

# Communicating with Stakeholders During Times of Transition and Crisis

State Charter Schools  
Commission of Georgia

**Lauren Holcomb**  
Executive  
Director

**Michelle Wirth**  
Georgia Charter  
Schools  
Association



# Agenda and Goals

When faced with a challenge, the way we communicate with stakeholders can make all the difference in escalating or mitigating a potential crisis. The goal for this session is to help attendees think about how to communicate in challenging situations to prevent a crisis situation from arising.

## Agenda:

- Share a recent charter school communications challenge.
  - Share best practices in crisis management.
- Collaboratively work through communications challenges with a focus on mitigating potential crises.
  - If time allows, discuss audience challenges.

# Communications Challenge

You are the board chair of a charter school.

A national news outlet is planning a feature story on your school in regard to student demographics and recruiting practices. Your school is far less diverse than the surrounding schools.

As the board chair, you are tasked with working with the school administration to respond to the news outlet's questions.

**Where do you begin?**



## *How to Prevent and Respond to Crises*

Michelle Wirth, Director of Communications,  
Georgia Charter Schools Association

2/4/20

# Agenda:

---

Best Practices for  
Preventing a Crisis

---

Communicating in  
Times of Crisis

# How to Prevent a Crisis

- Have a crisis plan – Try to anticipate possible crises and potential responses
- If you anticipate a crisis, prepare a holding statement
- Holding statement is a brief statement to release immediately after the crisis begins (You can express empathy, speak about steps being taken to rectify the crisis, reassure and give available details)
- Gather and keep information that could be helpful in times of crises (academic proof points, demographics etc...)
- Build your reputation prior to a crisis (general communications plan, develop relationships with reporters)
- If the situation turns into a media story, determine how to respond. Say how you plan to address the situation or what steps you plan to take to improve.
- Tell the truth
- Do not over-communicate
- Select the right spokesperson (create a board & school policy)
- Correct any rumors or misinformation
- Know the state and local political landscape
- Realize that whatever you send to parents or put on the Internet could end up in the news

# Consider Social Media & Smartphones



 **Jackson Kurtz** f t w e  
Reporter

**S.O.S. PETITION To Save Our School**

In the past three weeks Sude King Taylor Community School (SKTCS) leadership has pushed out nearly 70% of our teachers. As of Friday, April 12th when signed contracts were due, only 3 out of 16 teachers will be returning next year.

We, a large and diverse group of concerned SKTCS parents, families, and caregivers, are committed to creating a school that reflects the mission and values put forth in our charter. The current leadership structure has undermined the mission and values, repeatedly and consistently refused pleas for dialogue and mediation, shut down community engagement, and led us to this crisis point. We are calling for changes to ensure that SKTCS thrives as a true community school that empowers teacher and parent voice and creates structures of equity, accountability, and care.

Since November 2017 (the fourth month of the current year) a majority of SKTCS teachers have been asking the Governing Board for help with hiring and mismanagement they have witnessed and experienced in our school. The only response has been to alienate and threaten teachers for speaking up on behalf of our students. At least one teacher was retaliated against. The Board has encouraged participation in its committee structure, but when a diverse group of concerned parents joined the plea for help on behalf of teachers and students, the Board shut down the committee.

It is important for everyone to understand that we stand to lose even more staff if there are no changes in leadership for the upcoming school year.

Therefore we demand that the SKTCS Governing Board immediately:

- (1) Offers renewal contracts to every current member of the teaching staff.

**PETITION CALLS FOR SOME LEADERSHIP AT TO STEP DOWN**

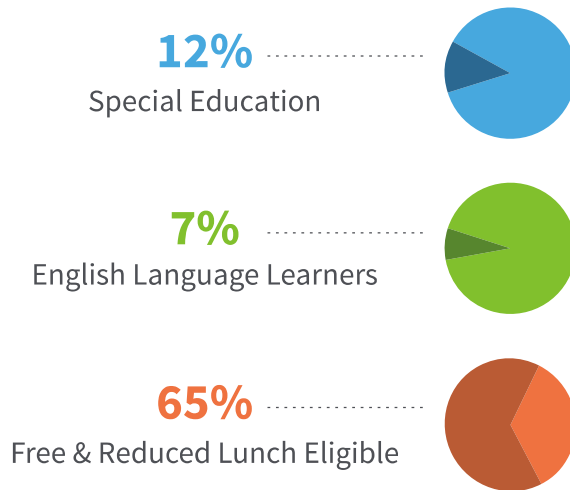
**RIGHT NOW** **WJCL 22 abc**



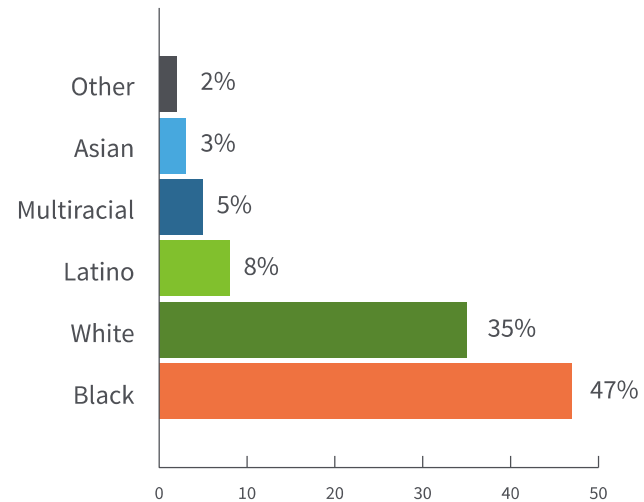
# Proof Points & Demographic Information



## Charter School Students:



## Charter School Demographics:





# Emphasize Ongoing Positive Efforts



Example: Anti-Bullying Program



Example: Plan to Increase Diversity



Example: School Security Upgrades

# Seek Guidance

- Call or email the State Charter Schools Commission & the Georgia Charter Schools Association



# Communicating in Times of Crisis

- **Crisis Communications Plan**
  - Emergency Management Plan
  - Crisis Communications Checklist
  - Crisis Team
  - Audience / Media List
  - Media Training: who should receive training?
  - Primary and secondary spokesperson
- **Who should and should not comment on a crisis? (Board/School Policy)**
- **Prepare Crisis telephone directory in advance**
- **When in doubt contact the SCSC, an attorney & GCSA**
- **Statement**
- **Town hall/press conference**
- **Evaluate and improve crisis communications**

# Crisis Communications Checklist

- Ensure all students are safe
- Immediately notify school leader, crisis team, board members, the SCSC and other key contacts
- Before going public:
  - Review situation and determine appropriate response with key staff
  - Draft potential press releases, talking points and other communications
  - Communications can include crisis status and school response. Take proactive steps to resolve if possible.

# Potential Crisis Team Members

The following roles are essential to a rapid response team:

- **Decision-Maker:** Makes the final call on all crisis strategy. This person also approves any external communications.
- **Team Lead:** This person leads the execution of the school's rapid response plan.
- **Communications Lead:** Prepares and sends all statements and communications, and keeps track of media clips and reporters who have reached out.
- **Subject Matter Expert:** Familiar with this particular kind of crisis and can explain what decisions were made internally and why.
- Other potential members: school safety officer, school counselor, legal counsel & school nurse

# Additional Considerations

- Do your best to get ahead of the situation by notifying key stakeholders (It's best to hear the message from you rather than someone else)
- Determine if you will allow access to spokesperson or use statements
- Factsheets and timelines are also helpful
- When you've said all there is to say move on to "the next steps."

# Next Steps...

- What resources do you need to develop or improve a school-wide communications plan?
- Determine how your school can communicate more effectively

# References

- <http://lacharterschoTols.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/LAPCS-Communications-Toolkit-2015.pdf>
- Campus Suite: School Communication Planning Guide, <http://content.campussuite.com/school-communication-planning-guide>
- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
- Cutting Edge PR
- Rapid Response Communications Presentation – RALLY



# Challenge Scenarios

Break into three groups to work through  
three challenge scenarios.

# Challenge A

## **Challenge:**

A group of beloved teachers is dismissed by the school administration due to performance issues. This decision angers members of the school community, including parents, who take to social media and news outlets to question the decision. The group is growing and calling for the school administration and board to be overturned.

## **Questions:**

What strategies should the school use to address the parent comments on social media? To address general concerns around the decision? To prevent the crisis from growing?

# Challenge B

## **Challenge:**

A student allegedly brings a weapon to school. No one is harmed, but school leaders inform the authorities and other members of the school community become aware.

## **Questions:**

What strategies should the school use to inform stakeholders about this incident? To preserve the school's reputation as a safe community? To prevent the crisis from growing?

# Challenge C

## **Challenge:**

You receive your CCRPI results from the Georgia Department of Education. Your score has dropped this year in comparison to surrounding schools. You learn a reporter plans to write a negative story about the new score.

## **Questions:**

What strategies should the school use to engage the reporter? To reframe the story in a positive light? To prevent the crisis from growing?

Questions?