# Crisis Communications Plan for Public School Districts

This plan is designed for public school systems to develop a crisis communications plan for use in any situation. It has been adapted from [The Broad Center](https://www.broadcenter.org/about/news/the-broad-academy-welcomes-a-new-cohort-of-education-leaders/) Preparing to Communicate Through a Crisis with Texas-based examples.

This plan was originally prepared for The Broad Center in 2018 by Lepping & Associates to reflect best practices in crisis response across industries, as well as specific needs identified in interviews and strategy and training sessions with leaders and staff from various school systems over many years.

## The Effect of District Structure on Crisis Response

Before following this template, pause to take stock of communications challenges your district might face due to its structure and size.

You may need to adjust the template or take additional steps before you even introduce it to your district, depending on your district’s degree of centralization, size, location, governance structure, and other decision-making norms.

Crisis communications decision-making usually falls somewhere along the following continuum. Where along this line does your organization currently fall?

### The Crisis Continuum

**Centralized Shared Duties Strategically Defined Shared Duties Decentralized**

**Centralized:** In many school districts, especially large ones, spokespeople are centralized. Potential crises are to be reported to, decided by, and managed at the department level. Common challenges for centralized districts include:

* The department may be too far removed from details.
* Depending on the system, a centralized spokesperson may be less credible or familiar to some key audiences.
* Bureaucratic layers may mean key facts pass within the system less efficiently, and response time may be too long to be credible.

**Shared Duties:** In some smaller districts and charter school networks, there is shared responsibility between leaders at the central office and leaders at school sites. Challenges that come along with this model include:

* Coordinated decision making by a cross-level joint crisis team may not be effective if too many players or tiers are involved, especially if it is unclear who is in charge and who plays what role.
* Responses may be delayed or may never occur.

**Decentralized**: This strategy is most common among locally empowered charter schools. Completely decentralized systems, where nearly all crisis communications work is handled at the local level, can cause major enrollment, funding, and credibility problems in situations where the national or regional brand may be negatively affected.

## The Crisis Communications Team

Communications plans created using this template will enable streamlined, coordinated decision making by a **joint crisis communications team with single-point leadership**. This team structure allows judgment and participation to be flexible, given the audience and situation needs, yet still has clear roles and a defined decision-making process.

A streamlined, rapid response is possible, even within large or multi-tiered districts, if the communications plan allows for pertinent facts and strategic suggestions to come in from any level—and allows those suggestions to be acted upon quickly and decisively.

**Key success factors:**

1. The joint crisis communications team immediately has access to all facts.
2. The decision maker, overall goal, appointed strategist(s), and additional fact gatherers are clearly designated from the beginning.
3. No time is wasted on side conversations or side committees.

This requires an effective command hierarchy or structure involving the key individuals logically needed in the moment. These key individuals are situational, depending who knows the facts, can provide big-picture judgment, and has audience understanding and trust. It is recommended to have back-ups individuals in mind in the event key individuals are unavailable when a response is needed.

**Before following this template, also consider:**

* **Size:** The larger the district is, the larger and more diverse your audience may be, and the more people involved in message distribution. All messaging should be resonant and consistent. Incoming queries should be tracked and answered quickly, leveraging that messaging. Any new information must be immediately looped back to the team.
* **Degree of governance involvement in management:** Ensure any governance stakeholders are involved in your plan and in sync with team protocol and process. This includes the school board, mayor, governance body, etc. Depending on the current district structure, it may be necessary to amend licensing agreements with regions or schools, or to reach a memorandum of understanding to establish norms and expectations for crisis communications decision making.

## Getting Started

This crisis communications template is designed to enable your district to efficiently and effectively define and direct your message and brand during crises. Many districts already have some strong tenets of effective crisis communications in place.

This template assumes a district needs to put in place all tenets of a good defense, which include:

* Clear crisis communication roles and responsibilities
* Timely fact finding
* Goal-driven strategy
* Family-driven messaging and release strategy
* Effective, tactical dissemination
* Follow up
* Effective partnerships with families and partners

This template is designed to enable your district to develop a crisis communications plan that helps you tell your story fast, first, and in your stakeholder’s language.

**During the early stages of a crisis, two dynamics come into play for school systems:**

1. Word-of-mouth typically drives the flow of information. This can pose immense challenges when things are moving fast and all facts have not been confirmed. Rumors can quickly take root and escalate.
2. Restoring order as quickly as possible through effective, timely communications will clear the way for you to focus on your larger goals of teaching and learning. Here’s how to plan for restoring that order.

## Four Essential Steps

This crisis communications plan template outlines four essential steps for the communications team to follow during a crisis: engage decision makers/define roles and responsibilities/establish facts, goal-driven strategy/action (continue fact finding), message development, and follow up.

### Step 1: Engage decision makers/define roles and responsibilities/establish facts

When building your communications team, include the fewest roles from different district levels as possible, but don’t potentially critical roles. In districts with dozens or hundreds of schools, the list of potential team members will be long; however, many will not be needed to participate actively.

The team leader is responsible for determining the other team members needed and may choose to bring in outside experts as de facto team members, such as a representative of the state, Center for Disease Control, education service center, or partner organization.

The following chart defines primary roles and responsibilities. Consider judgment, skills, and experience within the district when assigning roles.

### Roles and Responsibilities for [INSERT DISTRICT] Crisis Team

**Decision maker:** superintendent/assistant superintendent or their designee with successful track record of judgment during crises, or a particular school or district leader (but only one person)

* **Backup:** chief strategy officer or similar role (may be a school or district leader designee)
* **Responsibilities:** declares goal at hand, approves strategy and message delivery after reviewing or guiding proposed strategies

**Team leader:** chief operations officer, chief of staff, or director of operations-type role, a school leader with a successful track record managing urgent projects, or their designee

* **Backup:** another designated strong manager or communications director
* **Responsibilities:** arranges conference calls/meetings, indicates which team members must spring into action (considering areas of expertise required, who is closest to facts and audiences, keeping the number of advisors down to a manageable level) and their deadlines, indicates how the team will communicate important updates (ideally on a shared drive), shares relevant central drive file with active team members, holds roles accountable

**Advisors:** strategic advisors to be involved as needed at the direction of the decision maker and team leader; ideally not to exceed seven advisors; includes any combination of leads of schools, operations, technology, website coordinator, security, legal, human resources, finance, data, media, social media, or community/intergovernmental liaison

* **Backup:** each potential advisor listed must designate a backup expert in their area
* **Responsibilities:** develops and proposes strategy on shared drive to decision maker, advises in area of expertise, requests information from fact gatherers as needed

**Fact owners:** any team members listed above or their designees who are closest to relevant facts in the given situation; could be the superintendent (who should share what partners or authorizers are asking), legal counsel (who should share governing law), communications director (who should share what media know and when), or school operations directors/principals/student caregivers

* **Backup:** their designated backups (those empowered to do their jobs in their absence)
* **Responsibility:** owns fact gathering and immediate sharing on shared drive

**Tech owners:** internet techology leads for each school/district

* **Backup:** their designated expert backups
* **Responsibilities:** oversees and coordinates technology needs

**Messengers:** communication leads

* **Backup:** their designated expert backups
* **Responsibilities:** generates evolving message according to developing strategy, incorporating edits until message is approved and immediately transmitting core message to releasors to prepare for release; may also create tailored versions of core message for each stakeholder (e.g. core message becomes press release/parent email) or relies on releasers to do this (depends on who knows each target audience and has most skill tailoring messages)

**Releasers:** primary people responsible for tactical distribution (e.g. press secretary, social media coordinator, community/intergovernmental director, parent liaisons, communications director)

* **Backups:** their designated expert backups
* **Responsibilities:** prepared to distribute the message, once approved, immediately to their particular key audiences (e.g. staff, parents) at the designated release time (not before or after); may also play a role in message tailoring in advance of release

### Step 2: Goal-driven strategy/action (continue fact finding)

As soon as the crisis comes to the team member’s attention, proceed as illustrated in the following graphic. As the team proceeds through this process, it is critical for all team members to align on the fundamental goal.



**The goal set by the team leader or decision maker, will look like this:**

To [somehow move] [a stakeholder group] to [believe/do something] [toward a result critical to maintaining progress toward our district goals].

**Example:**

To build trust with families that we are meeting our public duty to provide their children with resources and supports while minimizing anxiety and maximizing teaching and learning during school closures.

**Elements of an effective goal:**

* Calls out stakeholder, typically parents and guardians. **Possible stakeholders:** families, students, teachers/staff, administrators, board, media, authorizer, partners, elected officials, etc.
* Aligns stakeholder’s key value(s) with district goals. Stakeholder key values are those triggered by a reasonable misperception of the situation (e.g. safety, caring, respect, opportunity, fairness). **Possible key values:** safety, well-being, quality of education, opportunity equity, fairness, respect for culture, legal, transparency of information, accountability, choice, control, change to current expectation, honesty, caring, empathy.
* Multiple conversations may be required to finalize these items. Coordination should be ongoing as needed with agencies, lawyers, partners, community groups, family, etc. at issue.

**Tips/guidance on finding and sharing facts:**

* Share verified information on one shared communication team drive folder that everyone can access remotely.
* Communication team members must have phone, computer, and wifi access.
* Upload examples of common facts to gather onto **[INSERT YOUR DISTRICT SHARED FOLDER LOCATION]** and indicate their location.
* Team members should also suggest situation-specific facts for gathering in the moment.

**Guidance questions for fact owners working to verify facts:**

* Do you have all the facts, to the best of your knowledge?
* What other information do you need to put this event into perspective?
* Is information consistent across several sources?

### Step 3: Message Development

Once a strategy is in place, draft your core message. Start by introducing a “value connect” to show stakeholders that you understand and relate to the core value at play. From there, lay out relevant facts they need to know, show examples of the responsible leadership you are providing in this situation, and explain how you will update them and confirm action has been taken. Finally, close with another value-connect message.

**Example letter to families regarding school closure:**

Dear **[INSERT DISTRICT]** families and staff,

**[INSERT DISTRICT]** will suspend normal district operations **beginning [INSERT DATE] and continuing through [INSERT DATE]**. This is based on the latest coronavirus (Covid-19) guidance from President Trump and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

 **Continuing Student Learning:** Our team is prepared to activate our e-learning plan and you will hear more about the **[INSERT DISTRICT]** online platform **[INSERT DATE OR DATE RANGE]**. We realize digital access has the potential to be a challenge for some, and plans are in place to provide access to the same materials in alternate ways. We are committed to the support of our teachers and leaders during this transition; training details will be provided towards the end of the week.

**Student Meals: [INSERT DISTRICT]** has plans in place to ensure no student goes without food in the weeks ahead. Beginning on **[INSERT DISTRICT]**, Child Nutrition Services will provide grab-and-go breakfast and lunch meals for students. More information forthcoming.

**Employee Pay:**During the closure, **[INSERT DISTRICT]** employees will be paid.

**District Communications:** We will communicate with families and staff about important information noted above later this week. We will continue to keep you updated. We also urge you to look for the latest district information on social media @**XYZISD** and on our website **[link to district website].** During the week of **[INSERT DATE]**, we will reassess the situation regarding Covid-19 to determine if we need to suspend operations for an additional period of time.

Thank you for your continued patience and understanding as we navigate this unprecedented global health situation and continue to place the highest priority on our community’s health and well-being.

Thank you,
**[INSERT SIGNATURE OF DISTRICT LEADER]**

**Tips/guidance for drafting effective messaging:**

1. **Value connect.** Show that you understand the stakeholder value at hand. Take it seriously. For example, if your families hear a rumor about a nonexistent issue, start by appreciating the larger value at play: “Your child’s safety is our number one priority.”
2. **Tell what you know, what you don’t know, and what you are doing to fix the problem.** Your job is not to provide the right answers. You won’t be able to be “right” when facts are still coming in. Your job is to be honest.
3. **What you know needs to include facts** you have learned that are relevant to the stakeholder. This includes historical facts and context that will matter to the audience and facts about your own actions/communications about the crisis.
4. **If there is a lot of bad news, put it all out at once.** Bad news is worse when it trickles out. Draft it based on what a parent prioritizes, such as imminent action first, future action second.
5. **Keep messaging brief.** Lengthy messages can inadvertently appear defensive. Using too many words communicates that you are concerned, which will lead your audience to be even more concerned, and may inadvertently communicate guilt. Make it just long enough to stand on its own days later without backtracking or clarification.
6. **Define any jargon** (e.g. “programs,” acronyms) in plain language. This is not the time to unnecessarily confuse your stakeholders.

**Helpful sentence starters for writing messages:**

* Our first priority is …
* The best information we have at this time is …
* Nothing matters more to us than …
* We treat each child as if they were our own …
* We will keep you updated as we get more information …
* As always, we strive to keep you informed …

### Step 4: Follow Up

The follow-up stage is another opportunity to regain trust with target stakeholders by demonstrating your district’s integrity and proving that you did what you said you would do.In ideal situations, your original outgoing message will stand for itself. A follow up is needed if you introduced an action, the outcome of which your average audience member will reasonably want to know.

**Include the following in a brief follow-up communication to each stakeholder:**

* Close the loop. Reveal the outcome of actions taken and progress and continue to do so until the situation is fully resolved.
* When new facts are uncovered, send out another follow-up message