

by Jackie Olson Kold



Communication is a RACE

No matter what kind of crisis unfolds, the reaction of school board members, staff, students, parents, the media and the community at large will be determined by two primary factors: how well the district deals with the incident and the district's ability to provide accurate, appropriate and timely information throughout the process.

When carrying out your crisis communications plan, remember not to rush, but to RACE—Research, Analyze, Communicate and Evaluate.

- **Research: Talk with your district's key publics, accumulate and review data *before* the crisis hits.** Research might include gathering data at community forums, focus groups with key publics or one-on-one interviews with key leaders about their perception of safety in the district. It might mean compiling statistics on the number of crisis incidents and the number of activities held in schools to promote a positive school climate.

In our district, safety and security measures and issues have been the subject of a

number of district-initiated community and school forums, live call-in radio talk shows and city and school cable TV programs, all of which have helped us gain data on the effectiveness of our crisis communications and process.

- **Analyze: Don't limit yourself to analyzing your research, but also look at your district's crisis communications manual, as well.** Look for trends in the data: Have you increased the number of events to celebrate diversity, for example? Do your efforts correlate with any decreases in racial violence? (Time frames for data analysis could be year to year or longer.) Research might also include a content analysis of media coverage regarding crisis incidents: positive, neutral and negative from year to year. Have you had a decrease or increase in the number of positive news stories related to safety in your district in the past year, two years or five years? What trends are emerging from your focus group and other discussions that measure public perception

related to school and community safety and/or safety initiatives?

Make it a priority to annually review your crisis communications plan and manual. Each summer, I review our manual, update crisis team lists and, along with our safety coordinator, determine if processes need to be revised or new processes need to be added. These changes are based, in part, on the research analysis and other factors, such as heightened national security. In the past five years, we have added the following chapters to our manuals: "Weapons and Intruders in the School"; "Terrorist Activity" and "Lock-downs." We have also continued to improve our "Bomb Threats" chapter.

During your research and analysis process, take inventory: What are we already doing and how effective has it been? Preparedness also means giving yourself "what if?" planning sessions. Your crisis manual's table of contents should include a plan to deal with all the crisis situations you can imagine—not just those that have occurred.

In Janesville, thanks to national training at the Center for Missing and Exploited Children that I attended along with other district leaders and key members of our community, we now meet as a Safe Schools Interagency Team. This allows us to go one step further to collectively discuss potential crisis situations by reviewing information on young people who may be having problems in one part of the judicial, school or social services system. Hopefully, through collective intervention, we can help them before an act occurs that escalates to a crisis, such as a student bringing a weapon to school.

This partnership also provides us an excellent working relationship for dealing with crisis incidents when they arise. Our joint activities may include: writing a news release or community safety letter; dealing with the placement of a released sex offender into one of our neighborhoods; assisting with a student abduction crisis; or disseminating confidential crisis information to our staffs, such as a potentially dangerous student alert. In addition, we also meet on an "as needed" basis with a Youth Violence Task Force, consisting of approximately 30 community leaders, to address, research, determine and recommend optimal school/community-based prevention programs and work on current safety issues.

As you finalize plans, remember to train staff—and the community. Each summer, after my office updates our crisis manual, we provide copies of the updated pages to all administrators and other staff

that have manuals, such as school counselors. Administrators receive copies for home and school, and each school office has one or more copies. During our regular administrators' training session in August, any updates are reviewed. In past years, after the start of school, principals have held building in-services on safety and the use of the manual as a refresher. This year, we covered the information during a new district-wide staff in-service, prior to the start of school.

Train community members so they know where to go first for crisis information. In our case, we determined our best "first source" for school emergency information to be our local radio station. We worked with the station and other media outlets to build an understanding and partnership in this effort. (We still disseminate news releases to all media outlets through e-mail alerts simultaneously, however.) Over time, we have continually stressed the radio station as a first source for school emergency information for parents and community members. This partnership has served us well, as it helps avoid situations such as jammed phone lines in an emergency. We've communicated this information through publications, a daily radio show on that station, parent letters, news releases, cable TV, the Web and more.

- **Communicate: It starts with the first call.** In our case, when a crisis occurs, the superintendent, safety coordinator and I are the first-call, internal contacts for building administrators to reach in a crisis

immediately after the school police liaison officer is involved. Once contact is made with one of us, we work with the building administrator/police department on crisis communication protocol, using our crisis manual as a guide. We identify a spokesperson and review all pertinent issues. For example, in an evacuation for a bomb threat, immediate issues may include strategies for serving students lunch or special education busing needs. The facts and plans for carrying out the crisis response are finalized quickly. At the building level, a crisis phone tree is put into action and a building team begins to work on specific needs at that level based on our direction and manual protocol.

- **Communicate: The second step is internal.** I then send out a crisis e-mail with a high alert notice to an established, crisis listserv I have developed. The disseminated information contains the facts and plans and lists the spokesperson. The crisis listserv includes our school board members, administrators and key secretaries.
- **Communicate: The third step is handling the media.** Once I have developed the facts into a news release, I do the following:
 - A finalized news release is sent to the internal listserv and key communicators, and administrators are directed to share this information with all staff to decrease the rumor mill.
 - The news release is sent to an e-mail media listserv and calls are made to the local radio and newspaper to further alert and clarify.

(It's important to give special attention to your local media. Not only will it improve your chances for gaining accurate coverage of the crisis and a fair portrayal in follow-up stories, your local reporters will be with you long after the initial media swell subsides to cover all other school news. That relationship deserves priority.)

- A news release/alert is posted on our district's cable channel and Web site crisis section.

It should be noted that the media may become aware of the crisis while you are still in the planning stages. Be prepared with your facts and a response when the situation occurs by having a comprehensive manual, practicing scenarios and developing an organized, computerized method of filing news releases for easy access and review. When speaking to the media, don't sway from the facts. If you don't have the information, let the media know when they will receive it. Be careful not to disclose inappropriate information—know what you can disclose and when by working with your district attorney and police department.

Hold a press conference if needed and consider implementing a "call center" with your police department. In addition to sending news releases, you should plan a press conference if it is appropriate. If you aren't prepared to handle calls or need time to pull your plan and facts together, this may be a good alternative. Send out an advisory as early as possible with the facts you have available and hold the conference in a location away from the crisis situation. Work with your police department to decide if you need to set up a call center off-site in

Finding a Competitive Edge in Tough Times

The 2003 Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) annual fall conference, scheduled for Nov. 6-7 at the Heidel House Resort in Green Lake, will focus on communication strategies school officials need to deal with issues such as difficult negotiations, tight budgets and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provisions. The conference will also present information about complicated legal issues raised by new communication technologies such as e-mail and Web sites.

Keynote speakers include Evan Zeppos, a public relations professional who was named the most outstanding practitioner by *Milwaukee* magazine; and Tom Luljak, assistant chancellor for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who worked to pull the UW-M out of the shadow of the UW-Madison.

"Communication Models for Budget Cuts: Rural, Suburban and Urban Schools" and "Communicating NCLB" are among the expert panel sessions. There will also be a panel with media representatives about getting your feature story printed in the local paper.

School board members and superintendents are encouraged to attend this conference. More information and registration materials are available at www.wspra.org/conference/index.htm.

conjunction with them to co-manage information and communication, depending on the level of the crisis and communication needs.

- **Communicate: The fourth step is informing parents.** A parent letter should be sent home with the students on the same day any crisis incident has occurred. You want to be the first one to give them the facts of the incident and build trust that you will communicate good and bad news in a timely fashion. You may wish to send such a letter daily for a period

after the crisis. (Remember that if the police are involved, it will likely make it to your local papers' police briefs section; and if students and staff are involved, they will be talking about the incident at home and in the community.) Before the school day is out, a letter from the principal should go home to parents explaining the incident and the measures you took to deal with it. This should also be distributed to your e-mail listserv, posted on your Web site and given to the media along with the news release; the media can help you alert

parents that a letter was distributed. Subsequent parent letters should be distributed in conjunction with news releases until the issue is resolved. Front-line staff should have the letter in order to read from it in the event they receive parent calls, and the building principal should be prepared to handle further communication with parents. If the incident is going to make your newspaper's police briefs section or if students or non-confidential staff members are aware of any crisis incident, it is better to be proactive with your parent communication.

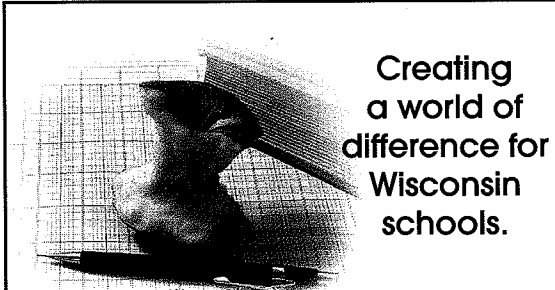
- **Communicate: The fifth step is to repeat and reassure.** Regularly report about how you are handling the crisis. I believe the single most important thing you can do in a crisis is to regularly share appropriate information internally and externally. This will train your community to obtain their information from proper sources, decrease the rumor mill, ease fears and build confidence and trust in your district. Reassurance is essential. Reporting that the investigation is underway and there is no new information is better than no information at all.
- **Evaluate: Examine both external and internal efforts.** Once the issue is resolved, debrief your crisis teams and administrators on what worked and what didn't. Include other key publics as appropriate and feasible, such as school board members, parent-teacher associations and the media. Look at new ways to control the issue in the future. Modify your

manual, protocol and policies as needed. Brainstorm new concepts to control incidents. For example, a local video production company in our community worked with our district's staff and students to create a video entitled "Consequences: The Senselessness of Bomb Threats." The program included testimonials from actual bomb threat offenders from our schools, who discussed what life was like for them after they had written a threat and were arrested and prosecuted. We showed the video to middle and high school students in their classrooms and broadcast it on our district's cable TV station. The media also covered the release of the video. By involving students and our community in the production and broadcast of the video, we helped send a message that these are serious acts that are treated seriously by the school district and law enforcement; hopefully, it discouraged some students from taking part in this behavior.

The RACE is Over

As you recover from the crisis, share with parents, key publics and the media the good news about what you've done right and the important lessons you've learned. Let them know that in all instances, crisis preparedness and communication is always foremost on your mind. ▀

Olson Kold, APR, is the manager of public information for the Janesville School District. She is also president-elect of the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA), which provided this column. Olson Kold presented this information at the July 2003 National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) conference in Denver, Colo. WSPRA, specializing in school community relations, provides visionary leadership and service to Wisconsin schools by equipping its members with effective communication management skills.



Creating a world of difference for Wisconsin schools.

EHLERS
& ASSOCIATES INC

Brookfield, Wisconsin 53005-6202
(262) 785-1520 FAX (262) 785-1810
www.ehlers-inc.com