



ALGONQUIN AND LAKESHORE CATHOLIC DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS (Policy Statement: Caring and Safe Catholic Schools)

Purpose

The purpose of this procedure is to help guide school administrators during situations when they may be the focus of potentially-negative media scrutiny. In these situations, the paramount concern is the safety and well-being of students and staff, followed by the dissemination of factual information.

Much of the media coverage enjoyed by the Board and its schools is of a generally positive nature. The media plays a key role in keeping our communities informed about Board decisions and about the good news taking place across the system. By its nature, however, the media also tends to focus on the not-so-good news, involving incidents or issues of a potentially negative or controversial nature. These may include any incident that threatens the well-being of students, staff or volunteers in a school or work site.

These types of situations have the potential to impact on student and staff safety, as well as the confidence students, parents and the community at large might have about the learning environment at a particular school. Secondly, how an incident has been handled at a particular school can impact on how other schools, and the Board itself, are perceived. In these situations then, it is of critical importance that communication with the media and other publics be handled effectively. This procedure provides guidelines to help:

- a) Identify what response or message, if any, is required from the Board and/or its schools;
- b) Identify who will be responsible for communicating that message in a given situation;
- c) Ensure that an appropriate and consistent message is communicated to staff, parents, students, the public and the media, as required.

Procedures

1.0 The School Level Response

When a potential crisis situation takes place at a school, the Principal or Vice-Principal (or designate) will notify the Superintendent of Education immediately. The Superintendent will, in turn, immediately contact the Director of Education to provide the most current information.

By the same token, if the Superintendent of Education or Communications Officer becomes alerted indirectly about a situation at a school, by the media or another outside group, they should contact the school. The Superintendent and the Principal will discuss and identify the most appropriate spokesperson for the school. In situations of a particularly sensitive nature, identification of the school spokesperson should be done following consultation with the Director's Office. Usually, the spokesperson for an incident involving a school will be the Principal but in some instances; the

Superintendent of Education may be designated as spokesperson.

In all cases where police are involved, all questions related to the police investigation will be referred to the police. If the Principal is aware that the police are issuing a news release about a situation, a copy of the release should be requested. As well, either the Principal or the Superintendent of Education should inform the Communications Officer.

The Principal will be responsible for internal communication to all staff at the school, to students, parents/guardians and school councils.

In the event of a student injury, the Principal will inform the parents/guardians. In the event of a death, the police will inform the parents/guardians.

The Principal will arrange for appropriate staffing of school telephones to answer parent/public inquiries. A brief, factual statement, prepared by the Principal in consultation with the Superintendent of Education, where appropriate, will be provided to school staff. A letter for parents/guardians and students, prepared by the Principal in consultation with the Superintendent (and police, where appropriate), may also be prepared. A copy of this letter should also be forwarded to the Communications Officer.

If reporters arrive at the school, only the Principal (or the Vice-Principal in his/her absence) should speak to them. Staff and students should not be encouraged to participate in interviews. Please note, however, that the media may choose to interview staff or students off school property.

School administrators have four options when approached by a reporter:

- provide accurate information on the incident, stating only information that has been confirmed by the school, without compromising confidentiality;
- state you are continuing your investigation and will confirm information with the reporter as soon as possible;
- state you are discussing the matter with the Superintendent of Education and that one of you will respond to the reporter with the information;
- direct the reporter to the Superintendent of Education or the office of the Director of Education.

2.0 The System Level Response

Some situations, albeit school-based, require more than just a school level response. Responsibility for coordinating a system level response rests with the Director's Office.

In implementing the system level response to the media, the Communications Officer, in consultation with the Director of Education and the Superintendent of Education will consider the following elements:

- who will be serving as spokesperson (e.g. Director, Chairperson, Superintendent of Education);
- the key message to be conveyed;
- whether these key messages need to be coordinated with statements by another organization (e.g. police);
- the "stakeholders" to whom those messages are to be conveyed (e.g. trustees, staff, students, parents/guardians, school councils, neighbours, emergency services, taxpayers, businesses and organizations directly affected, media);

- the person(s) who will be distributing those messages to each stakeholder group;
- the vehicles through which those messages will be conveyed and the respective timing of those vehicles (e.g. media releases/statements, news conferences, phone calls, e-mail, staff meetings, 24-hour information line, web site).
- If a system level response is required, the Communications Officer will also be responsible for:
- collecting relevant background information on the situation and preparing briefing notes;
- anticipating potential questions/issues from the media and preparing potential responses for the spokesperson(s);
- preparing draft “key messages” for the spokesperson(s);
- soliciting questions from the media in advance, wherever possible;
- working with the Administrative Assistant to notify trustees, as required, of the situation and the next steps to be taken, on approval of the Director of Education and the Board Chairperson;
- drafting news releases, system e-mail messages, script for the recorded information line, and other vehicles as identified, for approval of the Director of Education and/or his designate and the Board Chairperson;
- distributing news releases/statements to media;
- referring media to the appropriate spokesperson;
- informing the switchboard operator of the appropriate response to inquiries from the public;
- keeping Administrative Council members informed of inquiries and responses;
- providing the spokesperson with “handling the media” coaching, if required.

The Chairperson of the Board and the Director of Education are the Board’s prime spokespersons in situations when a system-level response is required. The Chairperson, as the Board’s elected representative, provides comments from a political perspective. The Director of Education provides the administrative view as the Board’s chief executive officer. Generally, the media know when it is appropriate to contact these individuals.

In most instances, unsolicited media inquiries are to be directed to the Communications Officer as a matter of course. This provides an opportunity to identify the reporter’s questions in advance so that the spokesperson does not feel obligated to provide a response off the cuff. The spokesperson can then respond more effectively. It also provides a way of ensuring that there is one spokesperson delivering a

consistent message on any given issue, rather than running the risk of inconsistent messages being offered by the three or four Board officials possibly called by the reporter. The Communications Officer will be responsible for referring the caller to the appropriate spokesperson (Principal, Director or Chairperson) as well as for informing the spokesperson of the inquiry.

3.0 **Media Interview Tips**

3.1 Before the Interview:

- Relax, collect your thoughts and pull together any pertinent background materials so that you have them at hand during the interview.
- Develop some key messages to help guide you through the interview. Think of these as either a *train* (sequential, keeping you on track) or a *pyramid* (brief main point, explication in the middle, supporting instances at the base). Practice saying them.
- If necessary, prepare a fact sheet to keep facts and figures accurate and provide these to the reporter.

- If you are nervous, role play an interview situation before hand.
- Make sure you have contacted your Superintendent, as appropriate. Also contact the Communications Officer if you want help in handling the interview.

3.2 During the Interview:

- The key to success: Be in control – be in charge – relax!
- Avoid educational jargon – speak to be understood.
- Do not worry about moments of silence. It's up to the reporter to fill the gaps in the interview. Silence is often a strategy used by reporters to get subjects to say more.
- Stick to your key messages...Bridge them back to them if the reporter's questions take you away from them.
- Don't be defensive – be factual and positive.
- Don't get involved with hypothetical examples, "what if" scenarios or innuendo.
- Don't lie and never speculate.
- Get it right the first time. The media will find you more credible if you consistently provide them with accurate information. If you don't know, say so and commit to getting back to them.
- Never say, "No comment".
- Where possible, focus on the positive action you are taking – not the problems. But acknowledge difficult situations and what will be done about them.
- Remember that you are talking to a large audience in the community.
- Tone, body language and eye contact are important factors. Adjust your interview style according to the medium with which you are dealing. For TV, your body language is important, while for radio, tone is critical.
- Don't underestimate a reporter; but do not assume that he/she is an expert on the subject.
- Remember, reporters are professionals with a job to do. Treat them accordingly.
- Keep in mind that reporters often come across as pushy and abrasive because they work under tight deadlines. Be accommodating; but don't be pushed around.
- Always remember the capacity – or role – in which you are speaking.
- Though you are speaking as an official, remember to be human and express sympathy when appropriate.

3.3 After the Interview:

- Learn from the experience – and congratulate yourself for doing your best.
- When errors occur, mention them politely to the reporter. When your school's reputation is at stake, request that inaccurate information be corrected as soon as possible. Notify your Superintendent of this request. The Communications Officer can help you deal with the media outlet.
- Don't try to "correct" item if you simply don't agree with the reporter's opinion.
- Evaluate your interview skills.
- Thank the reporter if you feel she/he has done a good job.

3.4 Follow-Up:

- Let your school community know how a situation has been resolved. If appropriate, draft

a “Letter to Parents” or prepare an item for your school newsletter. These should be developed in consultation with the Superintendent.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Lockdown

Appendix 2: Critical Incident Response Kits

Appendix 3: Coordinating Lockdowns between Police and Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District Schools (under development)

Forms

Approved: October 25, 2011