Operational Services

Exhibit - Memo to Staff Members Regarding Contacts by Media About a Crisis

If the media attempts to contact you about a death or other crisis, please follow these guidelines:

1. It is perfectly acceptable to tell a reporter that you would rather not comment on the incident, especially if it has been an emotional strain. Rather than shouting, "No comment" (which could imply that you are trying to hide something), say something like, "This incident has affected the school community greatly, and I would prefer to not comment on it." You should then refer the reporter to the Safety Program Coordinator, the person designated for the District's public relations, or other designated spokesperson.
2. According to School Board policy, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and the Ill. School Student Records Act (ISSRA), the only information about a student that the school is allowed to release is *directory* information (name, address, grade level, participation in sports or activities, awards received, period of attendance in the school, etc. as defined by the District in its procedures implementing Board policy 7:340, *Student Records*), except that the parent/guardian of a student under age 18, or a student aged 18 or older, may prohibit its release. Where no prohibition is on file, the Superintendent or the designated spokesperson may provide that information to the media.
3. Best practice is to avoid specific comments about students, such as the following: "_____ was a B student," "_____ was having trouble in class, and had been referred to the social worker last week," and "_____ was constantly in trouble for dealing drugs and smoking on school grounds." Do not speculate, assume, or hypothesize. If a reporter persists with questions, say something like, "Board policy prohibits me from specifically commenting on any student. Furthermore, I wish to respect the family's privacy."
4. Do not feel compelled to correct a reporter if a reporter tells you incorrect information. For example, to try and obtain more information, a reporter might say, "I was informed the student was failing…." Refer the reporter to the Safety Program Coordinator, the person designated for the District's public relations, or other designated spokesperson.
5. For persistent reporters, it may be helpful to acknowledge that you understand that they have a job to do, but you have a job to do as well, and you do not have the authority to comment.
6. If you choose, you may make your own personal comments about how the crisis has affected you. If the incident involved an athlete's death, the coach might say, "_____'s death is very tragic, and the team and I will miss him/her/them."
7. You may also address actions the school is taking to deal with the crisis. For example, you could say, "Although this is a terrible situation, we are fortunate to have a crisis plan to counsel students and faculty who are understandably upset."
8. Do not agree to set up interviews with students. All requests for interviews should be directed to the Safety Program Coordinator, the person designated for the District's public relations, or other designated spokesperson.
9. Media ordinarily should not be in a school building following a crisis (see *Appendix F: Planning for the Psychological Aftermath of School Tragedy* of the Ill. State Board of Education *School Emergency and Crisis Response Plan Guide*, available at: www.isbe.net/Pages/School-Emergency-and-Crisis-Response-Plan-Guide.aspx). If you are approached by a member of the media in a school building, immediately notify the Building Principal or other administrator.
10. Do not speculate or comment on the cause of death or other crisis, especially in an apparent suicide or murder. Tell reporters that information on the death should be obtained from the police department.

11. Remember, you do not have to answer any questions and may choose to simply refer all reporters to the Safety Program Coordinator, the person designated for the District's public relations, or other designated spokesperson.

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