

Through the Fog: *Communicating Clearly in a Crisis Event*

Ricki Collins

Director of Communications | Office of the Commissioner

Amanda Chin

Director of Media | Office of the Commissioner

Scan the QR to
Access SSC 77
RESOURCES



DISCLAIMER

Generative AI Tools

The **State of Tennessee does not currently permit the use of Generative AI tools**, such as Otter, in meetings hosted on state resources. Meetings with contractors, vendors, and subrecipients are not public meetings and may involve discussion of protected state data.

Generative AI tools are not adequately regulated and are designed to train on data that is collected and may misrepresent data or release protected data to the general public.

While the State supports your desire to maintain documentation of the meeting and what you learn, **please respect our decision to safeguard information** and do not attempt to use tools such as these. If you choose to use a tool such as this, the State will block that tool from the meeting.





Warm Up

- What's the first word that comes to mind when you hear '**crisis event**'?
- Have you ever managed a media crisis?



Why Does Crisis Communications Matter?

Communication can **shape public trust** as much as the incident itself.

Common Mistakes:



Waiting too long



Saying too much



Saying too little



Failing to coordinate internally



Forgetting employees are audiences



IN THE NEWS

Adolf Hitler baby photo in New Jersey middle school yearbook sparks investigation

 PBS NEWS HOUR

How some Atlanta students are getting extra help years after a massive cheating scandal

Oct 24, 2017 6:30 PM EDT

EDUCATION UTAH

Canvas cyberattacks has Utah colleges and K-12 schools on the digital defensive

Popular educational technology system was compromised by hacking group — alarming schools in Utah and across U.S.

KENTUCKY

Lawrence County High School 'addressing' senior prank gone wrong

Siskiyou County Sheriff's Office issues statement into drug exposure after school incident

Four hurt after Cumberland County Schools bus crashes in Leland

INTERACTIVE CASE STUDY

“What Would You Do?”

Knoxville 92°F   [Sign in](#)

Canvas cyberattacks has Utah colleges and K-12 schools on the digital defensive

Story by Jason Swensen • 4mo •  5 min read



 People take photos near a John Harvard statue, left, on the Harvard University campus, Jan. 2, 2024, in Cambridge, Mass.
© Steven Senne, Associated Press

- Alerted community to Canvas data breach
- No confirmation that Canyons District data was involved
- No action from Canvas users required
- Tips to avoid being victims of phishing attempts
- No student or employee data compromised, but district pulled Canvas offline through the weekend



“What Would You Do?” *(continued)*

School Statement:

"All students and staff have been released from the hospital, with the exception of one staff member who remains under medical care out of an abundance of caution. We again appreciate the swift response of law enforcement, first responders and medical personnel who assisted our students and staff."



Four hurt after Cumberland County Schools bus crashes in Leland

2026-07-08

BRUNSWICK COUNTY, N.C. (WECT) – A school activity bus carrying students and staff from a...





Building a Framework

- Preparation
- Clearly Defined Roles & Decision-Making Structure
- Approval Pathways with Time-Limits
- Internal Notification Cascade
- Media Response Protocols

Building Your Crisis Response Team

Crisis Response Team	Primary Contact(s)	Phone Number	Email	Backup Contact
Media/Social Response				
Internal Communications				
TDOE Communications				
IT/Operations				
Human Resources				

Establish a Crisis Response team, including primary and backup contacts.

Ensure you have internal and external POCs ready.

Remember to include other local agencies like police.

Notification Plans

PRIMARY

Superintendent



Deputy



Legal

SECONDARY

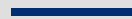
Communications Team



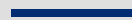
TDOE



School Admin



All Staff



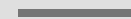
Partner Agencies



School Board

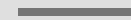
EXTERNAL

Families



Community

(partnership with city governments)



Media

Drafting Pre-Written Holding Statements

Holding Statement Template

- *Our district is aware of an incident involving _____.*
- *The district has been closely monitoring the incident.*
- *We are actively gathering verified information and working with the appropriate agencies.*
- *We will provide updates as soon as additional information is confirmed.*
- *The district does not comment on pending litigation.*

Rapid-Response Playbook

- First 15-30 minutes
- First 60 minutes
- First few hours
- First 24 hours



Social Media Protocol

BEFORE POSTING

- ☐ Verify facts
- ☐ Obtain approval
- ☐ Ensure message aligns with other communications

MONITOR Watch for:

- ☐ Rumors
- ☐ False screenshots
- ☐ Edited videos
- ☐ AI-generated misinformation
- ☐ Impersonation accounts

RESPONSE STRATEGY

- ✓ Correct factual misinformation.
- ✓ Link to official district updates.
- ✓ Avoid engaging in arguments



Post-Incident Review

Discussion Questions

- *What worked well?*
- *Where did communication slow down?*
- *Did staff understand their roles?*
- *Were approval processes efficient?*
- *Did stakeholders receive timely information?*
- *What misinformation emerged?*
- *What templates or procedures should be updated?*

District Readiness Checklist

Before a crisis occurs, does your district have:

- ☐ A written crisis communications plan
- ☐ Defined communications roles
- ☐ Current stakeholder contact lists, including district, local agencies, and media
- ☐ Draft holding statements
- ☐ Spokesperson identified
- ☐ Family communication platform
- ☐ Social media monitoring process
- ☐ Annual tabletop exercise
- ☐ Post-incident review process

3 Key Takeaways

1. **Prepare** before a crisis
2. **Communicate** quickly and accurately
3. **Build trust** through transparency and consistency

A laptop screen displaying a web form titled "District Communications Contacts" from the Tennessee Department of Education. The form is hosted on forms.cloud.microsoft. It includes a header with the TN Department of Education logo and a brief explanation of the form's purpose. Below this, there are three required fields: "1. District Name", "2. District Communications Website/Webpage", and "3. Who is your district's primary communications/media contact?". Each field has a text input area with the placeholder "Enter your answer". The laptop is a MacBook Air, and the background features decorative red, white, and blue diagonal stripes.

Thank you!



Ricki Collins
Director of Communications
Ricki.Collins@tn.gov



Amanda Chin
Director of Media
Amanda.Chin@tn.gov

Permission is granted to use and copy these materials for non-commercial educational purposes with attribution credit to the "Tennessee Department of Education". If you wish to use the materials for reasons other than non-commercial educational purposes, please contact the office of general counsel at (615) 741-2921.