

DON'T GET CAUGHT WITHOUT YOUR HOMEWORK: 5-STEP CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PREP PLAN FOR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Don't Get Caught Without Your Homework: 5-Step Crisis Communications Prep Plan for Educational Institutions

When it comes to messaging during a crisis, educational institutions must get it right – every time. Not only do you have a broad range of stakeholders (students, parents, faculty, boards, and sometimes public officials) that might have differing priorities, but the scrutiny on you is heightened because you are often dealing with children. But in the same way you'd expect your students to be prepared for an exam, administrators can be prepared for communicating during unforeseen events. Summer is a great time to examine your school's crisis communications policies and procedures and prepare for next school year, and this Insight provides the five most critical elements you need to address.

1. Understand the Spectrum of Issues

The range of crises that your school may confront is large and growing. Allegations of sexual misconduct, DEI and culture-related schisms, on-campus emergencies, off-campus student or employee behavior, data breaches, and cheating scandals are just a small subset of the issues that you may need to address.

Unfortunately, crisis communications is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Each potential problem necessitates its own strategy. As such, your crisis communications playbook

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should be comprehensive and contain a catalog of messaging materials to address specific scenarios.

2. Identify Your Stakeholders and Internalize Their Needs

Educational institutions have an array of internal and external stakeholders, and their concerns aren't always aligned. Students care about how a crisis will impact their day-to-day, parents are concerned about what an incident means for their child's future, and staff will worry about how an issue could impact their career. Each constituency and their attendant concerns are equally important and require distinct narratives to allay fears and demonstrate that you're in control.

The messaging in your crisis communications playbook needs to maintain consistency of messaging while also being tailored to each separate audience, all while reflecting your school's legal strategy and risk tolerance.

3. Determine What Channels Enable Efficient and Expeditious Communication

The best messaging is useless if it doesn't reach its intended audience. That's why surveying potential communications channels, and mapping those channels to respective stakeholders, is key.

In the K-12 space, emails and other digital notifications are common channels for reaching parents, while messaging to students is often best achieved via direct communication, such as assemblies. And, in the event of an emergency, leveraging multiple channels (e.g., text message alerts and traditional media outlets) may be most effective.

4. Get Into the Weeds and Hash out the Details

The best crisis communications playbooks delve beyond big-picture strategy. You should work out the tactics associated with executing a detailed strategy and codify them within your playbook. For example, you should establish a process by which all messages are vetted and approved before distribution, designate (and train) a media spokesperson, and even determine who *literally* presses "send" on the email message.

Most organizations don't fumble crisis communications because they don't have a media holding statement. Instead, issues arise when schools don't deploy their messaging

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materials quickly enough, or responsibility is delegated to staff who aren't experienced in certain high-risk situations like allegations of misconduct or threats of violence.

5. Align Your Communications Strategy with Your (Existing or Future) Legal Strategy

Some crises start as a legal issue, such as your school being slapped with a misconduct lawsuit). Others, like a data breach, are likely to give rise to one. It is essential that your messaging doesn't create additional legal liability for your school. Once you speak publicly, a litigant can use that communication in furtherance of their case.

But this doesn't mean your school should clam up and stay silent. In fact, taking control of the narrative and seeding your perspective is often essential to preserving reputation. However, anything you say should advance your broader legal strategy (or, at minimum, not frustrate it).

That is why Fisher Phillips Education Practice Group provides clients with such a differentiated offering. With attorneys experienced in crisis communications and advising the full range of educational institutions – from elementary school to higher ed – our education attorneys offer a one-stop shop for legally sound crisis communications.

Conclusion

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