



Crisis Communication Protocols

*REFLECTION,
EXAMINATION AND NEW
FRAMEWORKS*

*FOR 2019-20 AND
BEYOND*

Desired Outcome

To improve the district's communication practices in times of real or perceived threats to safety and measure a distinct improvement in parent and staff satisfaction for these efforts.

Methodology

- Development and implementation of a **community survey**
- **Dialogues** with several school/parent leaders
- Review of **prior crisis communications** and other district data
- Development of **new communication protocols**
- **Recommendations** for implementation

To conduct the audit, the district contracted with an independent communications professional who specializes in working with public schools and has worked for hundreds of school districts in New York and New Jersey.

Online Survey

- 1,305 parent responses (35% of total parent household mailing addresses)
- 207 staff responses (23% of total staff)
- Significant engagement: response rate of 32% from all parent/staff addresses

The survey link (English and Spanish) was embedded in a short email (English and Spanish) that was sent to all parents and staff members on July 22nd. A reminder email was sent the following week. The survey was closed on August 4th.

Survey Results:

Broad Conclusions

- A solid core of **unqualified district support is evident**, overt negativism is low
 - A substantial subset of **parents with younger children need enlightenment**
 - Implied recognition of the difficulty of crisis communication (**benefit of doubt**)
 - Implied evidence of strong community cohesion and **'fix-it' attitude**
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Survey Results:

Messages From the Community...

- Address unevenness and/or inconsistency with better-defined protocols
 - Words – the *right* words – matter in managing emotional response
 - Expectations for the school community must be formalized
 - Accountability should be narrowed to the Superintendent for crisis-based issues
 - Specific attention needs to be paid to Hommocks to improve confidence levels
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Who Participated?

- 33% have children ONLY in elementary school, followed closely (29%) by parents with children in more than one school.
- 913 respondents identified an elementary affiliation (fairly even among the four schools), 544 identified a middle school affiliation, and 560 represented a high school affiliation
- 131 of the staff responses (197) came from the MS or HS

Conclusion: there is a relative balance of participation among parents associated with the three levels of schooling (elementary, middle, high). Those with a Hommocks affiliation have a modestly higher level of participation in the survey.

Survey Results:

Does the District Communicate Promptly in a Crisis?

- **Relatively speaking, yes.** Roughly 54% of respondents believe the district's response is 'always' or 'usually' prompt. Half of that amount (27%) believe it is 'inconsistent.' Few believe it is not prompt (5%); a surprising number don't know (13%).

Conclusion: Reaction time by the district is perceived as fairly strong, but an emphasis on greater consistency should be made. In addition, while the lower level of identified promptness at Hommocks may, in part, have to do with dissatisfaction over the events of June and prior months, this audience is the outlier in terms of satisfaction.

Survey Results:

Does the content of messaging in a crisis meet with satisfaction?

- To a degree, but there is significant room for improvement here. Only about 38% of topline responses indicate a belief in the district's clarity (always or usually) of messaging in a crisis, and this is exceeded by the roughly 41% who believe the district's efforts are uneven. However, there is little overt negativism, as only 15% believe the content is often insubstantial or unsatisfactory.

Conclusion: the difference between responding and responding with clarity is made clear here, specifically in the significant increase in responses identified as 'inconsistent.' Even those who identify exclusively with the high school, who gave high marks for responsiveness, report a much higher degree of inconsistency for 'clarity' of messaging.

Survey Results:

Should parents and staff be notified when the police are investigating rumors?

- **Emphatically, yes.** There is little disagreement on the topline and in the cross-tabulations in terms of whether the district should alert parents if the police are called to investigate unsubstantiated rumors that could be perceived as threatening, with 7 in 10 respondents 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing.'

Conclusion: they unequivocally want to be notified.

Survey Results:

Are district and building leaders communicating successfully in a crisis?

- **Respondents are ambivalent on the topline.** While approximately 48% agree or strongly agree with this statement and 25% disagree or strongly disagree, nearly 28% are agnostic.

Conclusion: there is necessary work to be done here for all leaders.

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Survey Results:

How do respondents rank communications modes?

- In a surprisingly contradictory manner to their behavior. Only 1,917 of 5,918 (32%) cell phone numbers are identified as text receivers. Yet respondents *by far* identified text messages as the top-ranked choice for critical alerts (77%).

Conclusion: a recalibrated crisis communication process must include comprehensive guidance for parents.

Recommendations

1. Create a New, Formal Paradigm for Crisis Communications

A brief guide probably best created as an infographic with the following topics:

- Defining urgency
 - Terms we use and why you should know them
 - Actual messages you will receive (initial contact)
 - How we communicate with you (modes): initially and follow-up
 - Who you will hear from consistently
 - Your responsibilities to be informed (registration, vigilance)
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Recommendations

2. Develop the New Protocols for Crisis Communication

Who speaks, to whom, the content, and the mode

- Superintendent ONLY and ALWAYS
 - Audience – don't compartmentalize; uniform, transparent response for all, as we are 'one'
 - Process– text/phone, followed by detailed email AFTER resolution
 - Language – use the 'right' words consistently (new protocols in report)
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Recommendations

3. Marketing the New Communications Paradigm

Office of Director of Communications to Build and Execute Campaign

- Create an Expecting the Unexpected infographic and distribute/publicize
 - Fully integrate (with supporting narratives) in district materials and website
 - Draft a parent letter (for each principal) with information on the changes
 - Support principal/parent dialogues on the new paradigm
 - Support PTA Council efforts on social media awareness session
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Recommendations

4. Establish Ongoing Training for Parents/Staff

Work with Principals and Parent Organization to Broaden Awareness

- Professional crisis communications training for all administrators October 4
 - Parent dialogues on Expecting the Unexpected led by each principal
 - Staff dialogues on Expecting the Unexpected led by each principal at faculty meeting
 - PTA Council sponsorship of a workshop for parents on the perils of social media
 - Integrate all training as annual district initiative
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