



Los Angeles County

Commission on Human Relations

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You've had an intergroup crisis at your school: What now?

1. Gather accurate information about the event.

It is important to get eyewitness accounts as to what happened. Be aware that individuals may frame their accounts of the incidents in order to serve their own interests. Let your faculty and staff know that you are interested in knowing the facts of what has happened. It is helpful for them to know that your neutrality reflects your desire to learn what happened, rather than your interest in assigning blame and punishment.

2. Coordinate your school's message and designate a media spokesperson.

In order to avoid conflicting information from being disseminated from your school, it is important to coordinate a message that will be released to the public. The Commission recommends that the school designate one spokesperson who will communicate with the media. The spokesperson should have language capabilities to communicate with the ethnic media.

Tips for Crisis Communication: How should organizations communicate in high-stress environments? *

1. Communicate compassion, conviction, and optimism in your messages
2. Be concise, brief, and clear (6th-8th grade readability level)
3. Trust is critical. Be caring and empathic. Show dedication, commitment, competence, expertise, honesty, and openness.

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3. Plan for communication with parents and guardians in the event of a lockdown and provide for the orderly dismissal of students where appropriate.

Often in the event of a large-scale conflict, the school will find it necessary to lockdown the campus. In such situations, it is important to prepare for parent/student communication. Know that students will contact their parents and guardians and that parents and guardians will attempt to contact their students. School administrators must plan for communication with parents in order to reassure them of their children's safety, thus preventing the escalation of panic and chaos. If the school principal has a cell phone number or direct line for parents and guardians, the principal should provide that number to parents and guardians at the beginning of the year and again in the event of a crisis.

Where necessary and appropriate, school administrators will also need to prepare for the order dismissal of students. A school that is not strategic about reconnecting parents and guardians to their youth risks more chaos and the loss of goodwill towards the school. The following is an example:

An intergroup conflict erupts on campus and students use cell phones to contact parents to come and get them. When the parents arrive, they are unable to access the attendance office. Tempers flare and any goodwill that existed between parents, students and the school drains away rapidly because of the delayed release of students.

The Commission strongly encourages that schools develop a special procedure that quickly releases students while observing the school safety plan, district policies, school regulations and other legal requirements.

4. Provide information regarding the event to parents.

Parents will appreciate your communicating with them as quickly as possible. Where available, update websites and use automated systems that allow you to send messages to parents instantly. The information you provide to parents should include: (1) a message that your school does not tolerate hate, harassment, or discrimination (*please see the enclosed sample parent letter*); (2) a description of the event; (3) assurances that the child's safety is your priority, and (4) school contact information, including a phone number.

Some administrators have attempted to "shape" the parent letter in an attempt to soothe or lessen parental anxiety. The problem with such attempts is that it can result in distortion of the truth and the loss of parental goodwill and respect. This is especially true when the parent finds out you did not convey accurately what happened on your campus. Honesty is the best policy.

Keep in mind, your letter is not the only message received at home. Parents will also receive news of the event from other students, parents, and print and electronic media.

5. Communicate with and gather information from students.

Students are the most important stakeholders in creating a positive school environment. It is important to talk with them both in order to understand intergroup relations on campus, as well as to help them know that their voices matter. The Commission urges school administrators to ensure that student perspectives are considered when making decisions that affect the campus.

First, in response to an intergroup crisis, it is helpful to talk with the students actually involved in the conflict in order to gather information about the event and also to allow students an opportunity to be heard.

One helpful technique is the one used by Joel Juntilla of LAUSD Youth Relations during a recent school conflict. Mr. Juntilla called together a meeting of those influential students believed to be the “shot callers,” together with the vice principal. Students discussed the following:

- a. the campus incident;
- b. why they thought the incident happened;
- c. what they thought could be done to cool things down; and
- d. ideas they had to restore the campus to normalcy.

Also, it is important that school administrators continue to dialogue with students on the issues of intergroup relations and diversity. The Commission recommends that school administrators meet regularly with a diverse core of youth in order to develop student-led strategies and programs. These students can serve as an action team to create a positive and inclusive diverse school community for their peers.

A cautionary note: The Commission strongly recommends that faculty and staff must prepare themselves prior to conducting dialogues or discussions with students, however, as failing to do so may result in situations that worsen intergroup relations. It is advisable to bring in trained facilitators and other consultants who can help provide guidance and expertise on these subjects. *(For more information on facilitating interracial/intercultural dialogue, please see the Commission’s publication “When We Talk.”)*

6. Communicate immediately with faculty and staff.

The Commission believes school administrators must meet immediately with faculty and staff to (1) communicate to them that hate, harassment, and discrimination are not tolerated at school and articulate the consequences of such actions (*please see attached sample letter*), (2) ensure that faculty and staff help to maintain calm among the students, and (3) provide them with the opportunity to voice their concerns and suggestions.

Faculty and staff must serve as models for the school community in acting with neutrality, calmness, and professionalism. In addition to ensuring that faculty and staff themselves do not get caught up in the emotional upheaval of the crisis, it is important that they vigilantly monitor speech and behavior that encourages, allows, and/or tolerates hate, harassment, and

discrimination. Faculty and staff must help to control rumors spread by students and other staff, as well as to manage students' fears and perceptions.

Finally, it is important to talk with faculty and staff because in addition to holding vital information about campus environment, they also have their own concerns about personal safety. *(For more information on facilitating interracial/intercultural dialogue, please see the Commission's publication "When We Talk.")*

7. Meet with parents.

Meeting with the parents is a key opportunity for school administrators to answer parents' questions as well as to listen carefully to their concerns. Ideally, school administrators will already have been meeting regularly with parents throughout the year.

It is important that school administrators' use a parents' meeting as a time to honor parents' experiences, to help parents feel acknowledged, respected, and understood. The format of the dialogue is a key aspect that will either help to further or inhibit such goals. *Please see below.* The principal should also take this opportunity to outline the administration's plans to address the situation. Other speakers for the meeting should include student body leaders, the ranking police commander in your area, school police, and elected officials. Elected officials bring a sense of legitimacy to the situation; however, it is important not to allow the officials to monopolize the stage

While different dialogue formats will work better for different school communities, school administrators should consider a structure that works best for the situation at hand. The ultimate goal is to provide a safe space for the parents to talk. In some cases, it is critical to first separate the parents into small groups, groups divided by race and ethnicity, or groups separated by language needs, prior to bringing all of these groups together. In other cases, it is feasible to allow the large group to come together immediately.

The Commission recommends a structure that allows for all parents to participate, rather than allowing for just a few speakers to dominate the microphone. Allowing parents to discuss the issues in smaller groups will ensure that more parents participate, thus promoting a greater democratic process. As a result, parents will begin to feel appreciated and valued as a resource.

The following structure works well:

- a. parents are assigned to groups of no more than of ten persons, with designated facilitators for each group;
- b. parents discuss their concerns and list their top three concerns; and
- c. parents report out recommendations addressing the concerns to the entire assembly.

Please keep in mind the language needs of your audience. Consider having bilingual staff, translators, and/or translation equipment available at the meeting. Also, consider providing a separate room for small children to gather while the adults meet.

(For more information on facilitating interracial/intercultural dialogue, please see the Commission's publication "When We Talk.")

8. Provide processes for mediation as quickly as possible.

It is important that the healing process begin as quickly as possible.

Effective peer mediation programs help to transform the way all members of the school community approach conflict. Students are more likely to talk through conflict and refer their peers to use mediation when they have been trained and where there is a safe environment. Studies have also shown significant declines in suspensions where peer mediation has been implemented.

There are several professional organizations that can provide mediation services and training for your students and staff at a low cost. *(Please see the Commission's Human Relations Resource Guide for a list of organizations.)*

9. Promote effective, comprehensive, and sustainable human relations programming at your school.

It is important to move from crisis response to conflict intervention and prevention.

The Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations believes that all schools should provide safe, culturally-appropriate learning environments for students to achieve academic excellence and develop healthy life skills. When a student perceives that her/his cultural knowledge or heritage is not valued by the larger society, when students feel harassed because of prejudice against them – whether it's based on disability, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, race, language, or immigration status – their ability to learn is compromised.

The Commission believes it is critical that we work proactively to understand and embrace our diversity so that we may promote peaceful and positive intergroup relations throughout our schools and communities. Integrating human relations into the culture of a campus involves consistent and varied strategies to raise awareness and educate on our differences so that we may value our collective strength and build community. Strategies to improve human relations on campus should reflect the needs and voices of all campus stakeholders from the student body to the surrounding community. As a result, tactics to improve human relations may vary depending on issue, area, or audience; however, it is essential to engage all levels of the campus community in a holistic and inclusive process.

We urge schools to develop meaningful and sustainable human relations programs in the following ways:

- a. Adopt a School-wide Commitment to Peace and Respect for All Groups: Adopt a school-wide commitment to peace and respect for all, regardless of age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, language, immigration status, national origin, race, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, etc.. Display the commitment in writing throughout the campus in visible places

accessible to all campus community members and visitors and distribute frequent and consistent messages of an institutional and personal commitment to diversity, respect and peace. Invite to your campus culturally appropriate and representative community leaders to demonstrate diverse individuals and groups working together. Emphasize that all members of the school community must model in their own behavior the message of respect for all.

- b. Develop Human Relations Leadership Among Students: In a recent survey, students rank diversity first when asked what they liked about their school. The Commission urges schools to develop leadership among a diverse core of youth in order to develop student-led strategies and programs and to dialogue and meet regularly with students on the issues of intergroup relations and diversity. School administrators can gain important input, feedback, and suggestions for addressing intergroup relations on campus from their students. The school should either help establish or support an already existing campus-based student organization dedicated to promoting a healthy, non-discriminatory environment on campus. These students can serve as an action team to create a positive and inclusive diverse school community for their peers.
- c. Integrate Human Relations Principles and Lessons into Existing Curriculum: Support in-class programming that provides students with opportunities to deepen their knowledge of diversity, build leadership and interpersonal skills and strengthen their commitment to human relations. The Commission believes that integrating human relations concepts into existing curriculum is critical in order to infuse the principles and values of diversity, inclusion, and respect into student and faculty learning. Many human relations organizations offer support in developing standards-based human relations lesson plans and tools for teachers to integrate into all subject areas.
- d. Support and Implement Human Relations Trainings for Faculty and Staff: Provide training opportunities for faculty and staff opportunities to explore their own perspectives on diversity, as well as to develop skills and tools to facilitate better the discussions among their students. From cultural sensitivity training to developing standards-based curricula with human relations themes, teachers should be encouraged by the administration to attend appropriate human relations conferences, trainings, summits and events. Together with *Facing History and Ourselves*, for example, the Commission has helped conduct training for teachers to discuss difficult social and interracial issues within the context of standards-based history, social science, language and language arts curricula. The Commission is also staffed with professionals capable of working with teachers to incorporate a number of human relations themes into their lesson plans.
- e. Strengthen Parent/Guardian Communication and Involvement: Strengthen parent/guardian communication and involvement by hosting open forums and educational opportunities for and with parents/guardians. Continued interaction, trainings and discussions for parents will lead to a stronger community. Supporting parent leadership training and developing a strong parent advisory group allows parents/guardians to interact with community based organizations and government agencies on a consistent basis to address the needs of the campus and surrounding community (e.g., eliminating prejudice in the home, participating in

safe passage programs, increasing after-school youth programs, improving community-law enforcement relations, increasing access to mental health services, etc.).

In addition, the Commission recommends that school administrators consider the following ways to strengthen relationships between schools and their communities:

Community Dialogue: The Commission believes a series of action/solutions-oriented dialogues with the key school stakeholders is important in order to help school administrators identify and address the intergroup relations issues at the school. Promoting sustained dialogue among students, teachers, parents, administration and staff will allow key stakeholders in the school community to effectively communicate and support each other as well as offer a continued assessment of the school climate, e.g., School-based human relations committee, “Town Hall” meetings, Principal’s Student Advisory, etc..

Forming a School Collaborative: The Commission believes that school collaboratives, led by school administrators, can help develop leadership within the school community to identify, raise awareness, plan and take action on intergroup challenges facing the school community. Collaboratives should include students, teachers, parents, district leaders, law enforcement, community organizations (e.g. gang prevention organizations), and relevant government agencies (e.g., the Commission, L.A. City Human Relations Commission, Department of Justice Community Relations Service, elected local gov't representatives, etc.). School collaboratives should meet regularly in order to serve effectively as a vehicle for ongoing coordination and communication between school and stakeholders.

Collaborate with Local Non-Profit Agencies Providing Human Relations Services: The Commission has developed partnerships with many other organizations to provide trainings and curricula to schools, e.g., the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ), Leadership Development Intergroup Relations (LDIR), the Asian Pacific American Dispute Resolution Center (APADRC), and the Anti-Defamation league (ADL). In addition, the Commission can support the implementation of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) “Mix it Up” program that promotes dialogue and interaction among all students on campus. *Please see our list of human relations resources.*

In conclusion...

We need to take time to learn more about each other and remind ourselves about our similarities as well as our differences. The Commission hopes that you will use these ideas and suggestions as a guide in developing your own school’s approach to building a diverse and inclusive campus.

For additional resources and more information on our programs, please visit us at www.lahumanrelations.org or by calling us at (213) 974-7611.

The Commission and staff hope that you have an excellent school year!