

A GUIDE FOR ADMINISTRATORS,
COUNSELORS AND TEACHERS

RESPONDING TO HATE AND BIAS AT SCHOOL

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tolerance.org



PUT SAFETY FIRST

The paramount concern in any crisis is safety. Follow your school's policies for locking down the site or site evacuation, if needed; call school security officers or outside law enforcement, if appropriate; alert parents and caregivers, if warranted; and make sure everyone on campus is safe and accounted for. Attend to any injuries. Follow your school's emergency protocols. That, always, is an administrator's first order of business.

If you have not already formed an incident response team, do so now. Ideally, members of an incident response team need to project a sense of calm as well as earnest concern.

Restoring order is a key step to reestablishing any sense of safety.

Isolate alleged offenders as quickly as possible. Direct uninvolved students back to classrooms, and have teachers keep them there until further notice. If necessary for safety, hold bells and provide instructions to teachers by intercom, phone or written messages. Students, faculty and staff should be assured that the matter is being dealt with and that more information about the incident will be provided as soon as possible.

Rumors already will be flying. Take them seriously. According to both the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education, in most cases of school violence someone other than the attacker knew of the threat but failed to report it. Emphasize that any such information should be communicated immediately, and identify the person or persons to whom information should be reported. Publicize access to an anonymous tip line, an online report form or an in-school tip box. Provide avenues for people to share information, and assign people to review and report on that information as it comes in.

Also, especially with more serious incidents, be on high alert regarding the potential for copycats or retaliatory actions. With many incidents—bias-driven fights or attacks, vandalism and graffiti—there is a real risk of repeated incidents by vengeful classmates or copycats. Faculty and staff should be more aware than usual, watching for signs of tension, veiled or implied threats and unusual activity. Let all students know that the campus is on heightened alert.

DENOUNCE THE ACT

When a hate crime or bias incident has affected the school, it is important to denounce the hateful act in clear, unambiguous terms. Silence or a lack of response allows fear, confusion, misinformation and distrust to grow.

If someone spray paints swastikas on the school's main entrance, for example, or hangs a noose outside an African-American teacher's classroom window, it is not the time to say, "We regret if anyone took offense." The swastikas and the noose *are* offensive, and school leaders need to say so.

Your denunciation of the incident should be delivered to students and staff, parents and caregivers, and the wider community. Post it on the school website, and publish it in the school newspaper or newsletter. Send it out to the media. Deliver it over the school's PA system, closed-circuit TV or intercom.

Keep it simple. Focus on three main points:

- An unacceptable incident has occurred (be specific in your description of it, otherwise gossip and rumor will allow mistaken information to take root).
- A full investigation is under way.
- Our school stands for respect and inclusion, a place where all are welcome and appreciated.

An example:

"Someone or some group has painted swastikas, a long-standing symbol of the worst kind of hate, on the front entrance of our school. It is deplorable, and we denounce it. A full investigation is under way. We are working quickly to cover and remove this vicious symbol of oppression and genocide. Hate has no place at this school. We, as a school community, stand for respect and inclusion, a place where all are free to learn in a safe and welcoming environment."

- Let the campus know that you (or the police, if that is the case) are in a fact-gathering mode. If you are silent at this point, some may assume you are doing nothing to address the incident.
- Give a sense of expected duration of the fact-gathering phase. “For the next two days, we will be gathering facts about this incident. I will share specific news as it becomes available. In the meantime, please come to me, or to any member of the staff, with information or concerns you may have.”
- Conduct individual interviews with eyewitnesses as soon as possible to collect fresh recollections, emphasizing that the main goal is the protection of the school community. Hold these interviews in a secure place that doesn’t put eyewitnesses at additional risk. Ask witnesses to help identify others who may have information.
- Understand that eyewitness accounts will vary, and not all witnesses will feel safe in coming forward. Talk to as many people as possible in order to better understand what happened.
- If the incident was caught on school security cameras, review the video to see if it helps to clarify what happened or assists in identifying potential witnesses.
- Investigate the incident with an eye toward whether it is part of a larger pattern. Does a hostile environment exist for some students? Ask members of targeted groups if they are surprised by this incident and whether similar incidents have happened. Ask whether the school leaders’ response is satisfactory, and listen with an open mind if people say it isn’t satisfactory.
- Create a way for witnesses to remain anonymous. People may feel too frightened to identify themselves but may have vital information.

When police are involved, there may be additional concerns regarding the investigation. If individual safety is a factor, for example, then having a visible show of police support might be a calming influence. If, on the other hand, there is a large police response to what is perceived as a relatively minor incident, it could exacerbate tension rather than ease it.

And do not expect police to manage the campus climate. Police investigators are looking to solve a crime. As a campus administrator, one of your key objectives is to repair and improve school climate in the wake of a bias-based crisis; do not neglect that role as you await completion of a police investigation.

INVOLVE OTHERS

This should not be a starting-from-scratch moment; you should have existing relationships with parents and caregivers, community organizations and civic leaders to whom you can reach out during a crisis. It is, however, a moment to expand those connections and relationships. Maybe you don’t have a strong connection to a neighborhood adjoining the school campus, for example. Now is the time to strengthen it.

Small incidents that have not drawn widespread attention may be solved through much simpler processes. (Don’t, however, neglect considering whether a small incident is part of a larger pattern of hostility at your school.) For mid-level and larger incidents, take into account the following:

There are two overarching groups to consider:

DIRECT TIES TO THE SCHOOL

- Faculty and staff
- Students
- Parents and caregivers
- School district officials
- Alumni
- Who else?

INDIRECT TIES TO THE SCHOOL

- Government entities (a powerful one is the U.S. Department of Justice’s Community Relations Service at justice.gov/crs)
- Human rights groups
- Nonprofits and civic groups
- Faith groups
- Mental health counselors
- Elected officials
- Who else?

are ignoring the incident, trying to sweep it under the rug, not taking it seriously, hoping it just might go away. Because of that, a “no comment” response may damage your efforts to rebuild community. What’s a good alternative, when you have little or nothing to say? Frame the response as a values statement: “We’re very concerned. We don’t yet have all the facts. We’ll be ready to make a comment when we do.”

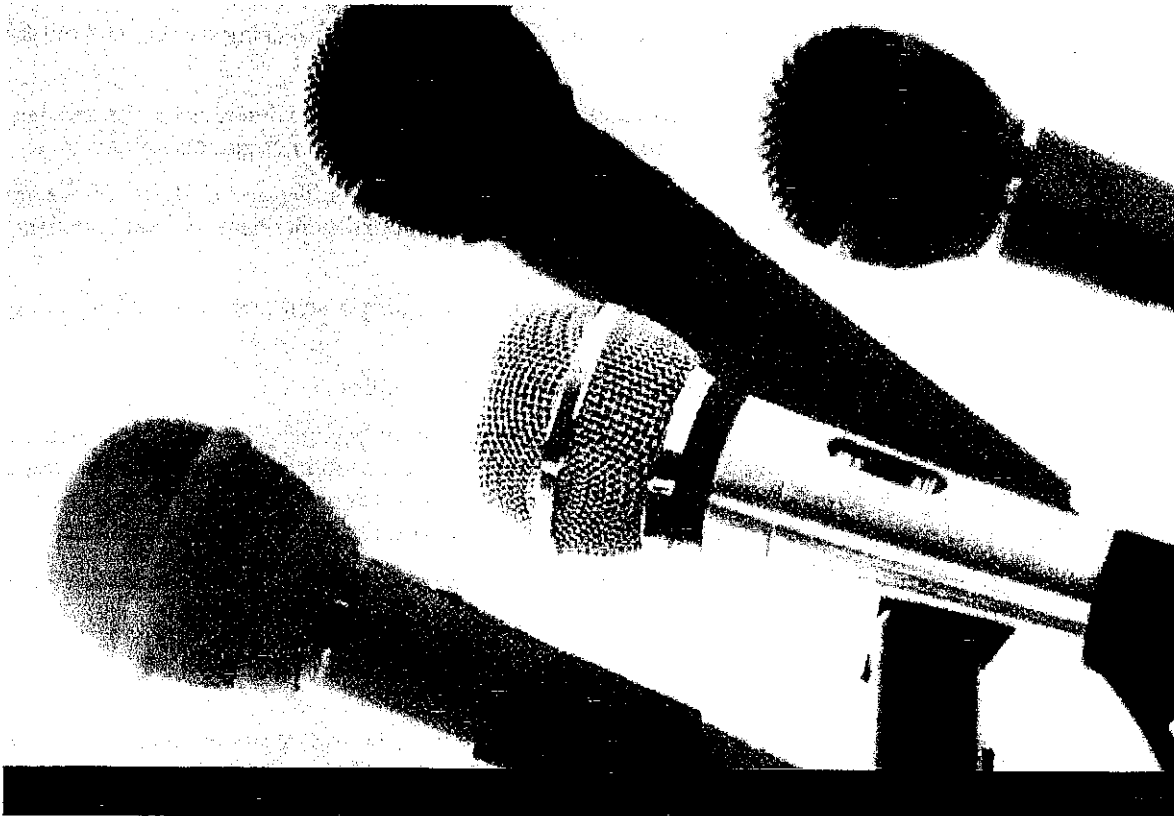
So be prepared to work with the media, and see it as an opportunity for you to widen the denunciation of the incident and to frame the message you want to be out there.

Smaller incidents may involve only a few calls from the local media. For larger incidents, it likely will involve the organization of a press conference for local, regional and sometimes national media. This press conference should happen within a few days of the incident—probably not on the same day, but perhaps on the afternoon of the next day or on the morning of the third day. The top school administrator should be the main speaker; again, this is not a time to delegate.

In most cases, it is a bad idea to stiff-arm the media at this event with “no comments” and hostile attitudes. Efforts to do so almost always backfire. You want to work with reporters and readily share as much information as is safely possible. This can help ease the crisis. On the other hand, it is not necessary to answer every—or even most—reporters’ questions, especially in the early stages of a crisis when you are still figuring out what happened and how to deal with it. Your number-one priority is the safety of students, parents and staff.

So what to say at the press conference? First of all, keep it simple. Use short, direct sentences. Provide enough details to explain what happened, but don’t slip into conjecture or guesswork about motives or other aspects of the incident. Repeat your main points often. Have a simple, nondefensive response ready for questions you do not wish to answer. “That’s not something I can comment on.” Or, “We haven’t determined that yet.”

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candlelight vigil or a rally for inclusion—are planned, alert the press in advance. Coverage of the positive aftermath of a bias incident illustrates the steps being taken to improve school climate.

PROVIDE ACCURATE INFORMATION— AND DISPEL MISINFORMATION

This is less about a step in the crisis-recovery process and more about your overall management of the response to an incident.

Misinformation often runs rampant in the aftermath of a bias-based incident at school. A fight involving two people becomes a melee involving a dozen or more. Stories of possible retaliation are whispered in hallways. Tales of “what really happened” allow for exaggeration, ratcheting up fears. In a crisis, you are tasked not just with managing information, but also with managing misinformation.

You cannot monitor everything, but you can designate a person or a small group to keep eyes and ears on various information sources, bringing misinformation to the attention of the incident response team in a coordinated, ongoing way.

Read comments on news websites. Browse Facebook and other social media sites. Follow Twitter. Spend time in the cafeteria and the hallways, listening to what is being said.

Create a fact sheet about the incident, and keep it updated—specifically correcting misinformation. Don’t let misinformation take root in the school or community; once that happens, it becomes much more difficult to correct.

Use each new communication—statements, emails, public address announcements, comments at meetings and school gatherings—to correct misinformation and reiterate facts, always coming back to the values message that there is no place for hate in this school.

And be careful as you gather your own information. Don’t jump to conclusions. If you are hasty, you may spread misinformation yourself and then appear to be backtracking or sidestepping something when you try to correct your own misinformation. It’s OK to say, “We don’t know that yet.”

And what if the incident turns out to be a hoax or fabrication? It happens, and it calls for a constructive response as well. In the case of a hoax, address the negative impact of the act anyway, even as you denounce the deception. Clear up any rumors and point out the damaging effects these deceptions have on confidence and trust. “Crying wolf”—lying about a threat—damages the peace and safety of the entire school community. And remember, just because someone has cried wolf does not mean a problem does not exist; continue to look into the issue to see if a pattern of hostility exists.

SUPPORT TARGETED STUDENTS

It is vital to support specific victims of a bias incident or hate crime at school, as well as show support for the targeted community. To create this support, you must provide for physical safety, denounce the act in unequivocal terms and follow through on appropriate consequences for perpetrators.

Victims of hateful acts often feel vulnerable, alone and angry. Even when the attack is impersonal—graffiti on a wall, for example—victims often feel personally violated and individually targeted.

A victim’s wishes regarding privacy should be respected. If the victim is a teacher, then a close colleague or department head should check in with that individual to discuss privacy issues. In the case of a student, have a designated safe contact person ask the student about her wishes regarding privacy. If a victim voices a desire to go public, initiate a conversation about the risks of doing so (media scrutiny, nasty comments in online settings, an inability to go back to anonymity) to make sure she is making an informed decision. Balance the risk of going public against the reasons for doing so. For many victims, there is a real sense of power in speaking up and out. For others, going public would make a terrible situation even worse.

Here are five other considerations:

DON’T PUT VICTIMS ON THE SPOT. Don’t ask victims to speak in class or issue statements to the media or answer for their entire identity group in response to the incident. This may reinjure victims and

and bias-motivated incidents in their policies, particularly policies that have been well-publicized and reviewed by the school and the community at large. Be open to the need for change; use this incident as an opportunity to review and improve policy.

FAIR ENFORCEMENT. When incidents do occur, it is crucial that schools enforce the consequences fairly and without regard to the offender's status. If some offenders seem to be treated more leniently than others, the victims and the school community will have little sense of justice and closure. Offenders also will be less likely to change their behavior and victims may feel more vulnerable and be less likely to report future abuses. This dynamic can contribute to a divisive and unsafe school environment.

A COMMUNITY APPROACH. Alliances with parents and caregivers, community or service organizations and advocacy groups can help school officials develop more creative consequences that will require offenders to face the destructive nature of what they did and perhaps even help them take steps to repair the damage they have done. Dialogue groups and peer mediation programs are particularly helpful for incidents involving large groups of students. Some communities also have restorative-justice programs in place, which can help. Los Angeles County, for example, created JOLT (Juvenile Offenders Learning Tolerance), a program aimed to provide education and awareness to first-time hate crime offenders.

PROMOTE HEALING

A hateful act has rocked the school, and the crisis-response effort continues to move forward. It's easy to get so focused on specific tasks—investigating the incident, handling the press conference, addressing the victims' needs—that the bigger picture is lost.

Your community has been wounded. That wound might have come from a source outside the school, such as vandals spraying hateful graffiti on school walls. Or it may have come from inside the school, identifying a deep division among students. Either way, opportunities for healing need to be part of your crisis response.

As the crisis winds down—sooner rather than later—it is helpful to find a way to gather together and share messages of healing and unity. This becomes an initial step into the postcrisis phase, a bridge between crisis management and longer term strategic planning around improving school climate.

One option is to plan a schoolwide or community-wide show of unity. Orchestrating a demonstration of school unity after a hate crime or high-profile bias incident can be a way to begin repairing the sense of community within a school. Distributing ribbons or wearing certain colors can become symbols of determination to recover from the incident and show unity in opposing hate and prejudice at school. Involve the neighborhood and wider community, as appropriate. This type of gathering can have a galvanizing effect, especially if it includes a pledge to work together to address issues raised by the incident.

Consider creating posters or buttons, promoting school values. "Our school stands for ..." Paint that slogan on a banner along the hallway, and invite students to add their thoughts. *Inclusion. Fairness. Kindness.*

A march around the school. A candlelight vigil. A mural painted on the wall that had held the hateful graffiti.

Do not frame this as the end of your efforts, but rather as a beginning of further work toward improving school climate and culture.



A TOOL FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

Teaching Tolerance has created a nationwide program that can help kick-start this kind of change. *Mix It Up at Lunch* promotes inclusion and bridge building within schools. (tolerance.org/mix-it-up/what-is-mix)