

Managing issues in a Private School

Confidential project



The brief

A leading independent school in Auckland asked Wright Communications to assist with its preparation for managing a crisis event or issue impacting the school.

Secondary schools are an issues-rich environment. In any given week, a school's senior leadership team including the Principal and support staff may be dealing with a wide range of student issues, employment issues and events in the community impacting the operation of the school.

The mass-shooting on 15 March in Christchurch highlighted the impact an event of this magnitude can have on schools. On the afternoon of the terrorist attack on two mosques, all schools in Christchurch were placed into lockdown. In some cases, students were required to lie beneath desks for hours with no break until the all clear was sounded. The manner in which schools initiate lockdowns and communicate with their broader communities is now under review by the Ministry of Education.

In the case of our private school client in Auckland, lockdowns are increasingly happening.

The brief for Wright Communications was to draft an Issues Management Plan that included the process and communications required during a lockdown. The Plan would also have to address the plethora of stakeholders connected to the school and the many channels of communication available during a crisis or breaking issue.

The Wright approach

Wright Communication's approach was to develop an Issues Management Plan that contained an appropriate blend of crisis management principles, recommended crisis management structure and tactical guidance.

The Plan would be read by a range of leaders – from the Board of Governors through to senior management and communications advisors. Crisis management principles and structures were necessary in the Plan to ensure all governance and leadership members were clear on crisis management roles and responsibilities.

Two key parts of the Plan were a risk register and potential scenarios. The risk register contained a comprehensive list of potential issues, their likelihood of happening and a brief positioning statement or communications strategy for each.

While not every scenario can be planned for, the Issues Management Plan identified three of the most likely scenarios. For each scenario, a holding statement and questions and answers were provided. In the case of scenarios with wide range of audiences a number of statements were drafted for front line staff, governors, parents and student.

Finally, the plan included a step-by-step guide for managing a lockdown within the school, including draft texts and emails to the school community.

Client satisfaction

The school's Director of Marketing and Development said Wright Communications experience in managing media and stakeholder issues clearly underpinned the advice and guidance in the Issues Management Plan. "It was a huge relief to get this Plan written. With the plan now drafted, we can start using it as a framework that, over time, our communications team can build on with logistics details and contact numbers. We will develop it into a critical reference document for managing the myriad of issues that we face on a daily basis."