

Operational Services - Memo to Staff Members Re: 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 correct to tell a reporter that you would rather not comment on the incident at this time, especially if it has been an emotional strain. Rather than shouting “No comment,” (which sounds like you’re trying to hide something) say something like, “this incident has affected the school community greatly and I would prefer to not comment on it at this time.” One should then refer the reporter to the Safety Program Coordinator or the designated spokesperson.
2. According to Board of Education policy and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, the only information about a student that the school is allowed to release is a verification of his or her attendance at the high school. If the parents give permission, certain general information (address, date and place of birth, major field to study, participation in sports or activities, awards received, etc.) can also be released. In the event of parental approval, the Safety Program Coordinator or the designated spokesperson will give that information to the media.
3. Comments such as the following should be avoided: “He was a “B” student,” “She was having trouble in class and I had referred her to the social worker last week,” and, of course, “He was constantly in trouble for dealing drugs and smoking on school grounds.” For the most part, it’s better to avoid comments about individual students. If a reporter persists with these questions, say something like, “Board policy prohibits me from commenting on any student. Furthermore, I don’t wish to infringe upon the family’s right to privacy in this matter.”
4. If one is comfortable with it, one can make comments about how the crisis has affected one individually or the school in general. If the incident involved an athlete, the coach might say, “Joe Student’s death is very tragic and the team and I will miss his contributions to the sport.”
5. One can also address actions the school is taking to deal with the situation. For example, “Although this is a terrible situation, we are fortunate to have a crisis plan to counsel students and faculty who are understandably upset.”
6. Do not agree to set up interviews with students. All requests for interviews should be directed to the Safety Program Coordinator or the designated spokesperson.
7. Do not speculate or comment on the cause of death, especially in an apparent suicide. Tell reporters that information on the death should be obtained from the police department.
8. Remember, one does not have to answer any questions. Simply refer all reporters to the Safety Program Coordinator or the designated spokesperson.