THE CURRENT STATUS OF SCHOOL CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLANS:
A SURVEY OF INDIANA PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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BY
SCOTT M. GOWER
DR. BECKY MCDONALD – ADVISOR

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ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION/THESIS/RESEARCH PAPER/CREATIVE PROJECT: The
Current Status of School Crisis Communication Plans: A Survey of Indiana Public
School Districts

STUDENT: Scott M. Gower

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Through an online survey issued to 293 public school district superintendents on
March 30, 2012, this study sought to understand the contents of Indiana public school
district crisis communication plans. Survey questions revolved around school district
size, district crisis teams, public relations professional employment within Indiana school
districts and the contents of the districts’ crisis communication plan. The findings
revealed a significant difference in the detail of crisis plans between school districts with
a public relations professional and those that do not have one. Also, a significant
difference in crisis planning was revealed between small school districts and bigger ones.
In addition to the aforementioned differences, it was also revealed which crisis scenarios
were most frequently covered in the Indiana public school district crisis plan. These
findings may help improve crisis communication planning for public school districts in
the future and add to the public relations body of literature.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Crisis planning continues to be an important topic of discussion in the world of public relations, and it can be especially important in the public education. Every day many parents send their children to school, trusting the schools to do their best to protect them from harm. As the news coverage of school violence and other crises has increased to the common television viewer, extra preparation and precautions have been taken to continue to protect the children. As part of that preparation, school organizations are learning how they can communicate – both internally and externally – to their many stakeholders.

This study sought to reveal more about the current status of crisis communication planning within public school districts in Indiana. It sought to learn what the current crisis practices are for school districts in Indiana via the districts’ crisis plans. In addition, the study sought to learn how school districts can improve their crisis communication plans, as well as their crisis communication planning. This study used a survey, which asks a variety of questions about both the school district and its crisis plans, in order to learn about how schools use their crisis plans.
This study sought to add to the current body of public relations knowledge, because it helped to gain an understanding of the extent to which school districts in Indiana were prepared to communicate with their stakeholders during a time of crisis. Becoming aware of the problems and successes of school district crisis communication planning in Indiana may aid other states’ school districts in similar situations or help them become better prepared for communicating during a future crisis.

Additionally, public relations for public school districts is not a well-researched subject of academic research. Any research study of this topic, if properly executed, will add to the public relations body of research and knowledge. Because there isn’t a lot of academic research for this subject, it is even more important that research specifically about public school districts be performed.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

On any given school day teachers, principals and other school administrators may have to deal with a crisis, such as a bomb threat, school shooting, fire, tornado, chemical or hazardous material spill, bus accident, death of a teacher or some other kind of crisis, within the boundaries of their school district (Murphy, 1991). How an organization, such as a school or school district, responds to a crisis can determine how the public views them (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

Schools are susceptible to a wide variety of crises, from natural disasters like floods, fires or earthquakes, to threats of violence like school shootings and bomb threats. A great amount of trust is placed into the hands of the school districts, as well as the individual schools, to keep communities’ children safe at all times (Practical information, 2007). A school district must effectively communicate during times of crises to persuade the public it is worthy of the trust it needs to have (Valley, Moag & Bazerman, 1998).

Like almost every kind of organization (Roberts, 1997), a school district’s reputation can have an impact on aspects of its overall performance – specifically, a school district’s enrollment numbers (Newberry, 2012). Organizations with a history of crises, as well as a history of poor reactionary performance during crises, are likely to see their organizational reputations suffer as a result (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Because
the public is now seen as a customer and often has the choice of which school to attend, support or work in, individual schools must make an effort to keep their reputation clean (Lockhart, 2005).

Crisis Communication

There was a time when the phrase “crisis communication” may have elicited mental images of pigeons carrying messages from one location to another. Majorie Van de Water (1942) may have been one of the first to write about crisis communication – or crisis teams – when she wrote an article encouraging volunteer military forces to learn to send crisis messages with trained pigeons. One could assume changes made in crisis communication by the twenty-first century, however, have likely made communication faster and, at times, more efficient. Through the use of news release distribution services and social media, just one news release from an organization has the potential to reach journalists, bloggers, consumers and industry leaders (PRWeb, 2012), in spite of news releases being uncontrolled media (Harmon, 2001). In fact, one of the academic leaders for crisis communication suggested that “crisis managers must now think about blogs, podcasts, Really Simple Syndication (RSS), and videos” to get their organizations’ messages across (Coombs, 2008).

When organizations experience a crisis and mishandle the situation, it often is as a result of the company’s lack of crisis plan (Marra, 1998). Some companies believe their strong reputation will get them through a crisis, while they fail to invest proper time and resources into crisis planning (Penrose, 2000).
A Definition for Crisis

One problem in developing a definition for crisis communication is that the word “crisis” can be overused. It is often used for experiences that are simply unpleasant. However, crises are much more than simply negative events. It has been said that “crises are unique moments in the history of organizations” (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). Developing a universal definition for crisis is made more difficult by the fact that crises are research by multiple academic disciplines, including business (Mitroff, 2005 A; Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001 B; Weick, 1988 C; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007 D), political science (Birkland, 2006 A; Comfort, Sungu, Johnson, & Dunn, 2001 B; Ramo, 2009 C), psychology (Slovic, 1987), sociology (Mileti & Peek, 2000 A; Mileti & Sorensen, 1990 B; Quarantelli, 1988 C), and others (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007).

In a study of the consequences of crisis conducted by Charles F. Hermann (1963), three characteristics were identified to aid observers in determining whether an event is an actual crises or simply a bad experience: surprise, threat, and short response time. While the original study was conducted about 50 years ago, its findings still find relevance in the construction of a definition for “crisis.” Robert R. Ulmer, Timothy L. Sellnow, and Matthew W. Seeger (2007) further detailed those characteristics by saying “a troubling event cannot reach the level of crisis without coming as a surprise, posing a serious level of threat, and forcing a short response time.” Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007) also went on to describe what each of those characteristics actually means in regards to a crisis.

Just because an event changes a public relations professional’s plans for a day at work, it does not mean the event contains the element of surprise. They said that an event
isn’t really a surprise until it exceeds “the scope of the management plan.” For an event to be a crisis, it needs to “create threatening circumstances that reach beyond the typical problems organizations face.” The fact is that if an event reaches the level of being considered a threat, it will ultimately require a short response time.

With those three characteristics considered, Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007) were able to settle on the following working definition of an organizational crisis: “An organizational crisis is a specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high-priority goals.”

Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities (2007) gives more insight into the definition of a crisis from a school’s perspective in saying the definition varies depending on a school or district’s “unique needs, resources, and assets of a school and community.” Additionally, the school crisis planning guide defines a crisis as “a situation where schools could be faced with inadequate information, not enough time, and insufficient resources, but in which leaders must make one or many crucial decisions.”

Other definitions for crisis include an event that causes an emotional response from stakeholders (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992) or “brings, or has the potential for bringing, an organization into disrepute and imperils its future profitability” (Lerbinger, 2012). Also, “crises are characterized by low probability of high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goal of an organization” (Weick, 1988). Coombs suggested that “crises are threats, meaning that they actually do or have the potential to create negative or undesirable outcomes” (Coombs, 2012).
These definitions can be helpful in expressing the actual or potential damage involved in a crisis, but Dan P. Millar and Robert L. Heath (2004) further explain crisis from a rhetorical perspective:

A rhetorical approach to crisis explicitly acknowledges that the responsibility for the crisis, its magnitude, and its duration are contestable. It stresses the message development and presentation part of the crisis response. It underscores the role that information, framing, and interpretation play in the organization’s preparation for a crisis, response to it, and postcrisis comments and actions. It features discourse, one or more statements made over time.

The Need for Effective Crisis Communication

No organization is immune to the possibility of a crisis affecting its daily operations. Every year different companies are affected by a crisis – sometimes minor, sometimes major – that disrupts its organization (Holmes & Sudhaman, 2011 A; Sudhaman & Holmes, 2012 B; Sudhaman & Holmes, 2013 C). Because of the constant flow of potential threats, the need for effective crisis communication skills is increasing (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007).

In an ideal situation, every organization would have a public relations professional to communicate with its stakeholder publics in a time of crisis, as having such a full-time employee has proved beneficial (Lerbinger, 2012 A; Boin & Hart, 2003 B; White & Dozier, 1992 C; Spaulding & Correa, 2005 D). However, budgetary limitations impact the plausibility of some organizations hiring such an employee, especially a full-time employee (Carlsmith & Railsback, 2001).

The discussion of best practices for crisis communication help organizations to withstand potentially devastating and surprising crises. Best practices are “lessons for
organizational and professional learning for a particular venue of practice” (Seeger, 2006). The study of best practices for crisis communication helps them to maintain, or even improve, their organization’s public image during a crisis.

Theoretical Approaches to Crisis Communication

As mentioned above, because no industry is excluded from crisis potential, crisis management is a topic for research in various academic disciplines, such as business, math psychology, and others. The communication field has also produced a lot of research on this topic, which includes the following theories: apologia (Hearit, 2006), image repair theory (Benoit, 1995), situational crisis communication theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), and organizational renewal theory (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007 A; Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, 2009 B).

While the term “apologia” may cause one to think of “apology,” apologia is not exactly that. It carefully responds to criticism or accusations from opposing viewpoints, creating a persuasive response (Hearit, 2001). Apologia is a crisis communication theory based in self-defense speech (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Some of the communication strategies employed by this theory include “denial, counterattack, differentiation, apology, and legal” (Hearit, 2006). Organizations use these tactics to explain its actions after a crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007).

How an organization are perceived or viewed by the public can be put at risk during a crisis. When a company or organization is accused or held responsible for an action that is deemed offensive, it is important to take actions to prevent damage to its public perception (Benoit, 1997). William L. Benoit’s Image Repair Theory (1995)
provides strategies that focus on the actions an organization takes after receiving an accusation. These actions should be aimed at repairing its damaged reputation. Some of the communication strategies used with this theory include “denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification” (Benoit, 1995).

Influenced by psychology’s attribution theory and crisis response strategies, W. Timothy Coombs suggested the situational crisis communication theory as a way for organizations to use evidence-based research to serve as a guide to assess and respond to crises (Coombs & Halladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007). Coombs’ theory assigns crisis strategies which “appeared on two or more lists developed by crisis experts” to different crises based on the threat to the reputation of an organization. The threat is evaluated based on “crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation” (Coombs, 2007). Crisis type refers to three different classifications that influence how stakeholders determine an organization’s responsibility: victim crisis cluster, accidental crisis cluster, and preventable crisis cluster (Coombs, 2007). Crisis history and an organization’s prior reputation influence stakeholders’ ability to receive an organization’s crisis communication. Some of the communication strategies used with this theory include “denial, diminishment, rebuilding, bolstering” (Coombs, 2007).

While the previous three theories seem to focus on the threat of the crisis, Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007) suggest there is a lot of “potential for positive discourse following a crisis that emphasizes the opportunities inherent to crises.” To better explain the concept of the organizational renewal theory, they developed a theory called the Discourse of Renewal. This theory “emphasizes learning growth and opportunity
following crises of all type” and has four central objectives: organizational learning, ethical communication, a prospective rather than retrospective vision, and sound organizational rhetoric (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). All of these objectives seem to focus on the future, what can be learned from the crisis, and how to turn the crisis into an opportunity.

_Crisis into Opportunity_

Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007) emphasized that organizations can sometimes turn a crisis into an opportunity to better its image, learn from the experience and/or put it into practice for the next crisis and daily operations. Crises can often be a turning point for learning and experience for companies which employ a “whatever doesn’t kill me only makes me stronger” outlook. Effective communication skills are necessary because all kinds of crises continue to happen, and these skills help to create “positive, renewing opportunities” during crises.

However, when an organization’s crisis communication is so poor during and in the aftermath of a crisis, the organization can be forever weakened, having lost the confidence of both their employees and the public.” When a crisis response dwells on the threat, or even exaggerates the threat, it hinders the organizations ability to effectively communicate, because it turns a crisis response into a threat response. This can often “magnify and even intensify the state of the crisis” (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007).

Success in crisis communication may be achieved by working to build trust before a crisis event instead of during or after.
Best Practices in Crisis Communication

Matthew Seeger (2006), through research and a panel of experts, developed a list of the ten best practices in crisis communication. While the list was compiled with the thought that all ten practices would work when put into practice simultaneously, Seeger acknowledged the ten practices may not work together in every instance. Communication professionals should use discretion in their decision to use his findings as a guide within their own organizations. The first of these – process approaches and policy development – suggests that public relations and communication professionals should be involved in the development of policy. Some organizations make the mistake of only involving communication professionals in communication decisions, making communication, at times, an afterthought.

The second is pre-event planning. As Seeger writes, “all organizations should identify the potential hazards they face.” They could plan for which audiences might be affected and what procedures they would follow (Penrose, 2000). The idea behind this practice is that an organization is most likely to be able to handle a crisis better if they have discussed and planned the procedures they would follow if that particular crisis were to occur. Whether it is one individual or a group of employees working at this, having someone planning and preventing crises is an often-overlooked aspect of crisis communication (Lerbinger, 2012).

The third (partnerships with the public) and fourth (listen to the stakeholders’ concerns and understand the audiences) best practices both deal with the organization’s relationship with the public. The public deserves to know what’s happening during a crisis, so it is important to pass along accurate and timely information to them. Seeger
found that developing relationships with the public was especially valuable to the organization, because the public is more likely to trust the communication coming from the company.

The fifth practice involves communicators speaking with honesty, candor and openness. While risks and the fear of public panic can get in the way of carrying this practice out, Seeger felt honesty, candor and openness was especially important for building public trust:

Honesty, in its most fundamental sense, is not lying. Candor refers to communicating the entire truth as it is known, even when the truth may reflect negatively on the agency or organization. A candid assessment might also include worse-case scenarios and fear about how bad the crisis might become. Openness in crisis communication refers to a kind of accessibility and immediacy that goes beyond even a candid response. While few emergency managers would question the need to be honest, candor and openness are difficult to achieve in the high uncertainty context of a crisis.

The sixth best practice is to collaborate and coordinate with credible sources. This is part of the pre-event planning that was addressed earlier. Seeger wrote that it’s important to have a “pre-crisis network” of contacts and to be developing relationships with stakeholders at every level.

The next best practice is to meet the needs of the media and remain accessible. Often organizations have the habit of fearing the news media or treating it like the enemy (Martin, 2005). Seeger writes that the media serves as the “primary conduit to the public and, during a crisis, are obligated to report accurately and completely . . . crisis communicators should . . . use the media as a strategic resource to aid in managing the crisis.”
One of the overlooked aspects for a school district during the time of a crisis can be media relations. As recently as 2006, a survey distributed randomly across the country found most corporations employed a public relations worker that served on its crisis management team (Lee, Woeste & Heath, 2007). However, many school districts have not yet embraced the media. In fact, school administrators often view the news media “with dread and suspicion” and don’t always see the benefit of a public relations professional (Lockhart, 2005).

The eighth practice encourages communicators to communicate with compassion, concern and empathy. Keeping this advice in mind and using it appropriately can help a company, spokesperson or message to be humanized. Some communicators prefer not to show these kinds of emotions, but a lack of emotion in a situation deserving of it can come across as “cold and uncaring.” It is possible the intended message will not be received as planned.

The ninth practice suggests that communicators learn to accept uncertainty and ambiguity. Seeger wrote that “crises and disasters are, by definition, abnormal, dynamic, and unpredictable events.” Because of those characteristics, it should come as no surprise that a crisis will produce some unknowns. This is not to say a company should act confused or like it has no idea what is going on, but it is important the public knows when a company doesn’t have all of the information.

The last of the ten best practices deals with messages of self-efficacy. It is important for an organization to believe, or at least appear to believe, its management knows what it is doing. These kinds of messages can serve to “restore some sense of
control over an uncertain and threatening situation.” If an organization can show that it is in control, showing its actions are clear, it can help build trust with its publics.

Other academic papers and articles have sought to add further best practices for crisis communication (Sandman, 2006 A; Olson, 2010 B; Veil & Husted, 2012 C), but most of what is written is covered by Seeger’s ten best practices. However, one thing the additional literature can add is an emphasis on using a crisis as an opportunity.

*Schools, Social Media, and Crisis Communication*

One of the overlooked aspects for a school district during the time of a crisis can be media relations. As recently as 2006, a survey distributed randomly across the country found most corporations employed a public relations worker that served on its crisis management team (Lee, Woeste & Heath, 2007). However, many school districts have not yet embraced the media. In fact, school administrators often view the news media “with dread and suspicion” and don’t always see the benefit of a public relations professional (Lockhart, 2005).

Using a public relations professional to deliver quick and accurate messages during a crisis has become even more important in the social media world. With applications like Twitter, messages ranging from completely false to completely true (Sutter, 2009) have the potential to spread much more quickly than in the past (Vascellaro, 2009). According to teen cell phone usage data from 2009, eight percent of all teens (ages 12-17) are using Twitter (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Purcell, 2010). While teens are not the age group keeping Twitter in business (Miller, 2009), eight percent is still a chunk of that population.
Plus, the above data is from three years ago, and Twitter has enjoyed tremendous growth in the years following that data. From March 2010 to March 2011, Twitter’s mobile users increased by 182 percent. In March 2010, an average of 50 million Tweets were sent every day. In March 2011, the number grew to 140 million, showing how much the (@Twitter, 2011). It would not be a stretch to assume that eight percent from 2009 is no longer an accurate number.

These numbers are important to know, because it shows how much the use – as well as the ease of use – of social media has grown. Because of how quickly true or false information can spread through a social medium like Twitter (Castillo, Mendoza & Poblete, 2011), school administrators need to present clear and timely messages to the students and other publics and stakeholders to prevent false information and rumors from being spread throughout the student body (Johnson, 1993).

One potentially positive aspect about using social media is that it does give an organization the opportunity to receive feedback from its stakeholders. However, if the publics with which a school district is trying to communicate during a crisis is not on Facebook or Twitter or any other social media application, a school district would not be well served by using social media over emails. But wherever the school district has a presence before the crisis, the response to the crisis should appear (Coombs, 2012).

Ultimately, when using social media during a crisis, a school district needs to consider the following questions: Are stakeholders going to see the crisis response on any of the possible social media applications? Did the school district have a social media presence prior to the crisis? Does the school district want to receive stakeholder feedback as instantly as social media would or could produce it? These questions would need to be
answered as a school district decides whether or not it wants to use social media as part of its crisis communication response (Coombs, 2012)

_Crisis Communication in Smaller Schools_

The majority of the school district crisis communication literature seemed to be aimed at larger school districts. Meaning, it seemed to lack provisions for the smaller school districts where resources and staff members may be in short supply. While not much specific academic literature exists about crisis communication or crisis planning for small schools, there is some about crisis communication for small businesses, which could apply to small school districts as well.

According to the research, small businesses are less prepared for crises than the bigger ones. In fact, if a small business hasn’t yet experienced a crisis, it is considerably less likely to have a crisis plan in place. A crisis plan is often not even a concern until something has happened. Even small businesses that have experienced a crisis often times still do not have a plan in place (Spillan & Hough, 2003). If this is a problem with small business, it is fair to assume smaller school districts could deal with similar problems.

_School Crisis Teams_

The use of crisis management teams (CMT) is considered a relatively standard practice among many corporations today (Devine et al, 1999). Most organizations use crisis teams as a decision-making group to respond to hazards and crises related to their company or organization.
There are a lot of advantages to employing the use of a crisis management team. One such advantage is the generation of more information. Having more minds to consider everything involved in a situation can produce more information than one mind by itself. Oftentimes, groups are also more likely to stimulate the creativity within itself using the added perspectives a group would bring to the table. A team environment also “encourages agreement with important decisions” (Beebe & Masterson, 2000).

However, with all of those advantages come some disadvantages as well. Working in groups uses a lot of valuable employee time and resources. If eight employees are doing the work that would otherwise be done by one employee, then the job might become eight or more times more expensive to the company or organization. While it was mentioned above that a group atmosphere encourages agreement, part of the encouragement may come as a result of an amount of pressure to conform. Disagreement can – and likely will – happen from time to time in a group setting (Mullen et al., 1994). Another disadvantage that may occur in a group setting is one member dominating the entire conversation, which can also lead to other members not having much or any responsibility within the group (Beebe & Masterson, 2000 A; Engleberg & Wynn, 2000 B).

At times, crisis teams are put together based solely on individuals’ job title, rather than by how they would fit within the group. Meredith Belbin (1981) said the following about crisis management teams:

Management teams are commonly made up of members holding particular appointments. They are there by virtue of the offices or responsibilities they represent. No overall sense of design governs the composition of the group which, in human terms, is little more than a random collection of
senior managers with as wide a spread of human foibles and personality characteristics as one might expect to find in the population at large.”

Denis Smith (2000) provided a possible solution to this problem:

The selection of CMT members should reflect the individual’s ability to fulfill key roles and tasks within the context of a functional specialism or positional affiliation. Although research to date has suggested that such a process is possible and desirable, it has not been fully explored within the context of crisis events.

In an effort to help other organizations assemble more effective CMTs, Granville King, III (2002), through his research of successful CMTs, developed the following five propositions:

*Proposition One:* Crisis management teams (CMT) composed of members with prior interactions may be more likely to generate and share ideas with one another than CMT whose members know less about one another.

*Proposition Two:* Crisis management teams (CMT) whose members are heterogeneous may be more likely to generate better ideas than teams whose members are homogeneous.

*Proposition Three:* Crisis management teams (CMT) whose members are knowledgeable of the task at hand may be more likely to generate better ideas than members who are not knowledgeable of the task.

*Proposition Four:* Crisis management teams (CMT) whose leader demonstrates a charismatic style of leadership may be more effective in controlling and eliminating an organizational crisis.

*Proposition Five:* Crisis management teams (CMT) are less likely to be effective if the culture of the organization does not support crisis planning.

From this information, one can gather the most effective CMT would be composed of a diverse group of individuals, who have previously worked together and are knowledgeable about the current crisis topic, while being led by a charismatic leader in a workplace culture that supports crisis planning.
It can be presumed the above description of the ideal CMT also applies to school districts as well, as no effort was made in King’s paper to indicate the propositions applied to a limited number of industries or didn’t apply to a specific industry. School districts are subject to a number of different crises on any given day, so the appropriate use of crisis teams could play an important role in dealing with a potentially hazardous situation (Practical information, 2007).

According to Karen S. Knox and Albert R. Roberts, a school crisis team should range from about four to eight people and “include central office administrators and mental health staff who oversee district policies and procedures, resource allocation, staff training and supervision, and technical assistance to the schools in the district at the time of crisis.”

Knox and Roberts also listed a media coordinator, a staff notification coordinator and an in-house communication coordinator as important roles that should be included in a school district crisis team. The media coordinator serves as the liaison between the school and the media. The staff notification coordinator is in charge of notifying the other team members, as well as other school staff members. This is often done through a phone tree. The in-house communication coordinator screens phone calls, keeps a phone log, keeps a database of regional- and district-level resources and also assists the staff notification coordinator with the phone tree (Knox & Roberts, 2005).

Gaps in literature and Research Questions

Through the research of current literature of school crisis communication, it was found that, while there is a significant amount of crisis communication, not a lot of it is focused on the atmosphere of a public school district. The idea of public relations efforts
for a school or public relations practitioners working for school or school district is a relatively new idea, but its existence does raise the first of six research questions:

**RQ1. What do public relations professionals add to a school district compared to a typical school district without a public relations practitioner?**

The school superintendent is the leader of the school district, and, as a result, he or she often serves as the district’s spokesperson or liaison with the media (Murphy, 1991 A; Jackson, 1995 B). However, it is also suggested that any employee that may speak with the media should receive some kind of media relations training (Lerbinger, 2012). Social media has created concern, because of the powerful potential reach it has and a company’s inability to control what an employee tweets about. Because of the influx of social media applications, it may be important to know if company employees are receiving media training as to what is appropriate or inappropriate to post during a crisis or in general (Popkin, 2009).

**RQ2. Have school district employees other than the superintendent been trained to interact with the media in times of crises?**

All crisis communication plans are not created equal. Part of measuring and/or evaluating a school district crisis communication plan involves look at the range of possibilities that is covered by the plan.

**RQ3. Which crisis scenarios are specifically addressed in a school district’s crisis communication plan?**

Two different crises, even if containing the same subject matter, are not going to be the same. Nevertheless, some organizations may find it useful to have prepared
communication templates (news releases, letters to students and parents, etc.) included in the crisis plan.

RQ4. Do school districts make use of news release templates or any other templates for communicating with any of its stakeholders?

Following the provisions set by King III (2002) about crisis management teams, one can learn whether or not crisis teams are being given the best chance to succeed.

RQ5. Are crisis teams in Indiana school districts constructed in a manner that would give them a better chance to succeed?

Does size matter when it comes to creating a crisis communication plan? The literature showed that smaller businesses are less likely to have a crisis plan in place and are overall slightly indifferent unless it has already experienced a crisis. Smaller schools may also find themselves falling into that trap.

RQ6. Are smaller schools less thorough in their crisis communication planning?
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

During the preliminary research, the goal was to determine what Indiana public school district crisis plans contained and what they were lacking. An online survey was chosen as the best research method to obtain this information, because it gives the school administrators the ability to provide information on the contents of their district’s crisis plan without delivering a physical or electronic copy of the actual crisis plan. As some administrators were uncomfortable with the idea of giving their school districts’ crisis plan to the researcher, this was seen as an appropriate compromise.

In addition to the questions from the content analysis, other questions were added to the survey. These questions included topics such as district size (number of students, number of employees, etc.), crisis teams and public relations employees.

Participants

Because the purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the current status of crisis communication plans used by public school districts in Indiana, the pool of potential participants was narrowed to employees involved in crisis planning for the 293 public school districts in Indiana.
Since the school district superintendent is the leader of the school district (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999), it was presumed he or she would likely be the most knowledgeable about the school district operations. If that was not the case, it was reasonable to believe he or she would at least be able to determine which employee would be most suitable to answer questions on a given subject about the school district. For these reasons, the researcher determined the survey should be sent to each of the 293 superintendents of public school districts in Indiana.

While there are some private school districts in Indiana, the directors or superintendents of these institutions were not contacted as they fall outside the scope of the research questions. It is presumed that, since they are not governed by the Indiana Department of Education, private institutions would operate under different requirements in regard to crisis plans and communication.

**Survey**

The purpose of the survey was to determine what the school districts’ crisis plans contained. While a content analysis may have been an appropriate method of collecting that data, efforts to collect crisis plans from school districts were frustrated by some districts’ efforts to remove parts of the crisis plan they did not want available to the researcher. Additionally, some school districts were uncomfortable with the idea of the crisis plan in a third party’s possession. By sending out a survey with questions similar to those asked by the researcher during a content analysis, the researcher can learn what is included in each school district’s crisis communication plan without collecting the crisis plans. Also, a survey was a much quicker form of research than a content analysis,
because it relied on participants familiar with their district’s crisis plan answering questions and submitting their answers instead of one research looking at more than 50 copies of school district crisis plans. A copy of the survey is included with this paper and can be located in Appendix A.

Based on the preliminary research performed by the researcher, the survey was created using online survey software called SurveyGizmo.com. After the survey was created, a URL was generated by the software, and this URL was sent via electronic mail to all 293 Indiana public school district superintendents along with information introducing the survey/research project and its purpose. The email addresses were obtained through the Indiana Department of Education website. About two weeks after the initial email was sent, those who had not yet responded to the survey, nor requested to be removed from future email lists, were sent a reminder email. A final reminder was sent a week and a half later. The survey was open for a total of 30 days.

The survey consisted of several different groups of questions. The first section asked some demographic questions. For example, questions asked how many students were in enrolled in the district, how many employees worked for the district and how many schools operated by the district. The survey also asked for the name of the school district, the name town in which it is located and to specify in which region of Indiana (Northwest Indiana, Northeast Indiana, East Central Indiana, West Central Indiana, Southeast Indiana, or Southwest Indiana) it was located. The survey participant was also asked to choose from a list of job titles. As stated above, the superintendents were invited to take the survey, but they were also invited to give the survey to the district employee
they felt is most knowledgeable about the crisis plan or best suited to participate in the survey research.

The second section of the survey included questions about a district’s crisis team and whether or not the district has a full-time public relations employee working for it. However, the main purpose of the second section of questions in the survey was to learn basic, but specific, details about each school’s crisis plan situation, such as the year it was created, the year it was most recently updated, whether or not the individual schools possess their own crisis plan, whether or not the public may access the crisis plan, and others.

The third section of the survey focused mainly on the school district’s communication plan for specific scenarios. First, it was determined whether or not a school district’s plan included communication guidelines for any individual scenarios. The participant was provided with a list of 37 possible crisis scenarios, compiled through the review of literature, and given the option select scenarios detailed in his or her district’s crisis communication plan. Options for each scenario include internal communication, external communication or both internal and external communication.

The fourth section of the survey contained questions on media relations training, whether or not the crisis plan contains any communication templates, such as news release templates or templates for letters to parents or students. It also asked about district use of specific media such as text messaging or social media applications (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.).

The survey’s fifth section focused on the stakeholder publics addressed throughout the district’s crisis plan, while the sixth and last section asked participants for
permission to be contacted in the future for follow-up questions based on the results of the survey.

**Follow-up Questions**

At the end of the survey, each participant was asked whether or not they would be willing to be contacted at a later date to answer some follow-up questions. If they were willing, they were invited to leave their preferred method of contact on the survey. About a month following the close of the survey, an email with six follow-up questions was sent to the willing representatives of 15 different school districts. Another email was sent out about two weeks after the original one in order to remind the school representatives to answer the questions if they hadn’t yet responded. A list of the six questions can be found in Appendix B at the end of this document.
As previously mentioned, an email with a link to the online survey was sent to all 293 public school superintendents in the state of Indiana. Of those 293 potential participants, the researcher received answers from 60 survey participants, which was a response rate of 60/293 or 20.5 percent.

Respondent Demographics

![Figure 1 - Location of School District](image)

Each of the six regions (Southeast, Southwest, East Central, West Central, Northwest, Northeast) in Indiana was represented in the group of 60 survey participants (see Figure 1). However, the Central region (East Central and West Central) represented
half of the survey participants. Two possible presumptions were made to justify this occurrence: 1) about 40 percent of all of the school districts in Indiana are located in the Central region, and 2) the academic institution through which the research was conducted is located in the Central region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of employees</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>600 +</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>451 - 600</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301 - 450</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201 - 300</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 - 200</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 - 100</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey respondents represented school districts of many different sizes, ranging from 51 – 100 district employees to more than 600 employees (see Table 1). Thirty-five percent of the participants represented a school district with 51 – 200 employees. About 37 percent were from a school district with 201 – 450 employees, and about 28 percent of the represented districts had more than 450 employees.
Similar to the number of employees for the participating school districts, the number of students enrolled in the represented school districts varied greatly from less than 500 students to more than 5,000 students (see Table 2). One-third of the respondents’ school districts have less than 1,500 enrolled students. About 38 percent of the responding school districts have between 1,500 and 4,000 students, and about 28 percent of them have more than 4,000 students. A benefit of this respondent variety is that the results should not have a bias toward a particular school district size.

In the explanatory email sent to each school district, it was explained that the superintendent did not have to be the employee to fill out the survey. In the case the superintendent felt another employee would be better suited to answer the questions in the survey, he or she was invited to forward the email to the most appropriate employee. The researcher makes the assumption the superintendent felt he or she was the best person to fill out the survey if he or she did so. However, there is no way of knowing whether or not the superintendent actually felt he or she was the best survey participant in the school district.

Nevertheless, as shown below, the majority of the survey participants were the school districts’ superintendents, 56.67 percent of the respondents. Safety specialists made up the next significantly large group of participants with 18.33 percent of the responses. Due to the subject matter addressed in the survey, it was not surprising to see 75 percent of all the completed responses done by either a superintendent or a safety specialists. Public relations professionals filled out 5 percent of the surveys.
Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>56.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety Supervisor</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations Specialist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Facilities</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ1. What do public relations professionals add to a school district compared to a typical school district without a public relations practitioner?

The results showed that only 18.3 percent of the participating school districts employed a public relations professional on its staff. Of that 18.3 percent, 90.9 percent were full-time public relations employees, while 9.1 percent worked part time. According to the survey results, and not surprisingly, bigger school districts were more likely to employ a full-time public relations professional. Half of the participating school districts with more than 5,000 students and 600 employees reported employing a public relations professional. Meanwhile, only 10.4 percent of the school districts with less than 5,000 students and 600 employees reported employing a public relations professional. It seems apparent the size of the district plays a role in the likelihood of it employing a public relations employee.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PR employee?</th>
<th>1-1500</th>
<th>1501-3000</th>
<th>3001-4000</th>
<th>4001-5000</th>
<th>More than 5000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5
School districts with a PR employee (by number of district employees)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PR employee?</th>
<th>1-150</th>
<th>151-300</th>
<th>301-450</th>
<th>451-600</th>
<th>600 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That having a public relations employee would be helpful to an organization during a time of crisis is confirmed by numerous research studies. However, employing a worker to solely be in charge of a school district’s public relations efforts can be difficult to attain. Especially in the case of many small school districts, the funds are simply not available.

One particular benefit of employing a public relations professional, which the results of the survey appear to reveal, is a recent update to the district’s crisis plan. As is shown in the table below, 100 percent of the school districts with a public relations employee made an update to their crisis plans either in 2011 or 2012.

Out of the school districts without a paid public relations worker, however, only 77.6 percent of them had updated to their crisis plans in 2011 or 2012. About 14 percent of them made updates to their plans in 2010, while the remaining 8 percent or so most recently made updates to their plans between 2002 and 2009.

Table 6
When was the most recent update made to the crisis plan?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to the recent updates to the school districts’ crisis plans, a significant difference between the school districts with a public relations professional and those without was shown in the number of scenarios each crisis plan covered. Out of the 37 scenarios listed on the survey, crisis plans from districts with a public relations employee covered 25 scenarios at higher frequency rates than those without. Additionally, the average difference between the two groups on those 25 scenarios was 11.9 percent.

Meanwhile, those without a public relations employee covered nine of the scenarios at a higher rate than those with a communications employee, and the average difference between the two in those circumstances was 6.9 percent. Also, when the difference between the two groups was less than 2 percent, it was labeled as “equal,” and three of the scenarios fell under this classification.

A table with the scenario statistics broken down by whether or not a school district employed a public relations professional is available in Appendix C.

According to the survey results, having a public relations professional on staff in a school district also seemed to have an effect on the likelihood of a school district utilizing social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). School districts with a public relations employee utilized social media to communicate with its external publics at a rate of 54.5 percent of the time. Meanwhile, as shown in Table 7 below, 34.7 percent of the school districts without a communication professional utilized social media to communicate with its publics and stakeholders.
Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PR Employee on staff?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another added effect of a public relations professional at a school district is the likelihood of prepared communication in the crisis plan. News release templates appeared in the plans of 72.7 percent of school districts with a public relations professional, while only 26.5 percent of the crisis plans from school districts without a communication professional included a news release template. A template for a letter to parents and a letter to students appeared in 81.8 and 54.5 percent of districts with a public relations worker, while only 22.4 and 14.3 percent of the other school districts had one.

Every one of the participating school districts (100 percent) with a public relations employee as a member of a school district staff had an employee with media relations training, while 53.1 percent of the rest of the school districts had an employee with media relations training. Also, 100 percent of these crisis plans contained tips for speaking with the media, and only 59.2 percent of the rest of the school districts’ crisis plans had media tips in them.

**RQ2. Have other school district employees been trained to interact with the media in times of crises?**

The majority of Indiana public school districts have an employee that has received some form of media relations training (see Figure 2). 61.7 percent of the school districts have an employee that has received media relations training. However, the majority (63.3
percent) of school districts do not require any kind of media relations training from their employees. Additionally, the majority (66.7 percent) of public school districts’ crisis plans contained some tips or guidelines for speaking with the media (Figure 3).

**Figure 2 - Media relations training for district staff members**

**Figure 3 - Crisis plans with media relations tips/guidelines**

**RQ3.** Which crisis scenarios are specifically addressed in a school district’s crisis communication plan?
Indiana public school district participants were asked which specific scenarios were accounted for in the districts’ crisis communication plans. A list of possible scenarios was provided, and participants were invited to check any of the three boxes:

1. *Internal* – This option should be selected when a crisis plan contains only plans for **internal communications** for a given scenario.

2. *External* - This option should be selected when a crisis plan contains only plans for **external communications** for a given scenario.

3. *Both* – If a school district’s crisis plan contained details for both internal and external communications, this option should be selected.

If a district crisis plan does not contain communication plans for a particular scenario, all three boxes should be left blank.

The first question asked in regard to the specific crisis scenarios contained in the crisis plans was about whether or not the school district’s crisis plan covers the communication plan for specific crisis scenarios. As seen in Table 8, 60 participants answered this question. A total of 49 districts – 81.7 percent of the responding school districts – claimed to have guidelines for specific scenarios in their crisis plans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>81.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8

*Does the crisis communication plan include guidelines for different crisis scenarios?*
Weather or Natural Disasters

Some of the most common scenarios covered in these crisis plans were for natural disasters or weather-related incidents or crises. As shown below in Table 9, the vast majority of school districts with guidelines for specific scenarios have communication plans in case of fire (93.9 percent), tornado (91.8 percent) or severe weather conditions (87.8 percent) such as snow or icy roads.

A surprising revelation from the results shown in Table 9 was the difference between the number of crisis plans with guidelines for earthquakes compared to those with guidelines for floods. According to the United States Geological Survey, Indiana has experienced six earthquakes during the course of a 30-year period, (Top Earthquake States, 2012). Meanwhile, according to Lotshaw (2010), all but 10 of Indiana’s 92 counties were declared presidential disaster areas. A lot of Indiana finds itself susceptible to flooding (Gustin, 2011), so more school districts being prepared to communicate during an earthquake than during a flood was surprising. As one might expect, very few of the crisis plans had communication guidelines for a hurricane.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRISIS</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>% w/ different scenarios</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>93.9%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tornado</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>91.8%</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe weather conditions (snow, ice, etc.)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>87.8%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthquake</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flood</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurricane</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9
Natural disasters or weather-related scenarios included in the crisis communication plan
**Crime and/or Violence**

The table below (Table 10) shows the results for scenarios involving crime and violence in the school district. Bomb threats, school shootings and student suicides/suicidal students were the most common the scenarios in the school districts’ crisis communication plans.

Somewhat surprising is the lack of communication guidelines for instances where a district employee is arrested in general or arrested as a sex offender. More than half of the participating school districts’ plans did not have any communication guidelines for these situations. Considering Indiana’s recent history of teacher sexual misconduct, some communication procedures would likely be beneficial. In fact, according to a seven-month investigation by the Associated Press, “sexual misconduct allegations led states to take action against the licenses of 2,570 educators from 2001 through 2005” (Indiana had dozens, 2012).

Of all the listed scenarios in this group, rape received the least amount of attention with a little more than 30 percent of the responses indicating crisis communication guidelines. Communication protocol for cyberbullying, a relatively new crisis for school districts (Li, Cross & Smith, 2011), was in the crisis communication plans of less than 50 percent of the responding school districts. One research study suggested about 10 percent of Indiana youths are being cyberbullied (Preusse, 2012), and according to a survey done by the New York State Senate’s Independent Democratic Caucus, about 70 percent of the students in New York State have been cyberbullied or know someone who has been a victim of cyberbullying (Giordano, 2012). While this research is for students in the state of New York, Indiana public schools also handle their fair share of cyberbullying
occurrences (Public Radio International, 2012; Bauer, 2012). Enough so that many parents in Indiana are calling for new laws to prevent cyberbullying (Schultz, 2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRISIS</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>% w/ different scenarios*</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bomb threat</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>98.0%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School shooting</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>87.8%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student suicide</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>77.6%</td>
<td>65.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicidal students</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug-related incidents</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol-related incidents</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual harassment done by student</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual harassment done by teacher</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest of a district employee</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyberbullying</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandalism</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest of a district employee as a sex offender</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang-related activity</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial discrimination</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hate crime</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34.7%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Accidents/Sickness**

This section detailed the survey responses for scenarios that would be considered accidents. Accidents are interpreted events that happen unintentionally or unexpectedly, including to the people involved. Sicknesses, which include food poisoning and contagious illnesses/diseases, were also included with this group.
Considering the relatively recent H1N1 flu pandemic, it should come as no surprise that outbreak of diseases or sicknesses would be covered by most crisis plans (77.6 percent). The vast majority of the crisis plans contained communication details for a bus accident and a chemical/hazardous material spill (83.7 percent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRISIS</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>% of SD w/ different scenarios</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bus Accident</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>83.7%</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemicals/Hazardous Material Spill</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>83.7%</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outbreak of disease or sickness</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>77.6%</td>
<td>65.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power outage</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatal accident on property</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building collapse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food poisoning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34.7%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All Other Scenarios

This section contained scenarios that could not be classified with any of the other groups. These situations included employee strikes, wildlife inside of schools or the death of a teacher or student outside of school were placed into this section. The question following the list of scenarios in the survey gave participants a chance to list any further scenarios not included in the list but in their district’s crisis plan. Other scenarios covered in participating school district crisis plans but not on the original list included airline crash, building lock down procedures, unwanted visitors, weapon on school property, death of a public figure and child abuse.
### Table 12
*Accidents or sickness scenarios included in the crisis communication plan*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRISIS</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>% of SD w/ different scenarios</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death of a student</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>91.8%</td>
<td>76.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of a teacher</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>89.8%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead body found on school property</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal/wildlife inside of school building</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal/wildlife outside of school building</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee strike</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RQ4. Do school districts make use of news release templates or any other templates for communicating with any of its stakeholders?**

Some school districts have prepared communication templates to use in case of a crisis. Of the 60 participating school districts, 21 of them (35 percent) had a news/press release template in their crisis communication plans. For a letter to parents template, 20 school districts (33.3 percent) had them in their crisis plans, while 13 districts (21.7 percent) had a template for a letter to students included in their plans.

**Are crisis teams in Indiana school districts designed in a manner that would give them a better chance to succeed?**

As organizations seek to effectively plan for a variety of different crises, many use a crisis management team in order to put together and prepare a crisis plan (King III, 2002). According to Coombs (1999), “a crisis management team is a cross-functional group of people within the organization who have been designated to handle any crisis.” Judging by the survey results illustrated on the graph below, it appears the majority of
school districts in Indiana see the usefulness of having a crisis management team to deal with possible crises.

Additionally, as shown in Figure 4, the school district crisis teams are typically made up of employees from both the district central office as well as the individual schools, giving each team a variety of perspectives in crisis planning.

![Figure 4 - The makeup of school districts' crisis teams](image)

**RQ5. Are smaller school districts less thorough in their crisis communication planning?**

As noted earlier, the participating school districts varied greatly in size. For the purposes of these results, “small school districts” will be defined as school districts with 200 or fewer employees, while “big school districts” are those with more than 200 employees. Out of the 60 school districts participating in the survey, 21 school districts had 200 or fewer employees, while 39 had more than 200 employees.
Often smaller businesses are put at a disadvantage because of limited employees and resources, and it is possible that smaller school districts have the same disadvantage. Also, without the experience of a crisis, small businesses often do not make crisis planning a priority.

When asked if their school district employed a public relations worker, two of the 21 smaller school district respondents (9.5 percent) said their district did employee a public relations employee. This is considerably lower than the bigger school districts (23.1 percent), as well as the overall average percentage of 18.3 percent.

Smaller school districts’ crisis plans are also less thorough in the sense that a smaller percentage of the surveyed scenarios are covered in their crisis plans. Out of the 37 scenarios listed on the survey, crisis plans from bigger school districts covered 32 scenarios at a higher frequency rates than smaller ones. Additionally, the average difference between the two groups on those 32 scenarios was 16.1 percent.

Meanwhile, the smaller school districts covered two of the scenarios at a higher rate than the bigger ones, and the average difference between the two in those circumstances was 9.9 percent. Also, when the difference between the two groups was less than 2 percent, it was labeled as “equal,” and three of the scenarios fell under this classification.

A table with the scenario statistics broken down by bigger and smaller school districts is available towards the back of this report in Appendix D.

When asked if participating school districts’ crisis plans included a template for news releases, letter to parents and letter to students, significantly fewer smaller school districts had the templates. Only 14.3 percent of the smaller school districts had a news
release template compared to the 46.2 percent from bigger school districts. For the letter to parents templates, 4.8 percent of the smaller school districts had them compared to the 48.7 percent from bigger school districts. For the question regarding a template for a letter to students during a crisis, 4.8 percent of the smaller school districts had them, while 30.8 percent of the bigger school district had them.

Tips for speaking with the news media were a common ingredient in school district crisis plans, and 61.9 percent of the smaller schools’ plans contained these tips, while 69.2 percent of the bigger school districts do. At least one employee received media relations training from 52.4 percent of small school districts and 66.7 percent of the bigger school districts.
As indicated by the findings, there are clear benefits to employing a full-time public relations worker in crisis communication preparation. The survey results showed that crisis plans from those kinds of districts have been more recently updated, the plan details communication plans for more crisis scenarios, more employees are trained to speak with the media, and more crisis plans with tips and guidelines for speaking with the media included. A lot of those same benefits or advantages were shown to be true for school districts with more than 200 employees.

It appeared as though many school district administrators may be hesitant to prepare for crisis communication ahead of time. The communication this included mentioned items such as news releases, letters to parents or letters to students. Part of the reason many school administrators disagree with this method is because they feel that “a template for a press release belies the fact that any crisis is unique. The press release should be custom tailored to the specific event or circumstances” (Bevan, 2012).

The survey results did not really show conclusively whether or not the school districts’ crisis teams were constructed with Granville King III’s provisions in mind. It is difficult to imagine a survey that could measure several of those five provisions.
Limitations of This Study

While a 20 percent survey response rate is typically a satisfactory amount, only 60 survey responses comes with it a considerably higher margin of error (over 11 percent) than is desired for a study such as this. Sixty responses is kind of a small sample size by which to judge an entire state’s public school districts. Additionally, because only one of the participating school districts employed a part-time public relations employee, this study was unable to compare the impact of full-time and part-time public relations employees on a school district.

Areas for Future Research

As has been previously mentioned in this paper, there is considerable room for further public relations scholarship on the topic of crisis communication planning in public school districts. This work examined the differences in crisis communication planning between school districts with a public relations professional on staff and those without. Future research should examine the practice of the crisis communication plans, still comparing districts with a public relations worker to those without one. For example, does each school, when faced with an equal crisis, stick to what is in its crisis communication plan? How does one compare to the other in regards to media relations during the aforementioned crisis? How is each of the school districts covered by the news media?

The survey showed a disparity in crisis communication planning between small school districts and big school districts. A planning disparity also exists between school districts with a communications professional and those without. However, which is a
better predictor of thorough crisis communication planning, a public relations employee or a larger school? Scholars should look into research that further examines that subject in order to assign greater impact to one attribute.

Another possible area for research could be in reference to social media policy or social media relations. As was shown in this study, very few school district employees receive any form of media relations. Because of the growing use of social media applications like Twitter, which allow people from all over the world – including members of the news media – the opportunity to read the candid thoughts of any schoolteacher or other district employee (Haynes, 2012). Are school districts being proactive in establish a social media policy for their employees, especially in times of crisis when an organization would prefer to control the messages coming from its organization?

Advances in technology continue to change aspect of general crisis communication, so school crisis communication is an evolving subject matter for scholarship and should provide plentiful research opportunities.

Conclusion

School districts operate under very limited budgets and can be very restricted in the actions they chose to take. There are things revealed by this study they can change, but there are others they cannot. While a school district may not be able to drastically change its enrollment number, or it might not have the funds available to hire a public relations professional, it can try to train and educate those already employed by the district. There is a prevailing thought that only one or two people should be trained in
media relations, because only one or two people are going to speak with the media (Bevan, 2012 A; Carroll, 2012 B; Carter, 2012 C; Kleefisch, 2012 D). However, it is possible circumstances may arise in which other employee may need to be able to communicate with the media (Roberts, 2012). Receiving media relations training does not mean the school district should rely on that person, but it should prepare them in case they would need to speak with the news media.

Excuses can be made as to why a particular school district hasn’t prepared itself for a particular crisis, but the survey still revealed that even if the majority of school districts are preparing for every crisis, each scenario had some school district(s) that prepared for it. Every school district, whether big or small, with a public relations employee or not, has the opportunity to prepare itself.


Carroll, T. (2012, June 1). Email interview with Teresa Carroll, director of communications for Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation.


Haynes, S. (2012, June 1). Email interview Susan Haynes, chief communication officer for Mooresville Consolidated School Corporation.


APPENDIX A

The Current Status of Crisis Plans for Indiana Public School Districts

Consent

1) Informed Consent Form for Survey

Study Title
The Current Status of School Crisis Communication Plans: A Survey of Indiana Public School Districts

Study, Purpose and Rationale
The purpose of this research project is to examine the depth of communication preparation contained in the crisis plans of Indiana public school districts. The results of this research could assist school districts in improving their own plans, as well as developing a new plan.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria
To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be a public school district administrator who is knowledgeable about the district's crisis plan. Participants must be adults over the age of 18.

Participation, Procedures and Duration
For this project, you will be asked to complete a series of questionnaires about your school district's crisis plan. It will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete the questionnaires. You will also have to opt to be contacted for a follow-up interview at a later date.
Audio or Video Tapes
For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, the interviews will be audio/video taped. The tapes from these interviews will be kept in locked room until the end of the 2012 calendar year. At that point, they will all be destroyed.

Paper Data
The paper data in this research project will be notes taken by the principal investigator during the interviews. This data will be kept in a secure location until the end of the 2012 calendar year. At that point, they will all be destroyed.

Data Confidentiality or Anonymity
All data will be maintained as confidential and no identifying information such as names will appear in any publication or presentation of the data.

Risks or Discomforts
There are no perceived risks for participating in this study

Benefits
One benefit you may gain from participating in this study may be a better understanding of other school districts' (or Indiana public school districts as a whole) crisis communication plans.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at anytime for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study.

IRB Contact Information
For one's rights as a research subject, you may contact the following: For questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Director, Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070 or at irb@bsu.edu.

Researcher Contact Information
If you have any further questions regarding this research project before you begin the survey, feel free to contact the researchers with the information below:

Principal Investigator:
Scott M. Gower, Graduate Student
Journalism/Public Relations
Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306
Telephone: 765-717-7778
Email: smgower@bsu.edu
Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Becky McDonald
Journalism/Public Relations
Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306
Telephone: 765-285-8209
Email: bamcdonald@bsu.edu

Consent
I agree to participate in this research project entitled, "The Current Status of School Crisis Communication Plans: A Survey of Indiana Public School Districts." I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described above) in this study.*

( ) Yes, I agree to participate, and I grant permission to use my name, school district and responses in the academic paper

( ) Yes, I agree to participate, but I do not grant permission for my name, school district or responses to be used in the academic paper

( ) No

________________________________________________________________________

School District Information

2) What is the name of the school district?*

________________________________________________________________________

3) In which town is the school district office located?*

________________________________________________________________________

4) In which county is the school district office located?*
5) In which Indiana region would you say your district office is located?*

( ) Northwest Indiana
( ) Northeast Indiana
( ) West Central Indiana
( ) East Central Indiana
( ) Southwest Indiana
( ) Southeast Indiana

6) Which of these job titles best describes your position?*

( ) Superintendent
( ) Assistant Superintendent
( ) Safety Specialist
( ) Public Relations Specialist/Public Information Officer
( ) Chief Communication Officer
( ) Chief Personnel Officer
( ) Director of Secondary Education
( ) Director of Elementary Education
( ) Chief Financial Officer
( ) Director of Business Services
( ) Director of Facilities
( ) Director of Technology
( ) Other: _________________

7) How many students are enrolled in your school district?*

( ) 500 or less
( ) 501 - 1000
8) How many employees (full time, part time, temporary) does your school district?*

( ) 1 - 50
( ) 51 - 100
( ) 101 - 150
( ) 151 - 200
( ) 201 - 250
( ) 251 - 300
( ) 301 - 350
( ) 351 - 400
( ) 401 - 450
( ) 451 - 500
( ) 501 - 550
( ) 551 - 600
( ) More than 600 employees

9) How many different schools does the school district include?*

( ) 1 - 5
( ) 6 - 10
( ) 11 - 15
Crisis Planning

10) Does your school district have a crisis team?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

11) If yes, is the crisis team made up of employees from individual schools (principals, teachers, etc.) or district central office staff (superintendents, directors, etc.)?*

( ) Employees from individuals schools
( ) District central office staff
( ) Both staff from district office and individual schools
( ) My school district does not have a crisis team

12) If your school district has a crisis team, how many members does the crisis team have?*

( ) 2
( ) 3
( ) 4
( ) 5
( ) 6
( ) 7
13) Do any of the individual schools in your district have a crisis team?*

( ) Yes, all of them
( ) Yes, some of them
( ) No, none of them

14) Does your school district have a crisis plan?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

15) If so, is the district's crisis plan available to the public?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

16) If so, how may the public access the district crisis plan? (Check all that apply)

[ ] Via the district website
[ ] Via the district office
[ ] Via mail
[ ] Via email
[ ] Other
[ ] Our crisis plan is not available to the public
17) Is the crisis plan for a school district or an individual school?*

( ) School district
( ) Individual school

18) If the plan is for an individual school, which level of instruction does the school provide? (Check all that apply)

[ ] Preschool
[ ] Kindergarten
[ ] 1st grade
[ ] 2nd grade
[ ] 3rd grade
[ ] 4th grade
[ ] 5th grade
[ ] 6th grade
[ ] 7th grade
[ ] 8th grade
[ ] 9th grade
[ ] 10th grade
[ ] 11th grade
[ ] 12th grade
[ ] This crisis plan is for the school district

19) Do the individual schools within your school district have crisis plans?*

( ) Yes, all schools in the district have individual crisis plans
( ) Yes, some schools in the district have individual crisis plans
( ) No, none of the schools in the district have individual crisis plans

20) If so, what percent of the schools in your district have a crisis plan?*
( ) 1 - 10%
( ) 11 - 20%
( ) 21 - 30%
( ) 31 - 40%
( ) 41 - 50%
( ) 51 - 60%
( ) 61 - 70%
( ) 71 - 80%
( ) 81 - 90%
( ) 91 - 100%

( ) None of the schools in my school district have a crisis plan

21) When was the school district's crisis plan originally created?*

( ) 2012
( ) 2011
( ) 2010
( ) 2009
( ) 2008
( ) 2007
( ) 2006
( ) 2005
( ) 2004
( ) 2003
( ) 2002
( ) 2001
( ) 2000
( ) 1999
( ) 1998
( ) 1997
( ) 1996
( ) Before 1996
( ) Unable to determine the year of creation

22) Are there any indications updates have been made to the crisis plan?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

23) When was the most recent update made to the crisis plan?*

( ) 2012
( ) 2011
( ) 2010
( ) 2009
( ) 2008
( ) 2007
( ) 2006
( ) 2005
( ) 2004
( ) 2003
( ) 2002
( ) 2001
( ) 2000
( ) Before 2000
( ) There are no indications any updates have been made to the plan.

24) Which contact information is available in the district crisis plan?

[ ] School district central office
[ ] A specific school within the district
25) Does the school district have a public relations employee on staff?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

26) If so, is the public relations employee a full-time or part-time district employee?*

( ) Full-time employee
( ) Part-time employee
( ) My school district does not have a PR employee

27) In the case of a crisis, who is the school district's media spokesperson?*

( ) Superintendent
( ) Communication professional/PR Coordinator
( ) Principal
( ) Whichever administrator is on site
( ) Other: ___________________

External vs. Internal Crisis Communication Plan

28) Does the school district have an internal or external crisis communication plan?
An internal crisis communication plan details communication instructions among
school district employees. An external crisis communication plan contains instructions for communicating to parents, media, community members, etc.*

( ) Internal
( ) External (media, public, etc.)
( ) Both internal and external
( ) No

29) Does the crisis communication plan include guidelines for different crisis scenarios?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

30) If so, which potential crisis scenarios* are covered in the crisis plan?  
(*Select INTERNAL is there is only an internal communication plan for that scenario, EXTERNAL for external communication plan, and select BOTH if the school district has both internal and external crisis communication plans. Check all that apply.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol-related incidents</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal/wildlife outside of school building</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal/wildlife inside of school building</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest of a district employee</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest of a district employee as a sex offender</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bomb threat</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building collapse</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus Accident</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemicals/Hazardous</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material Spill</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyberbullying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead body found on school property</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of a student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of a teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug-related incidents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthquake</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee strike</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatal accident on property</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food poisoning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang-related activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hate crime</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurricane</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outbreak of disease or sickness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power outage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial discrimination</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School shooting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe weather conditions (snow, ice, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual harassment done by student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual harassment done by teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student suicide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicidal students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tornado</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandalism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

31) Are there any other scenarios included in your district's crisis communication plan?*

( ) Yes
( ) No
32) If so, which other scenarios are included in the plan? (Separate with commas; this question is not required.)

__________________________________

33) Are there disciplinary actions outlined in the crisis communication plan for a district employee involved in the crisis?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

Media Relations Questions

34) Does the school district utilize social media in order to communicate with external publics (media, parents, community, etc.)?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

35) If so, which social media applications are utilized by the school district?

[ ] Facebook
[ ] Twitter
[ ] YouTube
[ ] Blogger (or other blogging software application like Wordpress)
[ ] Other
[ ] My school district does not utilize social media in that manner

36) If so, does the district's crisis plan list social media applications as communications tool?*
37) Does the school district use text messaging to communicate with its external publics (media, parents, students, community, etc.) in case of emergency?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

38) If so, does the district's crisis plan list text messaging as a way to communicate with external publics?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

( ) My school district does not utilize text messaging in that manner

39) Does the school district have a press release template in its crisis communication plan?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

40) If yes, does the school district crisis communication plan have a press release template for different crisis scenarios (ex. Bomb threat, school shooting, etc.) in its crisis communication plan?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

( ) My school district's crisis communication plan does not have a press release template
41) Does the school district have a template for a letter to the parents of students in its crisis communication plan?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

42) Does the school district have a template for a letter to the students in its crisis communication plan?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

43) Does the school district's plan include tips or guidelines for speaking with the media?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

44) Have any members of your staff had media relations training?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

45) If so, are any staff members required to complete media relations training?*

( ) Yes
( ) No
( ) None of my staff have had media relations training

46) If so, which staff positions are required to complete media relations training?*

( ) Superintendent
( ) Principals
( ) Assistant Principals
( ) Directors (Facilities, Technology, Transportation, etc.)
( ) Other (please list)
( ) None of the district staff is required to complete media relations training

---

**Audience Questions**

47) Are specific audiences addressed throughout the school district's crisis communication plan (media, parents, law enforcement officials, student, district employees, community)?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

48) Which audiences are specifically addressed in your district's crisis communication plan?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Is Addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News media</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents of students</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of the school</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law enforcement officials</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District employees</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of the local community</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
49) Are any other audiences in the crisis communication plan that were not mentioned in the previous question?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

50) If so, which other audience(s) were addressed in the district's crisis communication plan? (If there are more than one, please separate with commas; this question is not required.)

____________________________________________

Follow-Up Questions

51) Would you be willing to be contacted to answer a few follow-up questions?*

( ) Yes
( ) No

52) If so, please leave your name and preferred method of contact (phone number, email address, etc.) below.

__________________________

Thank You!

Thank you for taking our survey. Your response is very important to us.
APPENDIX B

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

1. What is the school district's policy for making updates to the crisis plan? Is there a time frame in which revisions/updates need to be made (e.g. every year, every two years, etc.)?

2. About 35% of the survey participants said their school district crisis plan contains a template for a press release and even fewer contain a template for a letter to parents/students. In your opinion, is there a reason why most school districts choose to not have a prepared template for written communication to their external publics? If so, what is the reason(s)?

3. How are employees trained on the crisis plan? Are there simulations done for practice? If so, how often are different crisis plan scenarios practiced?

4. If you don't have a public relations employee working for your district, do you feel employing a PR professional would benefit your school district in planning for and executing during a time of crisis? Why or why not?

5. How often does your school district's crisis team meet? Do you prefer a large crisis team (10 or more people) or a small crisis team (less than 10 people)? In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages for either or both kinds of crisis teams?

6. The majority of the survey respondents (78.3%) said their school district does not require any of its staff to complete any kind of media relations training. Do you feel having staff members with media relations training would be beneficial to your school district? Why or why not? Why do so few school district require media relations training from any of its employees?
## APPENDIX C

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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal/wildlife outside of school build</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal/wildlife inside of school build</td>
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**Total:** GREATER 25, LESS 9, EQUAL 3
## APPENDIX D

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<td>Animal/wildlife outside of school bul</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandalism</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-8.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Greater                              | 32            | 82.1%         | -16.1%     |
| Equal                                | 3             | 7.7%          | 0.9%       |
| Less                                  | 2             | 5.1%          | 0.7%       |