



INDEPENDENT PROCEDURE

Title: **COMMUNICATIONS PROCEDURES FOR
HANDLING SITUATIONS / INCIDENTS OF
CRISIS / CONTROVERSY**

Independent Procedure No.: **9008**
Effective Date: **1999 Dec. 23**

Department: Communications – Director's Services

Reference(s):

- Emergency Procedures
- Public Affairs Emergency Contacts
- Safe Schools Policy and Procedures
- Traumatic Events Response Team Guidelines

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this procedure is to help guide school board staff during situations when they may be the focus of potentially-negative public attention. In these situations, the paramount concern is to provide accurate information about the safety and well-being of students and staff, and to reduce the dissemination of unfounded information that could raise concern in the community.

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 may also report on 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 – whether it be an accidental injury, fire, violent episode or other emergency/crisis situation. It may also include situations of a more subtle nature, where the matter is not a physical threat but rather an issue that is potentially controversial.

These types of situations have the potential to impact 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 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 stakeholders is handled effectively. This procedure provides guidelines to help: 1) identify what response or message, if any, is required from the Board and/or its schools; 2) identify who will be responsible for communicating that message in a given situation; 3) ensure that an appropriate and consistent message is communicated to staff, Trustees, employee group leaders, parents, students, the public, and the media, as required.

Administered By: Corporate Communications – **Director's Services**
Amendment Date(s): 2001 May 8, 2019 April 23

2.0 Before A Situation Occurs

2.1 The best time to prepare for a situation which may involve potentially negative media scrutiny is well in advance of the situation taking place. While not all situations can be anticipated, School Administrators may wish to consult with their Superintendents, Human Resources and/or the Communications department about how potential incidents could be handled. School Administrators shall also familiarize themselves with Freedom of Information regulations as they affect school boards, as well as the following Board documents:

- Emergency Procedures posted on the Board's web site;
- TVDSB's Emergency Preparedness Workbook available from the Health and Safety Officer. The workbook, which references the agreements between the Board and the cities and counties it services regarding the emergency use of Board facilities and equipment, is designed to assist schools in developing their own Emergency Preparedness Plans;
- Traumatic Events Response Team Guidelines booklet available from Learning Support Services. The booklet provides a School Administrator's checklist and outlines the support available upon request from the Traumatic Events Response Team;
- Safe Schools Policy and Procedures.

All TVDSB staff and Trustees shall consult with Communications prior to dealing with the media.

2.2 School Administrators shall also ensure that all school staff are knowledgeable of the protocol for interacting with the media, specifically to direct them to the office where they will be dealt with by School Administration or their designate. As well if the school secretary has certain procedures to follow in the event of a crisis, then these need to be understood ahead of time.

3.0 When the Situation Occurs or the Issue Arises

3.1 The School-Level Response

3.1.1 When an incident or crisis situation takes place at a school, School Administration (or designate) will notify the Superintendent of Student Achievement (or designate) immediately. The Superintendent will, in turn, immediately contact Communications and the Associate Director, Learning Support Services to provide the most current information. If the media has not yet inquired about the situation, the Associate Director, Learning Support Services will determine whether to notify the Director of Education.

By the same token, if the Superintendent of Student Achievement or Communications become alerted indirectly about a situation at a school, by the media or another outside group, they shall contact the school.

3.1.2 Communications shall be contacted in the following situations:

- when a school has issued a Lockdown
- when there is significant presence of emergency vehicles that might raise community interest or concern
- when a school is shut down for the day for any reason;
- when a school is evacuated for safety concerns – fire, bomb threat, chemical/substance spill; Communications shall be called when classes resume;
- prior to school messages to parents and guardians that are likely to raise concerns/issues in the community, – such as public health-related matters, sex offender or suspicious stranger reports, mould alert, etc.;
- when a violent incident takes place that the school administrator believes will attract media attention or if an incident has been posted online or has attracted the media's attention and reporters are questioning school/Board officials;
- incidents involving staff/student arrests/charges that are likely to become public [Organizational Support Services (Human Resources) shall also be contacted when staff have been charged];
- when a post on social media channels has the potential to raise concerns/issues in the community;
- when substantial controversy has been generated in the media or in the community over how a school has handled certain matters, e.g. fundraising initiatives.

In most cases, Communications shall be contacted after discussion between the school administrator and the Superintendent has taken place. However, there may be situations of urgency, wherein the school administrator has contacted the Superintendent's office but was unable to discuss the matter with the Superintendent. In these situations, the School Administrator shall call Communications directly and as soon as possible to provide the most current information;

In turn, Communications will, as appropriate, notify the Director, other members of Administrative Council and the Chairperson. Organizational Support Services (Human Resources) will be kept informed of any incidents involving staff. Some of these situations warrant a school-level response. However, notification of Communications helps insure that the Board is made aware of events and issues should the media solicit a system-level response.

3.1.3 In routine situations, the Superintendent of Student Achievement and School Administration 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, the Associate Director,

Learning Support Services, and Communications. Usually, the spokesperson for an incident involving a school will be School Administration. In some instances, the Superintendent of Student Achievement may be designated as spokesperson, particularly when and issue relates to a Board policy or a system initiative.

On rare occasions, the Manager of Communications may be designated as spokesperson.

- 3.1.4 In all cases where police are involved, all questions related to the police investigation will be referred to the police. If School Administration is aware that the police are issuing a news release about a situation, a copy of the release will be requested and shared with Communications to ensure a consistent message is delivered to all areas of the community. As well, either School Administration or the Superintendent of Student Achievement shall inform Communications that a release is being issued. [Organizational Support Services (Human Resources) will be contacted when staff have been charged.]
- 3.1.5 School Administration will be responsible for internal communication to all staff at the school, to students, parents/guardians, and school councils. The draft communication shall be reviewed by the Superintendent and/or Communications. Alternatively, Communications may draft the message for review by School Administration and the Superintendent.
- 3.1.6 In the event of a student injury, School Administration will inform the parents/guardians. In the event of a death, School Administration will inform the school community. Communications may draft the message for review by School Administration and the Superintendent. Police will inform the parents/guardians of the deceased.
- 3.1.7 School Administration will arrange for appropriate staffing of school telephones to answer parent/public inquiries. A brief, factual statement, prepared by School Administration in consultation with the Superintendent of Student Achievement, where appropriate, will be provided to school staff. A letter for parents/guardians and students, prepared by School Administration in consultation with the Superintendent and Communications (and police, where appropriate), may also be prepared. A copy of this letter shall also be forwarded to Communications if changes were made to earlier drafts.
- 3.1.8 If reporters arrive at the school, the School Administrator shall be the main point of contact. Staff and students should not participate in interviews on school property unless approved by School Administration. Please note, the media may choose to interview staff, parents and guardians or students off school property, but they are under no obligation to participate.

3.1.9 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, and emphasizing student and staff safety;
- state that an investigation is underway and more information will be provided as soon as possible;
- state that the matter is under review with the Superintendent of Student Achievement, and that someone will respond to the reporter with the information as soon as possible;
- direct the reporter to the Superintendent of Student Achievement or other appropriate spokesperson, as identified under section 3.1.4

3.1.10 Board staff shall strive to ensure all stakeholders receive appropriate, accurate information, as quickly as possible. To facilitate this, School Administrators and key staff members shall identify the best ways to communicate with Senior Administration, the school community and the media in the event of crisis situations. Communications can provide valuable advice on how to respond to the media in a time crisis or controversy. Media training is also offered from time to time through the Board's staff development sessions.

3.2 The System-Level Response

3.2.1 Some situations, albeit school-based, require more than just a school-level response. Responsibility for coordinating a system-level response rests with Communications. In determining what level of response is required with the media, the Manager of Communications will seek direction from the Director of Education or their designate and the Associate Director, Learning Support Services and the Superintendent of Student Achievement, as appropriate. Legal counsel may also be sought.

3.2.2 In implementing the system-level response to the media, the Manager of Communications, in consultation with the Director of Education (or designate) and the Associate Director, Learning Support Services, Associate Directors, Organizational Support Services and/or the Superintendent of Student Achievement, will consider the following elements:

- who will be serving as spokesperson (eg. Director, Chairperson, Superintendent of Student Achievement);
- the key messages to be conveyed;
- whether these key messages need to be coordinated with statements by another organization (eg. police);
- the "stakeholders" to whom those messages are to be conveyed (eg. 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 (eg. media releases/statements)
- news conferences, phone calls, communication applications (eg. School Messenger), e-mail, staff meetings, 24-hour information line, social media channels, and web site).

3.2.3 If a system-level response is required, Communications 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 Executive Assistant to the Director and/or Trustee 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, scripts for recorded information lines, and other vehicles as identified, for approval of the Director of Education and/or their designate, and the Board Chairperson;
- distributing news releases/statements to media;
- referring media to the appropriate spokesperson;
- informing Education Centre reception staff of the appropriate response to inquiries from the public;
- keeping senior administration informed of inquiries and responses;
- providing the spokesperson with coaching
- informing Trustees, Senior Administration and employee group leaders by email in the event of a lockdown or critical threat/incident at a TVDSB location

3.2.4 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 instances where the Director or the Chairperson have responded to the media, their offices will notify Communications.

- 3.2.5 In most instances, unsolicited media inquiries are to be directed to Communications 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 multiple Board officials possibly called by the reporter. Communications will be responsible for referring the caller to the appropriate spokesperson (eg. Superintendent, School Administration, Director or Chairperson) as well as for informing the spokesperson of the inquiry.
- 3.2.6 Occasionally, the media will contact a departmental Superintendent for information on a topic within the portfolio responsibilities. In such situations, the Superintendent will respond and then inform Communications, to ensure that all members of Administrative Council are informed of the inquiry.
- 3.2.7 The media may also contact a department Manager, Learning Supervisor or staff member for information. On these occasions, the Manager, Learning Supervisor or staff member will notify their direct Supervisor, School Administrator or Superintendent and Communications. If it is not appropriate for the Manager, Learning Supervisor or staff member to respond, the call shall be referred to Communications.