

# When Bad Things Happen to Good Schools

## *Needed: A Crisis Communication Plan*

**Although your school can rely on news media coverage of a crisis to get your messages out, this obviously should not be the only avenue you use.**

says Kermit Netteburg, communication specialist for the North American Division offices of the Adventist Church. To do this, the school should appoint one spokesperson who will issue communique and grant interviews with the news

media. Ideally, someone other than the head officer of the school should fill this position.

Netteburg advises that a crisis team be established to anticipate potential problems. The team should include the school's top leaders, a trained communications person, and experts in various specialties, as needed. He suggests that the team be kept small and that it be flexible. The group ought to receive ongoing training, and should function as a standing unit that anticipates problem situations and then crafts key messages to share in crisis situations.

The crisis team should develop a written plan that includes procedure and protocol to use when the school deals with a crisis. Roles and duties of staff, emergency and medical arrangements, physical plant considerations, and more need to be outlined in the plan. If a written plan is in place *before* a crisis, the school will be much better equipped to deal with the problem. But the key is preparation.

To communicate information about the crisis, the school should follow a set of steps that have been decided upon beforehand. The school's crisis plan should include a section on communication.

### **What Should You Say?**

As with any communication task, it is important to consider the audience. What do they need to know? Once that has been ascertained, the school can consider how to make the information available.

**I**nevitably, at some time your school will face a crisis. It is, therefore, imperative to have a plan of action as you deal with the situation and communicate with parents, church, and community.

School crises come in a variety of forms. There are natural disasters such as blizzards, tornadoes, and earthquakes, which pose an obvious threat to the well-being of a campus and its inhabitants. Another potential area for crises centers around accidents, such as fires or school transportation mishaps. Other crises relate to school operations such as a teacher's improper behavior or institutional mismanagement of money. A fourth growing area of concern is violence that occurs on school property and threats made against personnel or property.

Each of these crises demands a response from the school. Parents and church members need the assurance that the school is doing everything it can to provide a safe and secure place for their children's education. And they need to know the severity of the crisis and its potential effects on school operations.

The news media will want to know as well. Each of the crises listed above will bring out news reporters doing their job. Although your school can rely on news media coverage of a crisis to get your messages out, this obviously should not be the only avenue you use.

So much depends on the school's initial reaction to a crisis situation. The institutional response needs to be as calm and logical as possible. To ensure an appropriate response, the school must have a crisis communication plan in place *before*—that is, in anticipation of—any crisis situation.

### **Speak With One Voice**

Be sure to make plans that help your school to speak with one voice,

**BY DOUGLAS A. JONES**

The crisis team should make sure that the school has an on-campus communication system. On larger campuses, this may involve blanket coverage by voice-mail or E-mail messages. The initial announcement should be short and succinct and should indicate how additional information will be shared. It is essential for all school employees to be informed about the crisis.

**D**epending on the nature of the crisis, it may be adequate to notify parents and church members by letter. But if the crisis is an emergency such as an accident or natural disaster, the school will need to communicate more immediately. Obviously, if students or staff have been directly affected, it's important to contact their families as soon as possible. Some crisis plans use a phone tree system for informing parents and church members of a crisis situation.

Once the principal players in a crisis situation have been notified, the school will need to inform the public, if that is appropriate. Of course, in the case of a natural disaster, an accident, or school violence, the news media will contact you. The school should designate a spokesperson who communicates the key message ("We are concerned about the safety of our students and staff, and we are doing everything we can right now to cooperate with the emergency team at the site"; or "Police have verified one injury, and we are trying to reach the student's family.") Keep the message short and to the point.

### Using Media Coverage

Remember that news reports about the situation—in the newspaper, on television, and on radio—will go a long way toward achieving the goal of informing the public about the crisis. Generally, when a natural disaster or accident occurs, the public will sympathize with the school's situation. But

**Monise Hamilton, Director of University Relations at Andrews University, being interviewed by a local reporter.**

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**Monise Hamilton, Douglas Jones, and Pat Spangler make up the Crisis Committee at Andrews University.**

the school's public image, as well as its reputation with parents and church members, depends on the way you respond.

When reporters interview the designated spokesperson, he or she should be as clear, concise, and correct as possible. School employees should be told not to volunteer additional information or to speculate. If they don't know the answer to a question, they should say so.

### Knowing When to Be Discreet

When the crisis involves school violence or official misconduct, everyone will have to be much more discreet. Legal issues abound in such situations, and the school spokesperson must be wary of sharing information that is unsuited for general disclosure. Therefore, if the school has time to prepare a statement, it should do so. And it would be a good idea for administrators to confer with legal counsel before releasing the statement to the media. Of course, in an emergency situation arising from school violence—especially when dealing with threats against the school—the initial message should center on the safety of students and staff.

In all cases, tell the truth. But don't feel compelled to share everything that is known about the crisis. Instead, say, "It

would be inappropriate for me to comment about that right now" if a legal issue might be involved. Never say, "No comment." This makes the school look like it's hiding something. Or you might say, "That's privileged information." At a recent session of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, presenters Kathi McDonald and Michael Sampson cautioned school spokespersons never to say, "Off the record." These two St. Louis communications specialists stress that there is no such thing as "off the record" with reporters. If you don't want to read it in the newspaper, they warn, don't say it!

### Consider the Audience

In preparing crisis communications, be sure to consider the audience. What do you want them to know? What do they already know? And—although it may seem superficial and self-serving at the white-hot point of crisis—how will the school look as a result of what and how you have communicated?

The crisis communication plan at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, is a 22-page document that lists as its purpose: (1) Helping the university to make available, in a timely and accurate manner, any relevant information to all of its publics and to the media, and (2) Expediting the recovery process so the university can return to business as quickly as possible.

The plan also lists as its objectives:

- To take charge of the situation immediately by assessing the damage, if any, and containing the crisis;
- To ensure that Andrews University is viewed by the public as an institution that is concerned about its students, faculty, and staff and is dedicated to their well-being; and
- To ensure that all information being sent out from the university is consistent and accurate.

The communication plan includes a list of crisis communication team members

## The institutional response needs to be as calm and logical as possible.

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and university personnel (administrators, deans, directors) who because of their positions must be informed in the event of a crisis. Each person's entry includes telephone numbers, E-mail addresses, and local contact names and numbers.

**T**he crisis communication plan also includes emergency telephone numbers of community agencies such as the police, fire department, hospitals, and utility companies, as well as a list of internal publics (i.e., board of trustees, faculty, staff, students) and external publics (i.e., Lake Union officers, alumni, parents, news media, community) who must be kept informed.

Several pages are devoted to media contacts in the area (name, telephone, and fax numbers) in addition to numbers for the General Conference Communication Department, North American Division

**School crises may come in the form of a fire such as this one at William Jennings Bryan College in Dayton, Tennessee, on February 6, 2000, which destroyed the Administration Building and caused an estimated \$10 million damage.**

college and university public-relations officers, and union conference papers.

At the end of the crisis communication plan is a page of facts about the university. It includes the mission statement and statistics about the school (i.e., enrollment figures, degree offerings) that may be useful to reporters preparing news accounts.

The Andrews University communication plan also offers a list of the top six potential crisis situations that could affect the campus. The second item is *Fire in One of*

*the Residence Halls*. Under that heading are listed seven initial responses and procedures: (1) Make sure fire department and police/campus safety have been notified; (2) Evacuate people and relocate them to gym or cafeteria; (3) Open medical center for minor injuries (take more seriously injured to hospital); (4) Notify parents of any injured students; (5) Issue a toll-free number for parents to call for information; (6) Set up a media center for the spokesperson to meet with reporters; and (7) Contact news media.

Following the list of steps, the key message to be shared appears in bold type: **"Every action has been taken to ensure the safety of the residents of \_\_\_\_\_ Hall. Police are investigating the cause of the fire."**

In summary, a crisis communication plan represents an attempt to establish ground rules to follow in the event of a crisis. It offers a plan of action for appropriately communicating information to the campus and the public before there is a crisis situation. While such a plan cannot diminish the urgency or prevent the tragedy that a crisis can bring to a school, the document can help the school to do a good job of dealing with a bad situation. ❧

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### Taking on the Media

If the situation has caught the attention of the news media, your school's handling of the press can be crucial to the outcome of a crisis.

Be sure to establish friendly relations with local news people *before* a crisis develops. This is probably easier to do on isolated rural campuses than in larger urban areas, but it never hurts to provide opportunities for the local press to get acquainted with your school.

To develop a good, professional relationship with reporters, invite them to campus for special events, for lunch in the cafeteria, or for interviews with teachers or students who have expertise on current news stories. Encourage your journalism or English teacher to invite a local news anchor or reporter to address a class or assembly.

When reporters cover a crisis at your school, try to see them as allies in maintaining or restoring your school's good image, says Kathleen Fearn-Banks in *Crisis Communication* (1996). Be accessible and pleasant. Return phone calls and respect their deadlines. In short, treat reporters as guest colleagues.

If your school's crisis attracts several reporters to campus for an extended period, you ought to provide them with a work area. This place should be apart from the school spokesperson's headquarters and definitely away from the principal's or president's office. Be sure that the location is comfortable and has easy access to phones, food, and rest rooms.