

**Mountain View Whisman School District**

# **Emergency Response and Crisis Management Plan**

**Annex 4**

**Emergency Communications**

***Important Note:***

**Generally the Superintendent will be the spokesperson for the District in the event of an emergency. However, there may be circumstances when the Superintendent is not available.**

**This Emergency Communications Annex should be used as a guide for communication in the event that the Superintendent is not available to provide communications to parents or the media.**

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## **CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS**

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This Crisis Communication Plan provides information and procedures for the coordination of communications within the District, between the District and its stakeholders, and between the District and the media.

Our guiding principle is to communicate facts as quickly as possible, updating information regularly as circumstances change, to ensure the safety of our students and staff and the continued operation of essential services.

We will use multiple mediums to reach as many people as possible with accurate, timely information. This is especially important in the first hours and days of an emergency or crisis. Our goal is to be open, accountable and accessible to our audiences, while also being mindful of legal and privacy concerns.

Whenever possible, the first groups that should be informed about a crisis are internal audiences who are directly affected, such as students and staff. The next groups should include parents, Board members, community leaders, and other audiences as well as the media. The communication channel for each audience may differ and the use of multiple channels is encouraged.

In a crisis, people make decisions differently. They simplify, and cling to current beliefs. They remember what they see or have previously experienced, which means that first messages carry more weight. So in a crisis, we initially communicate:

- Simply
- Timely
- Accurately
- Repeatedly
- Credibly
- Consistently

We can build trust and credibility by expressing:

- Empathy and caring
- Competence and expertise
- Honesty and openness
- Commitment and dedication

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## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

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### Steps to Take for Communications in a Crisis

1. Members of Cabinet should meet immediately upon notification of a crisis. School principals should be included if a school site is involved.
2. Assess the magnitude of the situation and formulate a communications strategy to fit the situation. It's critical to do a quick assessment to help predict the level of public information and media response that will be required.
3. Identify audiences that need information
  - Those that are most affected by the event (most likely students and staff)
  - Those that are not immediately affected but need information about safety and facts of the event (e.g., parents, Board members)
  - Those that are not affected by the event but still need information (e.g., community leaders and media)
4. Develop messages to be communicated to each audience and determine who is responsible for delivering those messages. See Message Planning Worksheet (pg. 5) and Template for Initial Media Release (pg. 10) for assistance.
5. Deliver the initial messages as quickly as possible. See Crisis Communication Life Cycle on next page for information that should be included in messages.
6. ***Be first. Be right. Be credible.***
7. Say and do things that show everyone that the District is seriously concerned about what has happened and is taking action.

Each phase of a crisis has its own unique informational requirement. The following chart outlines the Crisis Communication Life Cycle and identifies typical information needs of each phase.

### Crisis Communication Life Cycle

	Pre-Crisis	Initial	Maintenance	Resolution	Evaluation
Typical Questions		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happened?</li> <li>• Where and when?</li> <li>• Who's responsible</li> <li>• Who's to blame?</li> <li>• Are we safe?</li> <li>• What's the danger to my children?</li> <li>• What's being done to protect or help people?</li> <li>• Is anyone hurt? Sick? Dead?</li> <li>• Who are they?</li> <li>• What are you going to do about it?</li> <li>• Who's in charge?</li> <li>• What's going to happen next?</li> <li>• Confirm the information from reliable sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What's the risk to my child and me?</li> <li>• What can I do to minimize the risks?</li> <li>• What should/can I do to help?</li> <li>• Why are you doing what you are doing?</li> <li>• What aren't you doing more/differently?</li> <li>• Who should I listen to?</li> <li>• Who's right?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why didn't the response go better/differently?</li> <li>• Who's responsible for getting us back to normal?</li> <li>• Why is it taking so long to _____?</li> <li>• I'm not seeing this on the news anymore. Should I still care?</li> </ul>	
Information Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify audiences</li> <li>• Develop generic messages and materials</li> <li>• Identify channels of communication</li> <li>• Exercise the plan to be sure it works</li> <li>• Build relationships with audiences and media now</li> <li>• Make sure employees know what to do if they are approached by the media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge the event with empathy</li> <li>• Explain and inform in simple terms about the risk</li> <li>• Establish your credibility</li> <li>• Provide appropriate courses of action (including where and how to get more information)</li> <li>• Commit to stakeholders to continued communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help people understand the impact of the situation and their risk</li> <li>• Provide background information to those who need to know</li> <li>• Gain understanding of and support for response</li> <li>• Monitor what is being said by whom and correct any misinformation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve future response by providing education about this response</li> <li>• Honestly examine problems and mishaps</li> <li>• Reinforce what worked</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debrief and evaluate how the plan worked</li> <li>• Document the response</li> <li>• Revise the plan to incorporate changes based on lessons learned</li> </ul>

The worksheet below is useful in helping to identify audiences, key messages, and appropriate communication channels.

### Message Planning Worksheet

Event: \_\_\_\_\_

Audience	Key Message	Supporting Facts	Communication Channel

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## **CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS**

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Messages should be clear, direct and simple:

- No more than 3 key points
- Use clear, direct language
- Avoid jargon
- Do refute negative allegations without repeating them
- Use positive or neutral terms, when possible
- Discuss what you know, not what you think
- Don't express personal opinions

Communication experts recommend the 27/9/3 principle: 27 words, nine seconds, three messages. If you don't keep it short and simple, someone else will make it short and simple for you and you may lose your key message.

Important points to be made are: student safety is top priority, preparedness of the school, access to information for parents, responsible immediate action taken by school representatives, support provided for students at the school, and coordination of efforts with community agencies.

### **Useful phrases:**

- We are still gathering information.
- All of our students and staff are accounted for and safe.
- Our emergency procedures worked exactly as we intended and practiced.
- Student safety is our top priority. We will continue to update our safety plans and security measures to protect our students and staff.
- Here are some steps we are taking immediately: LIST SAFETY STEPS
- We are very proud of our students and staff at our schools, who with the able assistance of the Mountain View Police Department, helped save lives.
- We know this is a difficult time for your family, and we encourage you to take advantage of the professional mental health service being offered by CHAC (650) 965-2020).
- We will provide regular updates on the district website: [www.mvwsd.org](http://www.mvwsd.org)
- Thank you again for your involvement and commitment to our schools.

You may be able to use the same message for multiple audiences.

As messages are developed, have the messages reviewed (ideally by a member of the audience the message is intended for) to make sure they are clear and direct. It's important to remember that during a crisis, people take in information differently. Communication takes place in the mind of the receiver.

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## **CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS**

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In addition to the primary messages developed, other information such as school and district FAQs should be ready.

Be sure to develop a script for those answering phone calls.

### **Sample Frequently Asked Questions:**

*What happened?* Stick to the facts you have verified: who, what, when, where. Coordinate information release with law enforcement.

*How much damage?* Never speculate on the dollar amount of damage. Give factual, clear information as it becomes available, e.g., two classrooms have been damaged in the fire.

*How many people were killed/injured/missing?* ONLY RELEASE CONFIRMED NUMBERS. Coordinate with law enforcement.

*How can I locate a family member, colleague, or student?* Provide evacuee information numbers and locations.

*How can I get updated information?* Give time and location of next briefing as well as hotline number.

*How can parents and teachers receive information about how to help children deal with trauma?* Provide phone number to CHAC and/or County Mental Health Department.

*How can I volunteer to help or provide donations?* Provide information number. Items needed now include: LIST

*Why did this happen?* NEVER SPECULATE

*What are you doing next?* We are assessing the situation and will determine next steps in cooperation with the Mountain View Police Department. Provide information on how families are being reunited, when classes will resume, etc.

*Were any policies or law violated?* We are conducting a thorough investigation into what occurred and how it can be prevented in the future.

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## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

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### *Working with the Media*

The media can be strong allies in getting your messages out quickly and accurately. Media has the legal right to have access to whatever the general public has access to.

Let the media know when new information can be provided. Establish a schedule for information releases. Provide all media with the same access at the same time.

The spokesperson brings the organization to life. He or she literally embodies the organization and give it is human identity. The spokesperson should remain calm, attentive, and polite with a relaxed and neutral physical stance. Make eye contact. Keep hands near the waist, but still visible and minimize the movement of hands.

People judge the messenger before the message.

### **Tips for Working with the Media**

- Tell the truth.
- Say it first.
- Use everyday language, not jargon.
- Be sure to listen to the whole question before answering.
- Don't restate any question you are asked (especially negatively phrased questions) because, through editing and selective quoting, it can be made to appear part of your statement.
- Don't interpret events or motives or predict what will happen.
- Don't speculate, ad lib, blame anyone, or try to be deceptive.
- Don't let anyone bait you into an argument because you are almost certain to look defensive.
- Don't downplay the seriousness of the situation or withhold information.
- Buy time by asking a reporter to restate a question. This will give you time to think before answering.
- Don't assume information the reporter has is correct until you have confirmed it.
- Never say "no comment."
- There is no such thing as "off the record."
- Don't make promises related to media deadlines. Indicate that you will do your best to respond in a timely manner.
- Reporters might leave a "blank space" hoping that you will fill the time with unintended comments. After you have made your three key points, **stop talking.**

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## **CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS**

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### **Useful Phrases when working with the media:**

I believe I have already answered that question. What you really need to know is...

That's a great question. May I get back to you?

Yes, that's been said, but let's not forget that...

I agree with you about X and I think it illustrates a great point...

What we do know is...

The real question here is ...

As I said before...

The key thing is...

There are three points we need to remember...

### **Students, Staff and Parent Rights with the Media**

You have the right to:

- Say no to an interview.
- Be treated with respect
- Select the time and location of the interview
- Have someone with you during the interview
- Know the purpose of the story
- Ask about questions in advance
- Speak to one reporter at a time
- Release a written statement instead of having an interview
- Refrain from answering uncomfortable questions.
- Say when the interview is over.
- Ask for a correction if the information is wrong.

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## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

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### Template for Initial Media Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: NAME

Phone:

**Headline:** NAME OF SCHOOL, INCIDENT

**Describe Situation:** At approximately TIME, DATE, TYPE OF INCIDENT occurred at SCHOOL NAME, LOCATION

**Describe Action Being Taken:**

Our school and district crisis response teams as well as emergency responders (LIST AGENCY NAMES) are on scene.

Our major concern is for the safety of our students and staff.

Parents can meet their students at LOCATION ADDRESS.

Insert quote from principal/district office administrator.

**For more information:**

Hotline number

District website address

## **Sample School Fact Sheet**

### About the school district

- Name
- Location
- Number of schools
- Number of pupils
- District mission
- School calendar
- Board of Education members
- Superintendent

### About the school

- Name
- Location
- Grades
- Number of pupils
- Motto/mission
- Principal
- Number of teachers
- Facility: when built, when remodeled
- History

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**CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS**

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## **Sample Daily Fact Sheet**

Date:

School District:

School Name:

Contact:

Contact Phone:

Latest Information:

Press briefing schedule:

Donations:

Condolences:

Funeral arrangements:

Mental health support:

Parent Information line:

Website:

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## **CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS**

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### **Sample Media Request for Information**

Reporter: \_\_\_\_\_

Media outlet: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Deadline: \_\_\_\_\_

Specific question: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Message taken by: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of request: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Sample Media Request for Interview**

Request interview with: \_\_\_\_\_

Media outlet and reporter name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ TV

\_\_\_\_ Radio

\_\_\_\_ Newspaper

\_\_\_\_ Magazine

\_\_\_\_ Other

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Date interview to be held: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Anticipated length of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Other interviewees: \_\_\_\_\_

Message taken by: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and time of request: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS**

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### **Monitoring**

During an event, it's not enough to disseminate messages. You also need to monitor what is being reported and what is being said or asked for by target audiences. This gives the opportunity to correct misinformation or to clarify and expand messages.

### **Post Event Evaluation**

When the event is over, evaluate:

- Did all audiences receive the message in a timely manner?
- Were the messages received and interpreted in the way we intended?
- Did the channels of communication work as we expected?
- Did we effectively monitor the situation and were we able to adopt our response as needed?

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## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

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### SAMPLE LETTERS AND NOTIFICATION STATEMENTS

Date

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Shortly before *(time)* today, an anonymous caller indicated that a bomb was set to explode in our school. While the threat was suspected to be a prank, school officials quickly proceeded to take appropriate action to insure the safety of students. The building was completely evacuated within *(number)* minutes. Officials from the police department arrived on campus immediately to conduct a thorough inspection. No explosive devices were found and portions of the building were reoccupied as officials determined the areas to be safe. All students resumed their regular schedules by *(time)*.

These practical jokes are no laughing matter to those of us concerned with the safety of our students and the importance of an uninterrupted school day. False bomb threats are a crime under California law, and charges will be filed if the individual responsible for this incident is caught.

I would like to compliment the students, staff and authorities for the way they handled this situation.

Sincerely,

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## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

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Date

Dear Parents:

It is always a scary situation when you hear there has been a bus accident. It is always a great relief when you know no one was hurt and that it was not serious. Such was the case in the incident on *(day), (date)*.

There was a substitute bus driver driving the morning kindergarten route home. She was following the prescribed route home and entered the parking lot where students are regularly dropped off for afternoon day care. The driver was unaware of the holiday and the early closure of that day. While in the parking lot, the driver made a sharp cutting turn and hit the light pole in the lot.

Fortunately no student was injured. There was minor damage to the bus and the light pole was knocked down. Another bus and driver safely transported all students home, and the school office contacted all parents.

If you have any other questions regarding this incident, please call the office at *(number)*.

Sincerely,

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## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

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Dear Parents:

Understandably, with the recent tragedies that have occurred elsewhere in the nation, we feel a greater obligation to take every precaution in protecting your child at school. As a result, I would like to make you aware of a situation that took place earlier today at *(school)*.

About mid-morning, we learned that local law enforcement officials were searching for an unarmed individual in the vicinity of our school. As a precaution, the decision was made to ensure the safety of all students by locking down our classrooms until the search concluded.

During this 45-minute period, students were safely secured behind locked doors and teachers calmly met with their children in out-of-view areas within the classroom. After an indication from authorities that the situation was under control, classes resumed their normal routines with no further disruption.

I would like to commend our students and staff for how quickly and quietly they responded to this situation. I also would like to thank local law enforcement officials for their assistance during this episode. Fortunately, no immediate danger resulted from the search for this individual. However, I share this to assure you that our staff has proactively prepared for such an incident. The precision and cooperation with which it was handled is evidence of the steps that have been taken to protect the well-being of your child. Absolutely nothing is more important to those of us at *(school)*.

Sincerely,