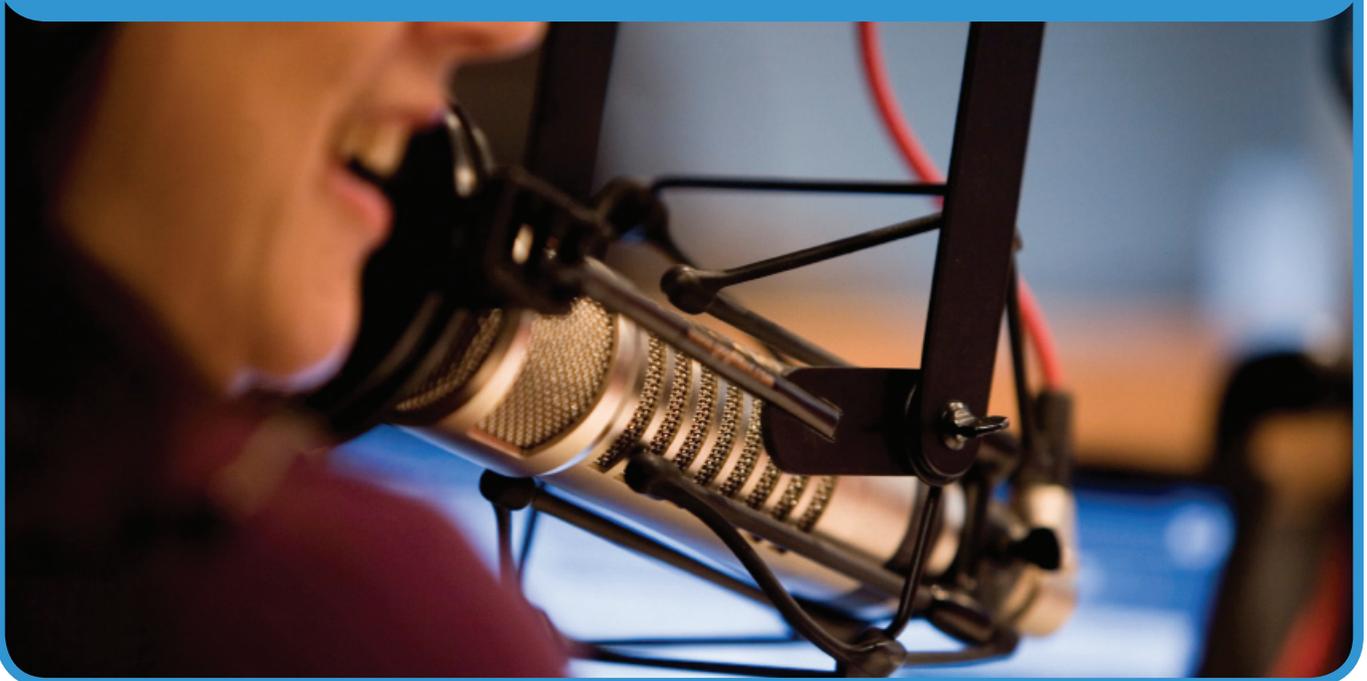


Safe Routes to School Guide

Media and Visibility



Created April 2008



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Overview

Working with the news media can be an effective, low-cost strategy to promote and expand Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs. The news media can have a tremendous effect on the attitudes and behaviors of their audience. When news anchor Katie Couric underwent a colonoscopy live on television, rates for the procedure across the U.S. jumped more than 20 percent.¹

While the influx of consumer-driven media, such as YouTube, is on the rise, traditional media sources are still the primary source of information for most people. Nearly 74 percent of consumers get their information from local television news and approximately 69 percent read the local newspaper. Local media are also considered highly credible sources of information by consumers, along with national newspapers and broadcast news.²

Media attention surrounding a SRTS program can help grow a program by making more people aware of its existence. For example, media attention could increase community participation in a Walk to School Day or help garner support from local elected officials.

Promoting SRTS programs through the media may also impact safety surrounding schools and neighborhoods. Announcing the launch of a program in the news media can alert local drivers that more children will be walking or bicycling in the neighborhood, possibly encouraging them to be more alert.

Getting information out in the headlines about Safe Routes to School is worth the investment. Use this chapter to learn more about increasing the newsworthiness of your SRTS program and maximizing your media relations activities.



Nashville, Tennessee.

Basics of Working with the News Media

Think like a Journalist

One of the first steps in effective media relations is to understand the perspective of the news media. By asking yourself, “*What makes my Safe Routes to School program newsworthy?*” you are one step closer to seeing your program in the headlines.

If you would like to invite the media to an event or pitch a story to a journalist, first ask yourself, how can I offer the media an interesting story? Gather information you can offer the journalist, such as how the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program impacts the community, the number of children walking and bicycling within the program and the effect the program has had on the children and school. If possible, find out information about the types of stories the journalist writes and offer information to support those types of stories.

Accuracy is Essential

A journalist’s reputation, both in the newsroom and with their audience, is dependent on their ability to accurately report the news. Journalists rely on their sources to provide them with accurate, credible information. If you can position yourself as a reliable source of information to a journalist, then they will be more likely to call you for information surrounding a story and also respond to your story ideas.

If you are unsure or unaware of the answer to a journalist’s question, it is best to say “I don’t know, but I can find out” and follow through on that promise. After an interview, if you realize you misspoke or gave false information, call the reporter right away and give them the accurate information.

Being a Journalist is not a 9 to 5 Job

Understanding the difference in a journalist’s deadline and your own is important. News is happening 24 hours a day, and the media works around the clock to cover it. A journalist does not call at 4:50 p.m. on a Friday afternoon to annoy you. They simply may have just started their “day” or just been handed the assignment. If you are able to work with the media under their tight dead-



lines, you will be seen as an asset.

“No Comment” is not an Option

It is never a good idea to answer a question with “no comment.” In the eyes of the reader or audience, “no comment” is an automatic assumption of guilt or wrongdoing. It is important to anticipate difficult questions that could potentially be asked, and prepare sincere, honest answers. For example, if it is a school’s policy to not discuss pending policy, then let the reporter know this instead of saying, “no comment.”

“Off the Record” is off the Table

Always assume that anything you say in an interview will appear in the story. There is no binding agreement that requires a reporter to honor an “off the record” comment, so even if you were to give information off the record, there is no guarantee it will stay off the record. In addition, if you are an employee of the government or some other public agency, any information you provide is public record.

Work Together as a Team

Media organizations are increasingly promoting their own worthy causes. Approach your local television, radio or newspaper about the possibility of working together to co-promote Safe Routes to School. Many times, news anchors or other media personalities can record public service announcements surrounding SRTS issues such as pedestrian safety or Walk to School Day.

Who's Who in the Newsroom

If you are talking to the wrong person in the newsroom, you are not only wasting their time, you're wasting your own as well. Understanding the difference in roles among members of the news media can be important in getting your message into the right hands. While titles can vary across newsrooms, here is a quick rundown of "who's who" in the newsroom.

Newspaper Editor:

These individuals serve as gatekeepers, making decisions on the types of stories that make it into print. They can also make changes after the reporter has finalized a story. Oftentimes they cover a specific topic or a series of topics, such as Health, Education or Crime.

Reporter:

Reporters are out "in the field," working to uncover stories, research information to support their stories and conducting interviews. Pitch reporters on stories specific to the areas they cover.

Anchor:

These individuals are the "face" of the TV news. While they have an extremely public presence, they typically do not control which stories get on the air. Consider inviting anchors out to events as a local celebrity.

Assignment Editor:

These individuals assign stories to reporters and photographers. Depending on the size of the outlet, there are typically several assignment editors who work during the week and another who covers the weekend. When calling or contacting a station, ask for the assignment editor to make sure they are aware of your event or story idea.

Producers:

Producers typically work in the broadcast sector and brainstorm story ideas. Many times, producers work on longer stories called "packages" or a series of stories being covered by the outlet.

Photographer/Videographer:

Photographers accompany reporters to capture the visual and auditory elements for a story. Sometimes photographers cover a story independently of a reporter. When it comes to newspaper photographers, the



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.....

stories they cover independently may not be exhaustive in length, but they may get front page coverage if the photo is a good one.

Editorial Boards:

This group of individuals, usually at a print publication, makes the decisions on what editorials will run in the publication. Set up a meeting with the editorial board to try to get on the radar of the publication.

Calendar Editor:

These individuals are responsible for publishing the outlet's calendar or events section. Send announcements or media advisories for special events and other Safe Routes to School activities.

Quick Tips

While the following tips will not guarantee that the media will cover your Safe Routes to School (SRTS) story, they can certainly up your odds. Use these basics of media relations to further develop the newsworthiness of your event or program.

- Make sure you have something newsworthy to say. Your story should **“hook” onto a newsworthy element**, such as an existing national or state-level event or involvement of a local official or celebrity.
- **Think visually.** Posters made by children or school mascots provide great visuals for the media, and they make photos of events more appealing.
- Prepare for the media interview. Use **talking points** to ensure a consistent message about your program. Think ahead of time about people who might speak to the media for an interview – but make sure you discuss this with them beforehand.
- **Call a reporter or editor** to talk about your program or event – just make sure you target someone who covers a beat related to SRTS (education, physical activity, local issues, etc.) For television, the best time to call is between 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. – 10 p.m. so that you are not calling during peak news broadcast hours.
- **Position yourself as a resource.** Make sure the media understands what kind of information you can provide them and make it a priority to answer requests when possible.
- Keep the length of a news release or media advisory to **one or two pages** when drafting a news release or media advisory. Offer more detailed information on a Web site or through supplemental materials. It is important to include accurate and complete contact information.
- Approach your local media to discuss **opportunities for teaming up** on the promotion of SRTS. Contact the community affairs department to discuss potential partnerships, such as public service announcements.
- Visit www.saferoutesinfo.org/resources/index.cfm for **template media materials and resources**.

Identifying the News Hook

In order to get news coverage, you have to have something newsworthy to say. As media events and messages are developed, it is important to first identify the “hook” that will be used. The “hook” is that critical piece of newsworthy information that will capture the attention and interest of both the news media and their audiences.³

While there is never any guarantee for media coverage, incorporating newsworthy hooks simply increases the likelihood of interest and coverage from the media. There are many variations of news “hooks” within Safe Routes to School (SRTS) including the following:

- Timeliness
- Impact
- Prominence
- Proximity
- Magnitude
- Conflict
- Oddity

Timeliness

The timeliness hook ties SRTS to an event or season, such as “Back to School,” or other events that could incorporate a SRTS message. In addition to times of the year, media events can also be tied to national campaigns, such as International Walk to School Day or National Bike Month.

Timeliness Examples:

Walking school bus leads the way on Walk to School Day

Kansas City Star

Back to School Tips

American Academy of Pediatrics Newsletter

Impact

The media is also interested in how a potential story impacts their audience in the community. Stories surrounding funding announcements and infrastructure

.....
“Just because you are worthy,
doesn’t mean you are
newsworthy” – David Henderson
.....

projects are examples of how SRTS can have an impact on the community.

SRTS media stories can also incorporate information on how walking and bicycling to school can have an impact on the health of children, the environment surrounding a school and the safety in nearby neighborhoods.

Impact Examples:

Town of Joyce getting its first-ever sidewalk

Peninsula Daily News

Traffic calming policy to get vote

Denver YourHub.com

Prominence

Prominent members of the community are a natural draw for the media. These individuals can be leaders within schools and districts or government, as well as prominent members of the community.

The prominence hook can also involve the media itself. Often media personalities are local celebrities themselves. Consider inviting a news anchor to attend an event or ask your local meteorologist to do the weather live from an event.

Prominence Examples:

Governor wants kids to hoof it

WFIE News

Proximity

In order to define proximity, you must understand the audience of the media organization. The proximity of The New York Times is much wider than the proximity of a small, community newspaper. Editors at small community newspapers are generally going to be more interested in what is happening in their county as opposed to events in a distant county.

Proximity Examples:

Oakwood students walk the walk, take part in annual international event

Dayton Daily News

Magnitude

The magnitude hook incorporates the element of quantity into the SRTS story. Will there be a record number of children walking or bicycling during an event? Are you announcing a large amount of statewide funding for the program? If you are conducting pre- and post-surveys, consider promoting your survey results as well to the media.

Magnitude Examples:

\$4 Million to improve school pedestrian safety

North Jersey Media Group

Conflict

Conflict can create a platform to promote the issues of SRTS, such as an increased need for pedestrian safety in surrounding neighborhoods and the importance of enforcing speed limits around schools. Conflict can bring about a positive story, with a headline such as “Support for sidewalks improved safety for kids”

Conflict Examples:

Parents upset with traffic plan for school route

Lincoln Journal Star

Walk to School Day underscores dangers

News Bank

Oddity

Incorporating an odd element within your program or event can also attract the attention of the media. To utilize this hook, look for ways to incorporate an unusual twist into your SRTS story.

Oddity Examples:

Principal’s 18-mile trek to school sets example

Deseret News

Tools of the Trade

As the volume of media outlets is on the rise, the target audience for each has become more tailored and the number of journalists within each media outlet has decreased.⁴ With this downsizing of the newsroom has come an increased reliance on outside sources for information. Many newsrooms rely on tips from their viewers to know more about what is going on in the community.

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs have a tremendous opportunity to reach out to the news media to promote the aspects of their programs. In order to supply the media with newsworthy and accurate news stories, it is helpful to know more about the tools of the trade.

Media Lists:

A media list contains the reporters' names, the types of stories they cover, their contact information and their preferred method of contact, if known. An updated media list can help you make contact with the right media outlet or journalist.

News Release:

The news release is a basic form of communication to the media that announces some type of event or announcement. News releases can be faxed, mailed, emailed or delivered in person to the outlet or journalist. Consider writing a news release to announce the launch of a SRTS program or funding, release the findings of a SRTS survey or to promote a walking school bus program. For template news releases provided by the National Center for Safe Routes to School, please visit www.saferoutesinfo.org/resources/marketing_press-releases.cfm.

Media Advisory:

The media advisory announces the basic information about a newsworthy event. It includes the who, what, where, when and significance of the event. Consider using a media advisory to announce a Walk to School Day event or the presentation of SRTS funding. For a template Walk to School Day media advisory, please visit www.walktoschool.org/resources/media-advisory.cfm.

Talking Points:

Talking points can offer helpful information on topics such as trends in school travel, safety, physical activity, environment and air quality, background on the event, Safe Routes to School and a list of participating countries. Provide a copy of talking points to journalists as background. Talking points can be helpful during interviews with local media, meetings with parents or any other communication planned surrounding a SRTS program. For SRTS-related talking points, please visit www.saferoutesinfo.org/resources/marketing_talking-points.cfm.

Letter to the Editor:

Letters to the Editors can be written to raise an issue concerning the readers of that publication. Keep letters brief, as publications typically have length guidelines.

Op-Ed Piece:

An op-ed piece is an editorial submitted to a media outlet for publication. Generally longer than letters to the editor, op-ed pieces can be written to comment on the importance of pedestrian and bicycle safety or the need for proper infrastructure surrounding a school.

The Art of the Interview

After writing the news release and preparing for weeks, the phone rings. It is a reporter wanting to cover your story and do an interview. Now what? With proper preparation and a little practice, an interview can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Here are a few general guidelines for a good interview:

- Speak in bullet points. Most broadcast news stories are 10 to 30 seconds long and the newspaper doesn't have the space for lengthy quotes. Keep it **straight, to-the-point and compelling**.
- Stick to the talking points and **avoid going off onto tangents**.
- Be prompt in your response when a reporter leaves you a message. Most reporters are working under a tight deadline, so **respond to phone calls and requests as quickly as possible**.
- **Ask for clarification** if a question is unclear. It is better to understand what the reporter wants to know than answering around the question and appearing evasive.
- **Do not feel pressured** to answer questions you do not know the answer to. If you are a parent and a reporter is asking about a specific school policy, refer them to the principal or a teacher who would be more acquainted with the topic.
- **Avoid jargon and complicated terminology**. For example, use the more general term "engineering improvements" instead of specific jargon such as "bulbouts."
- Be aware and try to **avoid nervous habits** such as repetitively saying "uuumm" or shifting your feet.
- **Avoid expressing your personal opinion** when speaking about the program. If you think a school could do more to reduce speed in its drop-off zone, the front page of the newspaper may not be the best place to announce this.



- **Never say "no comment."** If you simply do not know the answer, then say that. If it is against policy to answer a certain type of question, then tell that to the reporter.

Tips for Interviews

Tips for TV Interviews

- Look at the reporter, not the camera. Talk with the reporter as if you are having a one-on-one conversation.
- Unless the interview is live, do not be ashamed to stop and start over if you lose your train of thought or stumble over your words.
- Avoid wearing white or brightly patterned clothing.

Tips for Radio/Print Interviews

- Use your talking points: If you are conducting a radio or newspaper interview over the phone in your office, have your talking points at hand. The information is right in front of you and no one is there to see you using it. Just be sure to not sound as if you are reading straight from the document.
- Consider using pre-recorded audio clips called actualities to promote your Safe Routes to School program. Actualities are pre-recorded statements

With proper preparation and a little practice, an interview can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

regarding the program that the media can access to use in conjunction with their stories. Work with your agency's public information officer on how to develop actualities.

- Do not conduct an interview on a cell phone unless absolutely necessary because of the possibility for dropped calls or poor reception.

Tips for Live Interviews

- Do a dress rehearsal of the interview if time permits. Anticipate questions that may be asked and prepare short, concise answers using your main points.
- Make sure you know whether there will be "call-ins" where the audience can call in to ask questions.
- Make sure you turn off all phones and TVs to minimize background noise if you are doing the interview in your office or home.
- Always operate under the assumption that your microphone is on and recording.
- Pay attention to your body language. Do not slouch. If you are sitting right next to the reporter, look them in the eye as if you are having a one-on-one conversation.

Dealing with Difficult Questions

- **Anticipate** any difficult questions the media may ask and **prepare** your answer. It is easier to answer the tough questions if you have given them some thought beforehand.
- **Never speak for someone else.** If the reporter asks you, "How do you think the school's neighbors will feel about all of the construction from the new sidewalk project?" simply politely say, "You will need to speak with the neighbors about that."

- Generally it is not a good idea to answer questions about **hypothetical situations**. The media could integrate this response in the future surrounding a situation that is similar, but slightly different.
- Learn to **bridge the question** back to one of your main points. Answer the question, and follow up with one of your key message points using a transition, such as "and it is also important to point out..."
- Never comment on **topics you are unfamiliar with** or do not have all of the information surrounding.
- **Correct the journalist tactfully** before answering a question if the journalist uses a false assumption as a lead-in for the question.
- Do not let a journalist rush or push you into a response. Listen to the entire question before answering and **take your time** in giving your response.
- Do not let a "pregnant pause" force you into **talking just to fill the air**. Answer the question using your key points and wait until the journalist asks the next question.
- **Never say "no comment."** In the eyes of the audience, this response equals an automatic admission of guilt or wrongdoing, regardless of whether this is true or not. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. If it is against policy to answer a question, say so.

Rights as an Interviewee

During or before an interview, you have the right to:

- Request basic information about the reporter and the story. You have the right to know the reporter's name and the media outlet for which they are writing. It is also a good idea to know the beat the reporter covers, the deadline they are working under as well as the general gist of the news story they are writing. Most credible journalists will have no problem sharing this information.
- Determine whether you are being recorded. When you receive a phone call from a reporter, particularly for a radio interview, ask whether you are or will be recorded.
- Provide information at a later time. If you are not 100 percent sure of an answer, tell the reporter you would like to double-check your information and get back to them. They will appreciate the accuracy and you will become a reliable resource for them.

Interviewees do not typically have the right to:

- Demand questions in advance. Journalists may share questions or the general point of the interview with you, but you cannot demand to know all of the content of the interview in advance.
- Review the story before it runs. Occasionally a journalist will ask you to review a story for accuracy, but consider this the exception to the rule.
- Ask for another reporter to do the story. This will not only irritate the reporter, but will probably reduce the likelihood you would ever get coverage from that media outlet again.

Securing Program Spokespeople

Spokespeople are a great resource when you are planning to work with the media. By already having several program spokespeople lined up, you are helping the media out by arranging interviews for their story. At the same time, you should work to ensure these individuals offer a consistent, positive message about your Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program. Spokespeople can also find other ways to promote the program, such as writing letters to the editor or submitting op-ed pieces to the local newspaper.

Preparation is Key

When planning an event or story idea, think in advance of who you would like to speak with the media. Line up several individuals in advance and make sure they are comfortable speaking with the media.

Do your best to inform the spokesperson about the aspects of your SRTS program, if they are not already aware of them. Provide them with a program brochure and talking points. A spokesperson's lack of knowledge could present itself during a media interview. Imagine inviting a prominent figure to speak at a Walk to School event. During an interview the reporter asks "How do you think the program impacts the community?" and their response is "I'm not exactly sure what the program does, they just invited me to the event."

Talking Points

Draft talking points for the SRTS program so that everyone will be on the same page when communicating information about the program. Distribute the talking points to your spokespeople. These talking points can also have other uses, such as for meetings with parents or any other communications planned surrounding your program.

For general talking points about SRTS and International Walk to School Day, please visit the National Center's Resource Center at www.saferoutesinfo.org/resources/marketing_talking-points.cfm



Arlington, Virginia.

The Faces of SRTS

There are many options for securing a spokesperson for your SRTS program. The most important element is that they are knowledgeable of the program. Here are a few options for spokespeople:

Parents

Parents can offer a unique perspective on a SRTS program, whether they are coordinating an entire program or simply walking to school with their children once a year during Walk to School Day. Parents can comment on the importance of safety surrounding a school and the reasons why they choose to walk or bike with their children. Encourage parents to speak about the benefits they see in walking or bicycling.

Children

There is nothing cuter — and more attractive to the media — than a child talking about how they love to walk or bicycling to school. It really gets at the heart of why SRTS is such an important initiative — the impact on the children. Make sure you have the permission of the child's parent or guardian before putting them in front of the camera.

Teachers

Teachers can also offer good anecdotal information about how a SRTS program affects the children in their classroom. Many times teachers are the driving force behind a school-based SRTS program and can speak to the history and details of the program.

Community Leaders and Other Prominent Figures

Given their prominence, community leaders are a great ally to have when arranging media interviews. If the individual is unaware of the program, provide them with supplemental information about SRTS, such as talking points or a brochure.

Experts

The news media will also be interested in speaking to experts on the elements of SRTS, such as pedestrian safety, engineering, evaluation, environment, etc. Members of a state or local SRTS advisory committee can be a great resource for expert spokespeople.

Managing a Crisis

While no one likes to think about bad things happening, they do happen. Speaking to the media may seem like the last thing you would want to do during a crisis, yet preparing with a sincere, honest response may mean the difference in the life of your SRTS program. The following outlines a few helpful tips on working with the media in the event of a crisis situation.

Create a Plan

Work with a school or your SRTS advisory committee to create a crisis communications plan. Bring together all of your SRTS stakeholders — those individuals that represent all aspects of the SRTS program — and brainstorm a list of all possible crisis situations that could occur. For each possible scenario, map out the best plan of action to handle the crisis.

Within this plan, create a section for working with the media in the event of a crisis. This section includes standby statements, contact information for all local and state-wide media and detailed information on how, when and where the media will be addressed during and after the crisis.

Draft Standby Statements

Once the potential crisis situations have been identified, work to draft standby statements. These are written template statements you have on hand in the event of a crisis and only issue in the event of that crisis. Drafting and approving text before a crisis happens will allow you to spend more time communicating with your stakeholders.

Designate a Primary Spokesperson

Within the plan, designate at least one primary spokesperson. There may be multiple options for spokespeople in the event of a crisis, but once the crisis occurs, it is important that there is only one primary spokesperson the media will receive information from. This guarantees a singular, defined message.

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“Simply put, the media don’t ‘owe it’ to any person or institution to provide positive coverage. Their job is to cover news, and, when all is said and done, the media’s definition of news is the only one that counts.” – Ray Jones

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Respond Quickly and Honestly

Following a crisis, it is important to respond quickly and effectively. If you cannot immediately respond to a media request, let them know exactly when you will be responding and follow through on this promise.

Begin by tailoring the standby statement to include the specifics of the situation. Update this statement and re-release as new developments in the situation occur. Even if there is nothing new to report, a simple statement of concern and update can be released.

Evaluate and Update

Following a crisis situation, it is essential to evaluate your response to the event and update the plan as necessary. Did information get communicated to the right parties? What hurdles prevented you from responding accurately and quickly?

Resources

Public Relations Society of America

www.prsa.org

Institute for Public Relations

www.instituteforpr.org

The Institute for Public Relations is an independent nonprofit organization that builds and documents research-based knowledge in public relations, and makes this knowledge available and useful to practitioners, educators, researchers and their clients.

National Association of Broadcasters

www.nab.org

Google News Alerts

www.google.com/alerts

Google Alerts are email updates of the latest relevant Google results (web, news, etc.) based on your choice of query or topic. You can set up a Google News Alert to send you updates on Safe Routes to School in the news.

National Education Association School Crisis Guide

www.neahin.org/schoolcrisis/index.html

The NEA's School Crisis Guide offers step-by-step advice for schools and districts to use before, during, and after a crisis.

National Association of School Psychologists

www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/neat_media.aspx

Suggestions for dealing with the media during a crisis

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