Crisis Communications Guidelines

These guidelines cover the basics steps to take to ensure effective communication in crisis situations.

The term “crisis” covers a range of incidents and situations that occur on or off campus with the potential to have a negative impact on the school, students, staff, community, or LACOE. They include, for example, acts of violence, deaths/suicides, child abuse, assaults, injuries, crimes, and natural/environmental disasters. LACOE Security must be notified in the event of a crisis – 562-922-6666.

Effective communication is a critical component of crisis management. Key publics (parents, students, staff, community members, and the news media) expect and need to receive accurate, consistent, and timely information about the situation.

The primary communications goal should be to keep the public informed about the crisis while maintaining student privacy and allowing as little interruption to the educational process as possible.

LACOE recognizes that in a crisis situation, your priority is to ensure the health and safety of students and staff. That is why LACOE’s Communications Department is an integral part of your crisis response team — and available at all times to provide communications support in crisis situations.

The LACOE Communications Director is the agency’s chief Public Information Officer (PIO) and, along with the Superintendent, must be notified by phone or e-mail and kept up-to-date in regard to every crisis situation. Alerts and updates may come directly from a site administrator or from a central office administrator.

The LACOE Communications Director, or his designee, will determine whether a PIO is needed on site or whether communications issues can be handled from the central office.

A main crisis communications issue is likely to be how to deal with the news media. Crises are news and attract the attention of reporters from the print and broadcast media. While they may seem to “get in the way” in a crisis, the news media can play a valuable role in keeping the public informed about the situation.

All media inquiries are to be forwarded to the Communications Department. This LACOE policy is not intended to “censor” staff, nor does it reflect an assumption that school administrators would not be able or are not “allowed” to answer reporters’ questions. What the policy does recognize is that your priority is the health, safety, and well-being of your students and staff and this is where your attention needs to be focused.

When your site receives a call from the news media, an appropriate response might be: “So that we can focus on the needs of students and staff, we are referring all media inquiries to our Communications Department. Please call them at 562-922-6360.”

The PIO will work with the site administrator to gather facts and determine the most appropriate response to media requests. In most situations, the PIO will develop an official LACOE press statement (often with review of legal counsel) and serve as spokesperson with the news media.

A major crisis (e.g., school shooting) is likely to attract reporters and cameras on site. In this case, a Communications Department representative will be sent to the site to serve as PIO. Until the PIO arrives, the site administrator should:

- Establish a crisis communications center that can accommodate media briefings, and direct reporters and crews to this site. Let them know that they will be briefed as soon as the facts are gathered.
- Guide the activities of reporters and crews so they will not disrupt the educational process. While the news media have rights to be on campus, they should not be allowed to enter classrooms in crisis situations.
- Remember that many LACOE students (especially in JCS and Special Education) have confidentiality issues related to media coverage. Photographers, camera crews, and reporters should be instructed not to reveal identities of minors under the supervision of the Probation Department. Special Education students have confidentiality rights, and a parental release needs to be on file for these students to be photographed.

While these guidelines focus on responding to the news media in a crisis, the LACOE Communications Department can also play a vital role in helping you inform parents, students, staff, and other key publics.
A Few Basics on Communicating With the News Media in a Crisis

*Should you be in a crisis situation and need to communicate with the news media, here are some dos and don’ts:*

- Be prepared. Be honest. Be brief. Stress concern for safety of students and staff.
- Be accessible. Stick to the facts.
- Keep cool. Don’t become defensive; don’t lose your temper or argue.
- Work with the LACOE Communications Department to develop a written statement to be read and handed out.
- Work with the LACOE Communications Department to craft key messages — and stick to them.
- Stress positive actions taken.
- Bear in mind that there are legal implications to whatever you say to the media.
- Pause and collect your thoughts before you respond to reporters’ questions.
- The interview is not over until the reporter leaves. Always be careful about what you say in the presence of a reporter before or after an interview — the microphone may still be on.
- Don’t respond to negative questions by repeating words that inflame the situation, e.g., “Yes, it is a real tragedy....”
- Be alert to questions that begin: “Isn’t it true that ...?” “Aren’t you really saying...?” “How do you respond to ...?” “Are you aware that ...?”
- Avoid “what-if” questions. You can’t predict the future.
- Don’t speculate.
- Never say “No comment.” If you do, reporters may state that you were uncooperative in answering questions or may interpret for themselves why you aren’t answering. Better responses are: “It would not be appropriate for me to comment on that until all the facts are gathered.” “I don’t know the answer, but I should have it in an hour.” “I cannot reveal that information as it would jeopardize the legal investigation.”
- Never speak to a reporter “off the record” — unless you want it on the record.

(Adapted from *The Complete Crisis Communication Management Manual for Schools*, National School Public Relations Association.)