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## Crisis Communications: Types, Preparation, Protocol and Analysis



*It has become common in most industries, including schools, that responding to crises and preparing crisis communications is a necessary topic of discussion. Yet, the time to discuss planning for crisis communications is not when in the crisis, but proactively in order to ensure effective communication with stakeholders before, during and after the crisis. Catholic schools must acknowledge this contemporary reality and should plan accordingly.*

### Goals of Crisis Communications

A goal of crisis planning is to have seamless communication during the crisis and to articulately share with the school's publics what has occurred. Planning ahead, to the degree that is possible, is the best way to navigate the complexities of a crisis, especially on a school campus. When in the midst of a crisis, one of the greatest enemies is time. It is unrealistic to expect those in leadership roles to be able to prepare and deliver their most thoughtful communications

while working to manage the most pressing aspects of an issue. Working with law enforcement and local emergency officials to identify, discuss and prepare for potential scenarios is an essential and recommended component of the crisis communication planning process. The resources provided below are designed to support planning yet should be carefully adapted and implemented as appropriate for each school's unique needs.



### Tips for Crisis Communications

- 1 Remain Calm and Professional in Your Demeanor
- 2 Enact Your Crisis Communication Plan
- 3 Gather Information and Draft Statements to be Reviewed
- 4 Share Content Methodically and in a Timely Manner

*"If you fail to plan,  
you are planning to fail."*

Benjamin Franklin

## Types of Crises ... Public Relations, Natural Disasters, Cyberattacks, Security Threats, Dangerous Incidents

### Key Considerations for Common Crisis Scenarios

Types of crises that may occur in any organization or company, including Catholic schools, can include a public relations scandal, natural disaster, cyberattack, security threat or other dangerous incident.

#### Public Relations Scandals

- May include a wide variety of issues (employee arrest, accusation of inappropriate behavior, etc.).
- Should be addressed with as much transparency as possible.
- Advance planning is limited due to the unique nature of each crisis.
- Consultation with legal counsel and administration is often necessary.
- Those involved with communication planning and execution must understand the importance of confidentiality.

#### Natural Disasters

- Typical procedures: announcing school closures, sharing extent of damage to the campus, communicating re-opening schedule, etc.
- Partnering with local media can effectively reinforce communications via television and radio.

- Plans should include procedures for relocating students if necessary as well as potential for loss of access to the Internet during crises such as tornados, hurricanes, floods and other disruptive or dangerous events.

#### Cyberattacks

- The incidence of cyberattacks is growing in number and scope as society keeps pace with continued rapid growth of technology.
- Crises that occur in this realm could include a school's Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, email or website being compromised.
- With the rise in technology as a teaching tool and the prevalent use of social media by schools and students, having multiple authentication and log-in tools is paramount.
- Information Technology staff should confirm that malware protection is installed, as well as use of protected passwords and regular backups of data. Screenshots of social media and digital content that can be deleted by the person who generated the post will prove valuable for subsequent analysis.



#### About the author ...

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Jennifer Melville Trefelner, APR, CPRC, is the Director of Communications, Marketing & Social Media for the Diocese of Palm Beach. Jennifer has been with the Diocese of Palm Beach for the past 15 years, serving as the Director of Institutional Advancement at John Carroll High School and as the Online Communications Consultant for the Office of Catholic Schools. She possesses an Accreditation in Public Relations and is a Certified Public Relations Counselor through the Florida Public Relations Association.

Jennifer serves Catholic School Management and its clients on a part-time basis, specializing in comprehensive development programs, enrollment management plans, marketing programs, student recruitment and retention programs, annual giving programs, communication plans, and social media programs.



### Template for Phone Script in the Event of Stranger Danger

This is an important safety alert for (insert school name) parents from principal (insert principal name).

On (insert date/time), a student was approached by a stranger while walking home along (insert street), about (insert distance) miles from campus. Thankfully, the student was not injured. The stranger [insert reported action (drove away, ran away, was scared off, etc.)] and the student was able to run to safety.

Police are investigating and extra officers have been assigned to patrol the area. Please know that we take these situations very seriously, as the safety of our students is always our absolute top priority. A letter with additional information and safety tips is being sent home with your student.

I encourage you to discuss this with your children. If you see any suspicious activity or have any information on this suspect, contact the police immediately. Again, this was an important safety alert for (insert school name) parents.



### Template for Text in the Event of Stranger Danger

Today (insert school name) had a student approached by a stranger. All students are safe, but we urge you to report any suspicious activity to the police.

## Preparing for a Crisis ...

Produce a Plan, Meet with Local Media and Law Enforcement, Practice, Review, and Edit the Plan

## Protocol for When a Crisis Occurs ...

Contact Law Enforcement and School Officials, Collect and Verify Information, Utilize Crisis Plan

### Security Threats

- Tragically, school shootings present the crisis scenario of security threats and violence. It is during these situations that well-orchestrated and preplanned crisis communications accompany the threat response plan in place.
- A designated spokesperson available for media relations, who has developed a relationship with local law enforcement as well as trained staff on campus, should be appointed to deal with such threats or events.
- Steps to secure campuses, including protected vestibules, volunteer background checks, name badges for students, school resource officers onsite and protocols such as “see something, say something,” should be considered.
- Plans for lockdowns, sheltering in place, evacuations, reverse evacuations and room clearing procedures should be practiced on a regular basis.

### Dangerous Incidents

- Dangerous incidents that can create a crisis include fires, hazardous material spills, loss of utilities, etc. Protective actions for these situations include evacuation and incident stabilization.
- Advance communication with parents indicating where students will be transported in the event of having to leave campus is essential. Once at a second location, a crisis team (employees who are trained in safety measures and emergency situations) can direct students, maintain a level of calm, and inform parents about pick up or relocation of students. Such procedures should be clearly communicated in handbooks; however, full implementation may be reviewed but is often not practiced in advance.
- CPR, AED and emergency training is now being undertaken in schools nationwide.

### Advance Planning

It is recommended that schools plan in advance for the possibility of what could happen with any type of crisis. For example, school leadership should audit which communication platforms are available to push out information including the website, social media, e-newsletter, texting service and automated phone calls. In addition, having templates proofread and approved by communication staff, administration and/or appropriate authorities at higher organizational levels is ideal.

Each template should be modified to fit the content and format of each

communication platform that will be used to disseminate information. For example, a texting service to notify parents of an incident on campus likely has a character count, whereas a longer message can be displayed on the website. These kinds of considerations should be reflected in the templates that are developed.

Having an updated media contact list is crucial. Once a press release is available, sharing it via email to a pre-set media list and/or tagging local television and radio stations will increase efficiency when every moment counts.



### Template for Email Text in the Event of a Lockdown

(insert date)

(insert school name) Parents:

Though our students were never in any danger, I want to make you aware of an incident that occurred today on our campus.

This (insert: morning/afternoon), our campus was temporarily placed in secure mode while the police conducted an investigation in the nearby area. The lockdown was in place for about (insert duration) minutes and was lifted as soon as we were given clearance by law enforcement.

I want to stress that our students were safe and never in any danger. The lockdown was simply a precautionary measure suggested by the police.

Please know we take these situations very seriously, as the safety of our students is always our absolute top priority. Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call our school office at (insert phone number).

Sincerely,  
(insert principal name), Principal  
(insert school name)

**(Use School Branding Standards on All Communication Pieces)**

## During the Crisis

When a crisis is upon a school and a crisis communication plan is enacted, it is essential that all protocols are based in practicality. Each protocol should be reviewed and practiced in advance to the extent possible to ensure that the plan can be launched with as few unforeseen problems as possible. Most crisis communication plans include a document that outlines who will notify whom and in what order to alleviate confusion. Identifying a single point of contact for inquiries and statements is a common component of a plan. This will ensure timely and ongoing communications from one voice and leave less room for error and confusion. Any messaging that is created should show empathy and transparency and be reviewed carefully. Facts must be accurate and well understood, all information must be verified, and if/when needed, specific language or terminology should be reviewed by an attorney and/or communication staff.

Crisis planning in many schools includes designated secure modes such as a “Code Orange” or “Code Red” which are described and documented in appropriate handbooks. During the time of a crisis, the top priority is the safety and security of those onsite.

Depending on the circumstances, communication may occur from the school to the parents to notify them that the school is in a secure mode and to not attempt to pick up their students at that point in time. Once the campus is secured, typically communication is sent to the internal audience first, followed by communications to the external audiences, notifying that the “all clear” has been signaled.

### Post-Crisis Analysis ...

**Keep All Records, Audit How the Crisis Was Handled, Improve the Plan, Share Updates**

## Crisis Follow-Up

Following any crisis, an audit is typically performed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the crisis communication plan, any necessary changes are made and the updated information is shared with all parties involved. Vigilance in monitoring social media comments and posts after a crisis will provide useful insights. It may be necessary to respond to questions and concerns that a stakeholder makes online. Indeed, some kinds of online crises can be curtailed, if not avoided completely, when strong social media and online presence monitoring is regularly undertaken.

Meetings with the crisis communication team (all those involved with ensuring the crisis is resolved safely and smoothly) should be scheduled periodically to discuss adjustments in policy, campus facility changes and any new legal ramifications that occur. Also, updates and changes should be made regularly to contact information for employees, parents/guardians, media, etc.

Collaborating with local schools, law enforcement agencies and area officials will help to ensure that proper planning is in place prior to a crisis occurring. Having a comprehensive plan will aid in the rapid response and best outcome for the school and all involved. Not having a thorough crisis communication plan can result in chaos, injury or harm to students and adults, loss of trust from stakeholders, and a myriad of problems during and after the event.



### Template for Email Text in the Event of an Email/Text Scam

(insert date)

(insert school name) Parents:

Please be aware that there have recently been several cases of email and text scams reported to us. We are suggesting that you be vigilant with regard to this situation.

For example, it has been evident that hackers are using emails and/or phone numbers to disseminate messages asking for gift cards or funding. Please know that a school administrator will not contact you asking for donations of gift cards or funding via direct email or text messages.

If you have additional questions, please contact (insert name and contact information). Thank you for your cooperation during this time.

Sincerely,  
(insert principal name), Principal  
(insert school name)

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- School Assessments
- Program Audits
- Enrollment
- Marketing
- Mission Clarification
- Advancement
- Alumni
- Capital Campaigns
- Feasibility Studies

- Enrollment
- Technology
- Annual Fund
- Development

### Planning

- Marketing
- Communication
- Social Media Plans
- Strategic Planning
- Financial

### Leadership

- Governance
- Administrative
- Structure
- Search
- Board Training/
- Development
- Professional Mentoring
- Workshops and
- Webinars
- Retreat Facilitation
- Keynote
- Presentations
- Individual Seminars
- and Series



## Sample Diocesan Crisis Communication Protocol

Please share this information with the administration team to ensure that all know the proper protocol.

1. School administrator calls 911
2. School administrator calls school resource officer/security guard (if applicable)
3. School administrator calls/texts superintendent of schools and pastor
4. Superintendent texts director of communications, assistant superintendent and diocese site safety and security advisor
5. Superintendent texts vicar general, chancellor, pastor and risk management officer
6. Director of communications drafts initial text for school to disseminate to parents and emails school administrator, superintendent and diocese site safety and security advisor
7. Changes to draft text are emailed back to director of communications and updated accordingly
8. Director of communications emails approved text to school administrator, vicar general, chancellor, pastor, risk management officer, superintendent, assistant superintendent and diocese site safety and security advisor
9. School administrator notifies director of communications, assistant superintendent and diocese site safety and security advisor what text has been shared, with whom, and when
10. School administrator notifies the superintendent that the crisis has been resolved
11. Superintendent texts director of communications, assistant superintendent and diocese site safety and security advisor with update
12. Director of communications drafts initial text for school to disseminate to parents, stakeholders, and media and emails school administrator, superintendent, assistant superintendent and diocese site safety and security advisor
13. Changes to draft text are emailed back to director of communications and updated accordingly
14. Director of communications emails approved text to school administrator, vicar general, chancellor, pastor, risk management officer, superintendent, assistant superintendent and diocese site safety and security advisor
15. All media requests are sent to director of communications

## Learn More About Crisis Communication and Planning

Catholic School Management's team of experts is available to assist schools with their crisis communication planning, both in advance and when responding to crises. Consultative guidance in communication strategies, drafting of communications customized for key constituent groups, and cascading communication plans with minute-by-minute timelines are all areas in which CSM stands ready to serve. ☀

## CSM Refreshes Iconic Logo

Catholic School Management and the initials CSM have become synonymous and the practice to refer to the company as CSM is now considered the norm.

Back in 1979, Sister Patricia Mulally's keen understanding of CSM's work informed her artistic decision-making and resulted in a logo that emphasizes Catholic schools with the "C" and "S" situated to rest on a bold version of the "M" for management. It conveys a clear message supporting CSM's approach to the delivery of comprehensive consultative guidance grounded in the belief that the strength of Catholic schools rests upon, and directly results from, the strength of their management.



*A division of Christian Brothers Services*

CSM is pleased to announce a significant milestone in its history with the refresh of its iconic logo to continue to reflect the timeless message and wisdom of the original design while incorporating reference to CSM's most recent growth and change.

The refreshed logo still conveys its original message, now emphasized by the modification of the "M" to reflect the concept of strong management as the pillars that continue to sustain Catholic schools today and into the future. The integration with the CBS star, the updated font and expanded versions of the logo reflect CSM's contemporary status as a division of Christian Brothers Services.



*A division of Christian Brothers Services*

For more information about Catholic School Management, call 203.421.5169 or visit us at [cbservices.org/csm.html](http://cbservices.org/csm.html).

Sign up to receive the *CSML* at [cbservices.org/csml-sign-up.html](http://cbservices.org/csml-sign-up.html) or send an email to [csml@cbservices.org](mailto:csml@cbservices.org).

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