DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

The media can be invaluable for up-to-date information, ascertaining the mood and reactions in the community, for disseminating information and encouraging people to seek help. Offering press statements means the media have something for their deadline. If you refuse contact, accounts may be inaccurate. Co-operation with the media can make the difference between inaccurate reporting, resulting in a story that reflects negatively on the school and one which shows the school’s caring role and ability to respond effectively in a crisis.

Press Statements

Press Statements should be as regular as up-dates are needed and should include:

- Facts about the incident, what has happened, what is being done and what is planned
- Information regarding the critical incident management plan in place and the fact that the situation is under control
- Affirmation of the principles of critical incident management in order to:
  - Reduce and prevent further stress
  - Stabilise the situation
  - Normalise and promote the functioning of the school, its staff and pupils
  - Ensure everyone receives the help they need.

Explain that the whole school has been deeply shocked, that all available resources and support services have been accessed. Outline what steps are being taken to provide support for students and staff in an effort to get things back to ‘normal’ as soon as possible.

Managing the media

Each critical incident is unique and the dynamics of each situation will have to be assessed when it occurs. It is important that a structured approach to media management is developed to ensure the most positive and supportive response from the media.

It is strongly recommended that all media enquiries are channelled through one person who may be the Principal or his/her nominee. It is necessary to respond to questions accurately and factually as information becomes accessible however, it may be necessary to explain to the media that it is not possible to answer their questions at a particular time because of the sensitive nature of the incident or because the information is not available for various reasons.
It may be necessary to liaise with ELB or CCMS Communications Officers and or the PSNI, Ambulance, Fire and Rescue Service, **before making a statement.**

For child protection reasons and to ensure that ‘normal’ school life is disrupted as little as possible, the news media should not be permitted on school property without the prior approval of the Principal. The news media does not have legal access to school property without such consent. This applies to television, radio, print media and photographers.

**Responsible reporting by the media**

If someone in the school or community attempts or completes suicide it is very important to ensure that the event is reported in a sensitive but measured way so that other vulnerable young people are not put at risk. Remember to use the phrase ‘sudden and unexpected death’ rather than ‘suicide’ as the cause of death needs to be determined by a Coroner’s Court.

Many of our local media have signed up to responsible reporting guidelines. The advice they receive can also be relevant to schools reporting suicide www.samaritans.org/

**Reporting suspected suicide**

- Avoid explicit or technical details of suicide methods
- Include details of further resources of information and advice
- Avoid simplistic explanations for suicide
- Challenge the common myths about suicide
- Remember the effect on survivors of suicide
- Look after yourself
- Don’t romanticise or glorify suicide
- Don’t imply that there are ‘positive’ results to be gained by suicide
- Seek expert advice
- Use appropriate language

**Avoid phrases like:**

- A ‘successful’ suicide attempt
- An unsuccessful suicide attempt
- ‘Commit suicide’
- Suicide ‘victim’
- ‘Just a cry for help’
- ‘Suicide-prone’ person
- Stop the ‘spread/epidemic’ of suicide

**Use phrases like:**

- A suicide
- Die by suicide
• A suicide attempt
• Take his/her life
• Kill oneself
• Person at risk of suicide
• Help prevent suicide

Media interviews

It is important to ascertain, in advance of a media interview, what is the overall message to be delivered, for example, is it about providing public reassurance or is it about clarifying public misunderstanding.

Most staff members will be relieved that they can refuse to discuss the critical incident with reporters, bearing in mind the school’s ‘one spokesperson’ practice which should be understood by all. The spokesperson should be well briefed on the details and expectations of the interviewer. Briefing should include the most likely questions, easy and difficult, that may be asked. Negative lines of questioning should be anticipated and appropriate responses prepared. If media deadlines cannot be met it is essential to say so and to keep to new deadlines if agreed.

The spokesperson should:

• Liaise with the Chairperson of the Board of Governors and/or ELB/CCMS Communications Officers in order to identify two or three key messages to be highlighted

• Write these down before the interview and refine for accuracy, clarity, simplicity and impact

• Keep spoken comments simple, factual and brief so that key points such as what has been done so far, are not edited out

• Take time to respond to questions and seek clarification if necessary

• Be aware of legal issues, particularly the language/terminology used

• Avoid making comments which imply blame or fault for any part of the incident, as there could be significant legal implications

• Remember that official enquiries are likely to follow serious incidents. Media comments on the public record may have a bearing on such proceedings.

• Avoid ‘off the record’ comments at all times

• Express concern and the school’s grief, restrict answers to facts and accentuate the positive developments following the event.
Sample Press Release 1

For Immediate Release
Date
School grieves sudden death of pupil

As reported by the PSNI, _____________, a pupil at ______________ school died suddenly on _____________. The circumstances of _____________’s death are not known at this time and an investigation is currently ongoing. This is a tragic loss to _____________’s family and to our school community.

In response the school has implemented a plan which gives pupils the opportunity to talk about their thoughts and feelings with trained staff from the WELB’s Critical Incident Response Team. A letter has been sent by the school to parents, informing them of this tragic incident and providing information on the support services available through the school.

A special assembly to remember _____________ has been arranged for _____________.

Contact: _____________ Principal, _____________ School at _____________

Sample Press Release 2

For Immediate Release
Date
Historic school destroyed by fire

_____________ School was destroyed by fire in the early hours of Saturday morning. The Fire and Rescue Service and the PSNI responded to a 999 call reporting the blaze at 3 a.m. Saturday. There were no injuries reported. The cause of the fire is under investigation. Damage is estimated at £ ___ million.

"It is a tragedy to have lost this school, not only for our students and their families, but for our community." _____________ Chairperson of the Board of Governors said. "Schools are much more than a place of learning. They are where our communities meet - for special events, to vote and to play. _______ school, in particular, was a landmark in our community built in 1959 and having undergone substantial renovations in recent years. Trained staff from the WELB’s Critical Incident Response Team have been invited to provide support to our staff and pupils through this time of shock and loss."

Arrangements have been made to accommodate _____________ school’s _______ pupils at _____________ for the remainder of this school year, with the addition of temporary classrooms at _________. All parents were contacted by telephone on Sunday.

Contact: _____________ Chairperson B of G _______ School at ________