

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IN A DIGITAL WORLD

When the tweets and media calls reflect panic, what's a leader to do?



Kenneth S. Trump

A bomb threat e-mailed to a teacher. A warning of a shooting delivered through an international proxy server. Threats posted on Facebook or the latest social media app. Even a threat scribbled on a restroom wall can trigger texting and thus start rumors racing through the school community.

With a tide of threats now being delivered through digital media, the accompanying misinformation and panic hits many school communities. How can leaders protect student and staff safety while upholding their credibility—and the school's reputation?

As a consultant who works with school districts to strengthen their preparedness for—and response to—

school safety threats, I find there's often potential for a communications crisis to unfold alongside a real or perceived school safety crisis. As well as a plan for responding to security incidents and crises, today's principals and district leaders need a communications plan and a social media strategy to help manage communication.

"Swatting" and Other Trends

If you believe *swatting* is a discipline practice from years past, think again. Although paddling may be gone from most schools, *swatting*—hoax calls made to police, schools, and others to generate a SWAT-like response from safety forces—is increasingly happening in schools. For instance, imagine that your local police were anonymously notified that a mass shooting and hostage-taking was in

progress at your school. Dozens of public safety cars would zoom to the scene—where no such activity was occurring. Recent incidents include a bomb threat that forced the unscheduled landing of an airplane carrying a major corporation executive and a middle-of-the-night massive police response to the home of a technology company executive.

The prankster usually finds the location of another person (often by tracing their online presence), then contacts 911, spoofing the technology to make it appear the 911 call is coming from the swatting victim's location. Sometimes swatting is done for revenge; recently it's been associated with players in the online gaming community who are getting back at another player.

Swatting is just one example of how



electronic threats are creating new challenges for leaders. My security consulting firm recently investigated the current picture of violent threats to schools. We looked at more than 300 documented school bomb threats, shooting threats, hoaxes, and acts of violence in 43 states during the first six months of the 2013–14 school year. Our research revealed a disturbing trend. Thirty-five percent of threats were sent through social media (including texts or e-mails) and other electronic forms of communication. The next highest percentage of threats were made through bathroom graffiti (15 percent); over the phone (11 percent); verbally (10 percent); or through a note found in school (9 percent).¹

The cost of these threats is staggering—in taxpayer dollars for police response, lost instructional time, and anxiety among everyone involved. Not only are more threats being delivered to schools electronically, but once a threat is received, school administrators face the rapid spread of infor-

mation throughout the broader school community about that threat—by students, parents, and media. Rumors and misinformation that used to spread in days now spread in minutes.

How to Plan a Sane Response to Threats

Don't Rush to React

Rapid transmission of threats and dissemination of rumors places a heavy burden on school officials. Parents show up at schools to remove their children. Media calls pour in almost instantly.

Our analysis of responses to electronically delivered threats found that far too many school leaders and safety officials make knee-jerk reactions to threatening messages, such as prematurely evacuating or closing schools. Such reactions set leaders up for a much steeper challenge in managing both the incident and their communications responses. And by rushing to react, leaders risk exposing children to greater danger than kids would face if leaders had implemented

threat assessment protocols to help them respond less out of fear and more out of rational analysis.

Strong school public relations can be defined as good behavior, well-communicated. This holds true for actions on safety. Before they can come up with effective communications strategies, school leaders must have a threat response plan that is grounded in best practices, such as assessing threats carefully and not making a knee-jerk evacuation after a less-than-credible bomb threat. When threats are deemed less credible, keeping schools open under heightened security may actually keep kids safer than shutting down schools and sending them into the community.

Responses like these may seem counterintuitive, but they are a safer, more rational response to vague or weak-sounding threats. These practices often conflict with the intense pressures administrators feel from emotional parents and staff. Such pressures can lead school administrators to respond emotionally as well.

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Create a Protocol

A threat assessment protocol, which school leaders create in collaboration with first responders, can help ensure consistency, rationality, and thoroughness in responding to student- and adult-originated threats. Although each school district and school should have its own threat assessment teams and protocols, each protocol should follow these principles:

- Treat all threats seriously.
- Investigate the incident promptly and efficiently.
- Use support staff and external resources as part of a multidisciplinary threat assessment team. This team will often include school administrators, counselors, school psychologists, school resource officers, school security staff, and some teachers. This small team will be different from a school safety/crisis team, focusing only on behavioral issues and threats and not on broad school safety planning.
- Take appropriate disciplinary and criminal enforcement steps.
- Document threats and actions taken.
- Enhance security measures, as appropriate, to ensure the safety of all students, staff, and facilities while threats are being investigated.
- Have a formal debriefing process following each incident. Talk through what worked and what areas in threat assessment and safety plans you might improve.
- Train school personnel, along with public safety and other community partners, on threat assessment best practices and protocols. All staff should receive general training on threat trends and assessment procedures. Your school's administrators, counselors, and psychologists—and your threat assessment team and crisis team if you have one—need more detailed training.

■ Educate and inform parents about school and public safety and what to expect if threats or critical security incidents occur, including how parents will receive information at the time of an incident (such as through school social media channels).

It's important to talk with students about the proper use of social media and the often-unintended consequences of forwarding messages about threats or rumors, albeit with good intentions, without first talking with school leaders. Help students understand the seriousness of making threats. A bomb threat isn't a prank, but a serious matter that disrupts instructional time, strains public resources needed for true life-threatening situations, and may lead to expulsion and felony criminal charges. Swatting, for instance, brings down the heavy hand of the law. Once identified, a perpetrator will likely face felony charges and—if the perpetrator is a student and the case has a connection to his or her school—

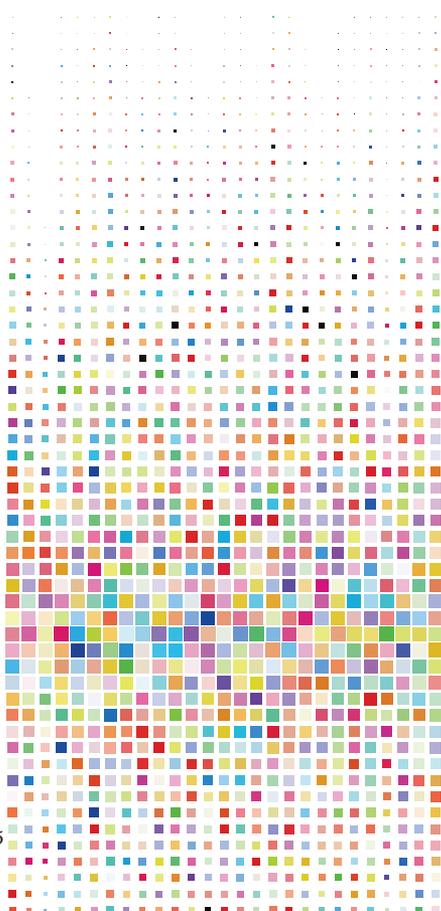
disciplinary consequences.

Threat assessment involves analyzing the behavior of the person making the threat, rather than using a “profile” checklist of specific characteristics. A good protocol will include a variety of questions focusing on the motivation, context, and other factors of the threat being assessed, including

- What was the motivation? Can you identify any reasons that the threat was made?
- What exactly was communicated in the threat? How was it communicated—and to whom?
- In what context did the threat occur? For example, was it in the heat of a fight? Or in a document that featured detailed planning of how to carry out the threat?
- Has the person making the threat previously engaged in threats or planned or committed violent acts?
- Does the threat maker have the ability to carry out the threat?
- Is there evidence of detailed planning or steps taken to implement the threat?

How to Communicate for Safety

Because of the uptick in electronic school threats, my consultants and I now incorporate an evaluation of a school's crisis communications and social media strategy as part of our school security and emergency preparedness consultations. In the last two years, our interviews with district-level administrators and building crisis teams have been dominated by discussions of the adverse impact of social media on safety-related matters. Clearly, school leaders must have not only traditional school emergency preparedness plans, but also crisis communications and social media plans that will let them hit the ground running when a threat—or an actual incident—strikes their school community.





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Proactive planning can empower school leaders to prevent, contain, and respond to school threats. There will always be a gap between the misinformation spreading through a school and the factual information delivered by school administrators facing a safety crisis. But when you have strategies to create effective messages and deliver those messages through multiple channels, you can shrink that gap.

Here is some practical guidance that media and communications consultants have offered to help prepare school staff to communicate effectively before, during, and after a critical incident.

Develop a Crisis Communications Plan

How you communicate during a crisis can save lives, cut down on confusion, support your staff, and protect the image of your school. Crisis communications plans should incorporate all media, including traditional print and broadcast media, social media, the school website, mobile apps, and online news.

This plan should be separate from the school's emergency plan. Identify the likely methods that people in your school community will use to receive information, and spell out who will create and deliver incident-specific messages. Having the principal provide scripted information to school office staff who answer phones can help with rumor control. Using the school's mass notification system to alert parents of the initial threat—and providing an update later, when additional accurate information is available—can reduce parents' anxiety.

Make the Most of Your Website

Your school website and social media channels are more than window dressing. They are the official voice of the school. School websites will be one

of the first places to which parents, the media, and local people turn for information when a threat or incident hits your school. Too often, our evaluations find that school websites lack a basic structure and content for proactively communicating about safety and getting out accurate information.

School websites should contain regularly updated stories and images. A site should have at least one page dedicated to school safety information (such as highlights of programs sponsored by school resource officers—or specific counseling services) and what to do in an emergency. School leaders should be communicating about safety issues, including proactive efforts for emergency planning, before an incident occurs to build a foundation of community confidence.

Some proactive school districts have a web page dedicated to providing accurate information to address rumors and misinformation in the school community. The National School Public Relations Association (www.nspr.org) provides an excellent network for school district communicators and offers members access to resources for building effective school websites.

The Duncanville Independent School District in Texas maintains a vibrant website at www.duncanvilleisd.org. This site has an information-packed "Safety and Security" area that offers information on school resource officers, the district's code of conduct,

visitor procedures that ensure safety, guidelines for talking to children about traumatic events, ways to report bullying, and more. The district engages with its school community through social media, and its website taps into its multiple social media channels. The site has a newsroom and public information area where it posts regular updates along with photos and videos.

Develop Digital Media Strategies

An important part of developing a strategic communications plan is figuring out who your audiences are and how they prefer to receive information. Leaders should conduct surveys or gather this information in other ways. Don't be surprised if the results are fragmented; some in the school community may strongly prefer social media and electronic communications, whereas others will request traditional communications channels such as letters or phone calls. School leaders are almost guaranteed to find themselves creating multiple communications channels and repeating messages.

Schools now have opportunities to build community engagement and to gain followers who'll bypass traditional media sources and go directly to district channels to find timely and accurate information. Consider creating a regular blog to build followers. You should use other social channels, too, to attract readers. For instance, the Roanoke City School District in Virginia uses Twitter to post updates on weekend high school football game scores, which has led to substantial numbers of people following the districts' social media channels.

Build Relationships with Key Communicators

School communications staff and district leaders cannot, and should not, communicate in isolation when an incident strikes their school. School

public information officers should proactively build relationships with their counterparts in police, fire, and other first responder agencies, as well as with local governmental leaders.

Administrators are well advised to create formal plans for managing a joint information center during high-profile incidents. At such a center, school representatives and first responder agencies collaboratively provide ongoing public information to the school community. Local emergency management agencies should be able to provide guidance on how to set up a joint information center.

Talk About Safety Early and Often

Every time you communicate with parents or the community, provide bits of school safety information.

Nuggets on school safety should permeate newsletters, parent association meetings, faculty professional development sessions, morning announcements, and other interactions. You might share fast facts and tips on Twitter or encourage school staff to role-play scenarios involving school safety and violence.

The emerging trends and challenges associated with electronic threats to schools provide school administrators with a challenging climate and many tricky decisions to make. But this doesn't mean school leaders should hide from the public light in hopes that the problem will go away. And it certainly doesn't mean they should evacuate students or close schools as soon as any threat, even one that doesn't seem credible, arrives at a school. Even in a world on digital ste-

roids, the best strategy is for school leaders to think, plan, and communicate safety long before an incident reaches their schoolhouse. **EL**

¹For 18 percent of the threats reported in our research, police refused to say how the threat was delivered. We also found that a few threats (2 percent) were made to schools by individuals outside the school community—often to distract police from community-based crimes or exact revenge against someone.

Author's note: For details on my consulting firm's school threat studies and free resources, visit www.schoolsecurity.org.

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