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COMMUNICATION CONTINUITY FOR K-12: ENSURING SCHOOL SAFETY

In an ever-changing world, ensuring the safety of students, staff, and faculty within K-12 school districts is imperative. School officials must be prepared to handle various crises, from natural disasters to unexpected emergencies. Effective crisis management relies on a well-thought-out communication continuity plan that ensures critical information reaches the right people at the right time. This article explores why communication continuity matters, the possible impacts of inadequate communication planning, and various options to improve your school district's emergency communication preparedness.

Why Communication Continuity Matters
Bad things happen, and they are often unpredictable in terms of timing, severity, and duration. Schools must be equipped to respond quickly and effectively, whether it's a sudden natural disaster, an active shooter situation, or a prolonged power outage. While many crises can be anticipated to some extent, having a robust communication continuity plan allows schools to avoid, mitigate, and recover from unexpected events.

Impact on Your School District

Maintaining consistent and effective communication is a key factor in keeping schools safe. The impact of inadequate communication planning can be expansive, affecting not only the physical safety of students and staff but also the overall well-being of the educational institution:

Impact on People: The safety of students and staff is the top priority. A breakdown in communication during a crisis can lead to confusion, delayed responses, and potentially life-threatening situations.

Impact on Trust & Security: A sense of security within the school environment is essential for a conducive learning atmosphere. When communication breaks down, it erodes the trust parents and guardians place in the school's ability to protect their children.

Impact on Enrollment: Maintaining student enrollment is essential. News of poor crisis management can spread quickly, leading parents to remove their children from school because of safety concerns.

Impact on Careers: Effective crisis management showcases leadership, proper planning, and organizational capabilities. Inadequate crisis response can impact the careers of school administrators and staff.

Enhancing Your Communication Plan

Your school district likely has an Emergency Preparedness Plan, but ensuring your communication plan is up to the task is crucial. Here are several strategies to consider:

Assess and Plan for Continuity: Create strategies to ensure continued operations for every department within the school district that include reliable voice and data communication systems able to withstand various challenges.

Built-In Redundancy: Build redundancy into your communication systems. This means having backup solutions for critical components, such as internet access, power sources, and communication devices.

Analyze and Update: Regularly review and analyze your communication plan to ensure that it is adaptable to new technologies, potential threats, and changing circumstances.

Exercise Your Plan: Practice makes perfect; performing regular structured drills will help build muscle memory for what to do when emergencies arise. Simulations build familiarity with the tools, help identify issues in advance of need, and allow you to build confidence in your plan and effectiveness.

Incorporate The Tools in Your Daily Routine: Many of the devices and technologies utilized in communications continuity planning have utility in day-to-day operations or personal use. Use the same type of tools in your daily activity to further strengthen effectiveness when it matters most. Portable Wi-Fi solutions, Push-to-Talk (PTT) devices, and Go-Kits work well in support of planned field trips and academic or sporting events.

Best Practices for Communication Continuity

Several options are available to enhance communication continuity within your K-12 school district:

In-Building Coverage: To ensure seamless communication within school buildings, it is imperative that districts look to improve their in-building coverage and ensure cell phones work ubiquitously. Consider solutions that improve in-building coverage, especially in areas with weak cellular signals.

Backup & Failover: To maintain operations when internet connectivity is lost, have cellular failover plans in place to maintain operations during outages. This ensures that critical systems such as background checks, phone systems, and security systems can remain functional.

Portable Pop-Up Data Network: To ensure reunification plans, recovery plans, and communication can continue even during displacement, prepare for evacuations by having a secure portable, pop-up data network that can be quickly set up and activated in under two minutes providing high-speed internet for 50-100 (or more) endpoints.

District-Issued Cell Phones: Providing key employees with a district-issued cell phone has many advantages and can play a critical role during an emergency situation. One of the key benefits is the district's ability to ensure school district officials and administrators have Wireless Priority Service (WPS) to the cellular network during an emergency or when the cellular network is congested. Additionally, by providing district-issued devices, the district has the ability to preload critical information such as emergency and reunification plans, student information systems, the district global address book, a push-to-talk app for one-to-one communication, or for group communication. Additional apps, such as a secure texting app can be added as well.

Cellular-Based Push-To-Talk (PTT): LMR radios typically are limited in their range, and if a natural disaster hits the towers, the radio system is often down for weeks, sometimes even months. Push-To-Talk radios provide nationwide cellular coverage, and if a catastrophic event happens and the cellular network goes down, it most often is restored within days restoring communications faster. PTT also enables a district to provide seamless communication between all departments during an emergency because an app can be added to smartphones enabling PTT on district-issued devices without the need to carry a secondary radio. Additionally, it is often easier to obtain interoperability between agencies. Lastly, if there is Wi-Fi available, PTT devices will continue to operate.

Go-Kits: A Go-Kit is a box with a few extra devices, such as phones, hotspots, or tablets, to be used during an emergency or when the need for additional communication arises, such as field trips, Friday night football or other special events as well as during emergencies.

Effective communication continuity is the cornerstone of school safety. It ensures that information flows seamlessly during times of crisis, enabling timely responses and better outcomes. By assessing your existing communication plan, identifying potential weaknesses, and adopting appropriate solutions, your K-12 school district can enhance its preparedness and better safeguard the well-being of everyone it serves.

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