical incidents and/or traumatic events occur. It is important to get good information to staff as quickly as possible when responding to a critical incident or traumatic event. This demonstrates transparency and bi-directional information sharing. In addition, it is imperative to ensure timely updates to websites with information for parents/caregivers on services and supports available in their community.

PROACTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH MEDIA AND THE COMMUNITY

When there's a negative news development for a school or school district, intuitively, we want to contain it. Your school is like a family, and few people like to share sensitive or negative family matters. However, while there can be good reasons to restrict the release of information, there are also positive reasons to share it; even announcing it to the media.

The key advantage in proactively notifying the media of something negative is the opportunity to prepare a communication plan to thoughtfully manage an issue, rather than reacting. This approach helps you to influence the public narrative, help ensure accuracy and protect sensitive and personal information. The plan should address which communication method to use; news media may be one tool, while parent/caregiver communication and staff meetings may be another. Determine the audience for the communication and the key messages to communicate.

School Staff

It is important to share as much information as possible with school staff prior to any information being shared with media. Staff should be discouraged from directly speaking to media; however, there is nothing preventing them from doing so if that is what they choose to do. Staff should also be advised there are sensitivities, often including student privacy, and potential facts and details they are not aware of or are still to be confirmed. It is recommended there be a single school/district spokesperson designated.

Media on site

For some incidents, unfolding events or issues that involve or affect a school, media will attend the site to get photos/video of the school and to try to talk to the principal, staff, students and parents/caregivers for information and reaction. If possible, have a district official on site to help manage safety and privacy concerns.

There are two initial, primary concerns when media arrive, student privacy and safety/disruption.

Student Privacy

Privacy concerns are different for elementary students and secondary/high school students. Elementary students are generally not allowed to provide their own informed consent to appear in the media while generally, secondary/high school students can.

Elementary Schools: One or two school staff members should approach reporters and camera people, even off school property, to ask for a business card and request that they respect the need for some children to not appear in the media for safety reasons. If a reporter wants to speak to or photograph a student, inform the reporter they require consent from the student's parent/caregiver.

Secondary/High Schools: Staff can make a request not to photograph students on school property; however, secondary/high school students are permitted to go off the school property. If the students do this, they are providing their own consent and the school is not obliged to interfere, except if there is a need to address traffic safety. Reporters and camera people should be asked to stay on the sidewalk or property outside the school and should avoid parking on the school site to minimize the perception that the school/district is endorsing the media coverage. However, if there are serious safety and traffic concerns arising from media off-site, some accommodation may be required to address the concerns.

PROACTIVE INFORMATION RELEASE TO MEDIA

There are occasions when you have an urgent need to get out a warning or instructions to all parent/caregivers of a school as soon as possible. Notifying the news media, particularly radio stations, can be an efficient and effective tool to reach parents/caregivers. It is important to prepare prior to speaking to any media.

All media have deadlines; it is important to meet their deadlines, if possible, but you never need to respond to media until you are ready. The following steps will guide you in dealing with media in a crisis situation:

- Identify one person to receive all media calls in the district. This person is responsible for taking media phone numbers, names, and deadlines—they are not the spokesperson.
- Identify one spokesperson to handle all media inquiries. This person must be confident in speaking to media but also able to stick to the key messages identified.
- Develop three key speaking points that can be shared publicly. Media can assist in clarifying facts and providing information you need delivered to your parent/caregiver community. If there are several media calls received or if reporters are from outside of your community, consider holding a news conference or conference call.

Pre-Planning for News Conference

- Prior to the news conference, identify key spokespeople for the district and ensure their roles and speaking points are clearly defined.
- Anticipate and prepare responses for a potential question or questions that have already been received.
- As appropriate, coordinate all potential media messages with local law enforcement and, if possible, have law enforcement involved in the news conference to answer any law enforcement related questions.

- Your role is to speak strictly from a school perspective and protect the privacy of your students.
- Do not answer questions prior to the news conference. This allows for one consistent message to be delivered to all media at the same time.

LOGISTICS PLANNING FOR NEWS CONFERENCE

A news conference should not last longer than 45 minutes, but plan for a question-and-answer period. If you will not be answering questions and only making a statement, inform the media in your news conference invitation. However, a simply statement should generally be distributed through usual channels. A news conference is *intended* as a media availability, so questions should be allowed.

Invite all media to the news conference allowing for travel time.

Consider holding the news conference at the school site if possible; this helps to ensure minimal disruption to a school or facility site over the days and weeks ahead.

It is important to assist the media to get photos and videos they need right away so they can exit the site as quickly as possible.

If you are not holding a news conference, consider issuing a news release. A news release clarifies facts and provides one source of information on behalf of the school district. A media contact must be identified to manage requests for follow-up interviews or clarification.

Post Initial Release of Information: Keep websites up to date with any new information as it becomes available.

CREDIBILITY

A school district gains instant credibility with media by proactively communicating information, even if the information is sensitive. In many cases, the tendency is to feel ownership of or blame for a negative incident or development. It's not so much the incident itself; it is how you respond to it that is being judged by parents/caregivers and others. If parent/caregiver communications are going home at the end of the day with information about an incident and, in the meantime you are responding to media inquiries about it, the media often ask for a copy of what is being provided. It's reasonable not to release the communication to media until 6 p.m., allowing parents/caregivers enough time to read the communication prior to hearing its content through the media.

Consider holding a community meeting to address parent/caregiver questions and concerns. Include community supports like law enforcement, mental health, and counsellors as part of the meeting. As such meetings are generally considered public, expect media to attend. Have a plan and someone identified to assist and liaise with any media that arrive, and stay with them throughout the meeting. However, media presence can affect the tone and dynamics of a meeting, so consider whether your meeting should be only for parents of a certain school, for instance, as a way to restrict media access. In any event, consider allowing media to photograph the meeting opening, but not stay. Ensure participants in the meeting are aware that media could be outside and looking for feedback from them. Assure participants they should only provide interviews if they are willing and confident in doing so.

APPENDIX B: COPYRIGHT TRANSFER

Copyright Transfer

I, _____
(Name) _____ (Signature)
and legal guardian

(Name) _____ (Signature)

Certify that I willingly assign the copyright of my video that I recorded on _____
(Date)

from my _____ with the filename _____
(Device) (File Name)

To:
_____ and agents acting on its behalf
(Organization)

Namely: _____ Date: _____

and _____ Date: _____

The conveyance of this agreement entitles the recipient organization to full ownership and legal rights of the video.



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