

School Safety and Crisis

Using Social Media in School Crisis Prevention and Intervention: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams

Given the ever increasing number of social media users at all age levels, schools are encouraged to create and implement social media policies and plans. School administrators and crisis response team members must recognize the numerous assets of social media while considering the potential liabilities they create before, during, and after school crises. While empirical research on the topic remains limited, many promising social media practices exist and are summarized in this document.

What is social media? The U.S. Department of Education Office of Safe and Healthy Students defines social media as “networking sites, messaging sites, texting, and other Web-based or mobile technologies that support social interaction” (2012, p. 5). All such social media should be considered as both potential challenges and assets.

Why should schools consider using social media in safety and crisis response planning? Social media is relatively easy to use. It provides an alternative or supplemental way for schools to disseminate crisis-related information quickly. During times of crisis, the school community expect direct information, updated information, options for connectedness, and sharable content. To meet these expectations, many caregivers are now more likely to use social media than the school website. Real time social media alerts or notifications can now reach smartphone users quickly and directly.

Additionally, social media has the potential to quickly reach the broader community (e.g., the press/media, others beyond parents/caregivers). A school’s use of social media to publicize crisis facts can help increase information accuracy and can more quickly dispel rumors or edit inaccuracies. Additional benefits of using social media for crisis response work include the ability for schools to post updates remotely, facilitate discussion and support, provide resource options, and increase community perceptions of a caring and helpful school culture. During large-scale crisis events, social media may also be one of the only means of getting communication out to families due to cell phone networks’ inability to handle the large number of phone calls being placed (Blackburn, 2011).

What are common challenges for schools that make use of social media? Sometimes social media can be a source of psychological trauma and other challenges. Of great concern is the fact that social media has the potential for triggering or exacerbating crises and the phenomena of *contagion*, wherein learning about a crisis event can lead to another crisis event (e.g., 1–5% of suicides are believed to be due to contagion). Schools may also experience users who adopt false profiles and/or post negative comments to a school social media site. “Plugged in” schools may become aware of cyberbullying, other online conflicts, and traumatic, embarrassing, or inappropriate information through social media. Schools administrators and crisis response teams may struggle with determining who is responsible for monitoring such issues and understanding boundaries.

Finally, social media can be time consuming and intimidating for some educators, parents, and other caregivers to prioritize and monitor appropriately.

Despite these potential problems, schools are encouraged to focus on the numerous benefits of using social media during times of crisis, while carefully considering how to minimize the potential challenges. Avoiding social media altogether will not eliminate the liabilities noted and can actually lead to perceptions that the school is failing to communicate and/or is out of touch with the realities of the situation.

What should schools consider before getting started? As a starting point, and prior to adopting and using social media, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Healthy Students (2012) recommends schools (a) set social media goals and objectives, (b) develop policies, (c) plan ahead, and (d) implement social media. Careful crisis team discussion and collaboration with the school’s public information officer and other partnering agencies (e.g., local health department) during these planning stages are warranted, and fit with more general recommendations for safety and crisis team practices (i.e., preparedness).

Regarding setting social media goals and objectives, school administrators and crisis response team members must determine who is their intended audience(s), how social media will complement existing communication strategies, and what types of information will be conveyed and received via social media.

In consideration of policies, schools must determine who will communicate crisis-related information via social media. For example, schools are encouraged to designate a knowledgeable and trustworthy social media administrator or specialist, as well as reserve or back-up individuals for this role. According to Rouse (2010), “a social media manager is the individual in an organization trusted with monitoring, contributing to, filtering, measuring, and otherwise guiding the social media presence of a brand, product, individual, or corporation”. A social media manager can lead efforts during prevention and preparedness stages and is ideal for inclusion in the Incident Command System (ICS) following a crisis. The social media manager can collaborate with the Incident Commander (often a school administrator) and work within the Public Information Officer of the ICS, helping to ensure valid and factual release of information and monitoring social media during/after incidents (for more information about the ICS, see Outside Resources at the end of this document). Finally, schools are encouraged to create and prominently display a social media comment policy for community users (e.g., comments will be deleted if they include profanity, hate speech, defamation). See the sample CDC comment policy in the resources at the end of this document.

In the social media planning stage, schools are encouraged to choose a primary social media platform (i.e., one that will reach the most users in the intended audience; e.g., Facebook), as well as a secondary platform (e.g., Twitter). Schools must then make plans for how to build a sustainable community of social media users/followers. Without a sizeable number of users, as well as consistent and effective use, a school’s social media communications may go unnoticed or lead to a loss of user confidence and interest. Finally, planning must include identifying specific and helpful social media actions within a comprehensive school crisis model (i.e., from prevention to recovery).

What are some promising social media practices within a comprehensive school crisis model? The U.S. Department of Education recommends five mission areas for high-quality school emergency operations planning: prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery. Careful

use of social media within each mission area can contribute to more effective school crisis safety and intervention efforts. The following sections summarize promising practices for using social media within each of the five emergency planning mission areas.

Prevention (avoiding/deterring/stopping a crisis)

- Post the school’s family reunification plan on a secured webpage and explain procedures that will be followed in the event of early release and/or a crisis situation.
- Disseminate crisis prevention informational flyers.
- Share information about crisis drills or trainings occurring in your school.
- Show videos of drill procedures or other expectations for students and parents on secured sites (e.g., for a fire drill or earthquake).
- Post notices to parents/guardians and community members with instructions on how to get information from the school’s social media sites.
- Develop sample messages to post on social media sites that follow the site’s guidelines (i.e., create a message that has a 120 character limit).
- Develop social media school policy and procedure guidelines, and provide these guidelines to staff and parents.
- Predetermine who will be responsible for reviewing and updating the social media sites during an emergency.
- Publicize information about the school’s safety planning efforts (e.g., trainings, drills).
- Link to school crisis prevention informational flyers (e.g., NASP handouts).
- Communicate (in advance) school plans for full-scale or functional exercises.
- Post encouragement for healthy or expected student behaviors.
- Consider utilizing students as cultural brokers for insight on how social media is being used within the school culture.
- Conduct tabletop drills or other preparedness exercises involving social media.
- Send positive messages that reinforce a safe and caring school climate.
- Conduct an exercise to test the effectiveness of the social media updates during an emergency.

Protection (securing a school against man-made and natural disasters)

- Post safety information or health alerts.
- Monitor sites to see what users are saying (doing so may highlight unknown problems or identify potentially valuable information missing from the social media platform).
- Consider using systems for anonymous reporting (e.g., K-12 Alerts, Frontline SMS, Bullyproof, School Tipline, TipSoft).
- Consider using Google Alerts or other, similar apps, to notify school officials when information is posted online or within social media suggesting a dangerous or threatening situation, based on key words (e.g., “Washington High School” and “gun”).

Mitigation (minimizing the impact of a crisis event)

- Post accurate and appropriate information regarding what happened as quickly as possible (while carefully respecting student/family privacy as needed).

- Reframe challenging situations or negative comments posted on social media; reach out to individuals to suggest off-line dialogue as needed.
- Communicate reunification protocol information.
- Provide guidance on how to minimize crisis exposure.

Response (stabilizing an emergency once it has happened)

- Direct users to previously posted or new crisis informational flyers.
- Link to previously posted family reunification protocol.
- Use hashtags through Twitter to help others track crisis event information quickly.
- Use hashtags to help schools monitor comments related to an event or evaluate individual student needs (i.e., “triage”).
- Retweet or link to helpful, factual information from other sources.
- Post school closure information.
- Consider using smartphone crisis applications (e.g., FEMA, see resources at the end of this document).

Recovery (restoring the learning environment)

- Post time, date, and location of face-to-face community informational gatherings.
- Post updates as they become available (e.g., school reopening procedures, where to find community and school resources).
- Post information about memorials and other outreach efforts.
- Celebrate positive recovery steps (e.g., thank volunteers, post photos).
- Consider social media as an emerging—though currently limited—method of mental health treatment (e.g., text messaging has been found to positively influence treatment in women with bulimia nervosa).
- Provide information on positive coping strategies.
- Examine the effectiveness of crisis communication efforts.

Additional social media tips for schools. To build a broad and consistent following, schools are encouraged to integrate crisis information with general school content on social media (i.e., avoid focusing only on crises). Integrating engaging content, such as video and discussion options, assists in maintaining social media as a communication tool.

Finally, schools must strive to respond quickly during crises, as social media users will seek information from other sources that may be less reliable if the school does not provide information in a timely fashion. However, balancing immediacy with accuracy and discretion is vital. To avoid posting unverified or incorrect information, it is acceptable to post statements such as “*We are aware of a disturbing incident that occurred at school this morning. We understand several rumors are circulating. The school’s crisis response team is currently collecting information and will report the facts when they are confirmed. Please check back here frequently for updates.*”

Conclusion. Using social media without careful prior planning can be counterproductive. Sometimes schools do not monitor social media comments or address feedback, potentially leading users to become dissatisfied or disconnected. Outdated, unappealing, or irrelevant posted

information may lead to discouraging perceptions of the school and can lead users to block, unfollow, comment negatively on, or simply ignore the school's social media. Schools must also recognize and plan accordingly for language, socioeconomic, and other barriers that may prevent some individuals from accessing social media. Schools must be ready to disseminate information via multiple strategies and address prevention through recovery.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

SchoolGuard™. This free app is appropriate in school intruder scenarios and includes a single panic button that will immediately and simultaneously speed dial 911, inform other school staff members of the incident, and alert all nearby on- and off-duty law enforcement officers (See: <http://schoolguard.guard911.com/>).

CrisisGo for Education. This paid app can help eliminate crisis plan “binders” by electronically organizing emergency contacts, crisis checklists, and maps. Additionally, it provides a two-way communication platform and live-streaming video (See: <https://jim-spicuzza-wqo8.squarespace.com/crisisgo-for-education/>).

K-12 Alerts: Anonymous Alerts. This paid app provides an anonymous reporting system for safety issues, bullying, or other suspicious activities. It can be used by students, parents, and community members (See: <http://www.k12alerts.com/webcorp/anonymous.html>).

Google Alerts. This free tool can be used to inform the social media manager or others via e-mail whenever problematic information is posted anywhere online, all based on key words used (e.g., “Kennedy Middle School suicide”). Try it out here: <https://www.google.com/alerts#>

Anonymous Bully Reporting App. This app also has one-click information push to multiple platforms, including Facebook and Twitter (See: <http://www.anonymoualerts.com/webcorp/>).

Center for Disease Control (CDC). A sample social media comment policy is available here: <http://www.cdc.gov/SocialMedia/Tools/CommentPolicy.html>

Chicago Public Schools Social Media Toolkit. <http://www.cps.edu/pages/socialmediatoolkit.aspx>

FEMA App. <http://www.fema.gov/app>

K-12 Alerts. This sends text messages or e-mail instantly to a large group (See: <http://www.k12alerts.com/webcorp/homepage.html>).

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