

THE NEA DEFINES A SCHOOL CRISIS AS “ANY TRAUMATIC EVENT THAT SERIOUSLY DISRUPTS COPING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING ABILITIES OF STUDENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF.”

SO WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

ALL CRISES OF ALL LEVELS REQUIRE A SWIFT, STRONG RESPONSE IN ORDER TO PROTECT A DISTRICT’S REPUTATION WHILE KEEPING THE PUBLIC INFORMED. SOMETIMES, DISTRICTS ARE AWARE OF UPCOMING CRISES, SUCH AS LONG LABOR NEGOTIATIONS THAT ARE LIKELY TO RESULT IN A STRIKE. OTHER CRISES, SUCH AS A SHOOTING OR NATURAL DISASTER, OCCUR SUDDENLY AND REQUIRE IMMEDIATE ACTION. THIS DOCUMENT WILL HELP GUIDE YOU IN PREPARING YOUR CRISIS COMMUNICATION’S PLANS FOR MYRIAD SCENARIOS.

	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4
DESCRIPTION	Most urgent; affects the entire community and is unfolding in real time.	Future physical harm is possible and fear is pervasive. May affect a smaller group or select individuals; or has the potential to affect the larger community, but with a longer lead time; can develop to a Level 1 crisis if ignored.	Can affect a large community but does not typically involve violence; reputational or emotional harm likely; could escalate if ignored.	Similar to Level 3, but more individual in nature.
EXAMPLE	The Parkland high school shooting; the Franklin Regional High School stabbing. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of life or threat of loss of life (students, teachers, other personnel) • Active shooter • Natural disaster 	A series of bomb threats targeting the University of Pittsburgh in 2012; water contamination threatens the Pittsburgh Public Schools’ water supply. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental hazard with potentially serious health or safety consequences • Terroristic threats • Bullying or hazing 	Canon-McMillan school lunch lady situation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher or personnel strike or walkout • Embezzlement or other theft/fraud • Student protest • Student misbehavior at a public event such as a football game 	Problem teacher returns to the job due to union negotiation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inappropriate social media post by a teacher or admin • Child left behind on a bus • Student/teacher death outside of school
RESPONSE	A holding statement — a strong, swift statement to keep stakeholders at bay is needed immediately, followed by a release of information as it becomes available and is appropriate to be shared. You want to communicate what you know happened, when it happened, what is being done about it, whether it is an ongoing or active situation, and how you will update the information (email, phone, website, news conference, social media, etc.).			

PREMO INSIGHTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You should run this holding statement by public safety officials so long as they are able to swiftly review • You should have prepared holding statements for myriad crises • You must have personnel redundancy in terms of trained employees who can deliver this message swiftly • Holding statements slow down rumors and speculation and buy you time/credibility with media • Your stakeholder community will expect to hear from the head of school; collaborate and ask for a joint press conference. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your goal is to showcase that your school’s crisis operations and protocols are working and reassure parents/students that everything is under control • Stories will have media legs; collaborate with authorities on messaging • You need frontline staff/teachers to be message deliverers to parents/students • You need to deliver clarity on what to expect next • Being proactive and authoritative is key. These are the kinds of stories that can assume lives of their own and quickly spiral out of control, especially bomb threats. Work closely with public safety to ensure you find the correct balance of informing the public and quelling rumors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These crises are nuanced and require simple, strong messages delivered swiftly. You will want to tell the full story but that is not easily absorbed. • Social media monitoring is essential • Legal counsel is likely to advise no comment or not understand the urgency of response; challenge them and remember your audience • Teachers and admin need to assist with rumor control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some cases, you will have information about a crisis and be unsure whether it will go public. We suggest defaulting to the side of transparency and control by communicating to the most impacted audiences only, vs. school-wide communications. • Personnel and HIPAA issues require consultation with legal counsel in concert with a crisis communications professional. However: simply saying “no comment” or not responding at all is never your best line of defense. • You want to communicate transparency and cooperation, even when you are legally obligated to limit the information you do communicate. • Increasingly, parents expect their school communities to care for their child’s
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				emotional needs, not just scholastic achievement. This means that authentic communications and emotional supports are critical in building trust with parents and students.
KEY MESSAGES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We take this situation seriously Safety is our paramount concern We are following policy/procedures and laws and working in close collaboration with.. Right now we are focused on... You can expect to be updated... Our goal is to keep the community as informed as possible... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We understand that this situation, which is out of our control, is extremely frustrating [and scary] for parents and students. We do everything possible to keep our campus safe. That's our number one priority. As we work closely with [agency], we will update you via our website and X as soon as we can. Our goal is to give you the most accurate information possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our student's emotional wellbeing is something we consider to be paramount in their ability to learn effectively. Toward that end... It's unfortunate that inaccurate information was posted and we're not sure about the motivation by the posting of this false information. What we do know is that this student.... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We have built a strong, vibrant community at X school and when something is inappropriate or doesn't go as planned, we're prepared to deal swiftly with the situation and restore normalcy. We're deeply saddened to confirm the tragic accident that took place involving members of our school community. (Insert student name) was fatally injured as a result of a sudden accident earlier this week. There are no words to describe the unthinkable pain his/her family faces as they process this loss, and we are asking our entire community to hold them in your hearts and thoughts. Be assured that our school community will offer all the support that we can. Counseling will be made available to those students who need it.
MESSAGE DELIVERER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You should run this holding statement by public safety officials so long as they are able to swiftly review You should have prepared holding statements for myriad crises You must have personnel redundancy in terms of trained employees who can deliver this message swiftly Holding statements slow down rumors and speculation and buy you time/credibility with media 			
MESSAGE CONTROL & MONITORING	Create one source of official information, ideally your webpage. Post all statements and updates to the webpage and then disseminate to other mediums including social media. If you don't have a social listening platform, have at least two dedicated employees monitoring social media with prepared rumor control messages.			
WHEN NOT TO ANSWER	Do not answer questions if you do not know the answer, if the question is better suited for someone else, you do not understand the question, or it is a speculative question. Refer to Premo's Predictive Interview Formula™ to prepare for the worst possible questions.			
TECHNIQUES TO AVOID THE "NO COMMENT" TRAP	<p>If asked to speak with someone involved in the situation and they are unavailable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are not available at this time, as we are respecting the privacy of those involved as they recover from this traumatic experience. If you leave me your contact information, I will let you know if they become available. <p>If asked for an additional detail about a criminal incident</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will need to refer you to the (insert government agency) for that information. <p>If asked a question with no answer within approved messaging (don't speculate)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am uncertain about that detail (or – I am not the appropriate person to respond to that question). If I may take your name and number, someone will get back to you. <p>If asked about blame</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Right now, all of our efforts are focused on everyone's safety, well-being and bringing the situation under control. At this time, I will not speculate on the cause of the incident. <p>If district messaging is not yet prepared</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are in the process of gathering accurate information and preparing a statement. If you provide me your email and question, we will send it to you immediately once finalized. 			