



Crisis? What crisis?

In the midst of a crisis, parents are almost always **a key stakeholder group**

Often, **strategic silence** online and in the media stops a story growing

Communications can be **prepared in advance**

How to manage your school's reputational risk

In the maelstrom which is the start of the school year, there is no doubt enough happening to keep bursars occupied. However, *Sue Bishop* and *Tim Toulmin*, of crisis PR agency, Alder, say that lifting your eyes to survey the risks which might beset your school in the coming year would be well advised, and could save a headache later.

Just as we (hopefully) turn our backs on the pandemic, schools will have a number of significant issues to deal with in 2022-23, from cost of living increases and pressure on fees, to decisions about TPS, culture wars, difficult mergers and the run up to an election in which independent schools are, again, a lightning

rod. In addition, there are rapid onset problems such as staff and pupil behaviours, accidents and safeguarding incidents.

Here are some of the situations we at Alder have been dealing with in independent schools, plus some general tips for keeping out of trouble and dealing well with it when it inevitably comes.

Cost of living

Schools will be under enormous financial stress this year, with a cost of living crisis putting pressure on site maintenance and energy costs. In turn, this is fuelling union calls for industrial action in the autumn over what they deem a real-terms pay cut. For bursars and governing bodies in some schools, the question of raising fees is looming large. ➤

▼ Gossip means that should a story leak, the press office can quickly be overrun with enquiries and speculation





It's a potent mix, which politicians and the media will enjoy stirring even more. Sensitive and carefully planned internal communications are required to keep staff informed of the pressures the school is under, and warm parents up in advance for any fee rises. Don't leave this too late; those who do risk trouble at home and leaks to the media.

Pensions

Some of you will have made your decisions already, and have lived through a well-ordered process. However, a large number of schools are either involved in a consultation process now or considering their position over the coming year. Lessons to be learnt include:

- ensure staff feel genuinely valued in the run up to any negotiation – put that at the top of any communications;
- communications around consultation periods are delicate – they must be seen to be genuine, not a 'done deal';

- explain repeatedly and clearly the realities of school expenditure and link this (gently) to job security;
- parents are often committed to certain staff but need to understand the link between wage hikes, investment in the school and fee rises. Many of them will realise that TPS is a far better scheme than their own; and
- explain the context – not only have 300 or so schools already left, but this process is a result of government decisions, not poor management.

Culture wars

Movements such as BLM or #MeToo may have quietened down for now, but the issues they raised have not gone away. Schools have generally done a great job in reflecting societal shifts within their provision, but the apparently smallest matter can flare up.



Equally, the antagonism surrounding transgender issues can mean that sensitively handled internal situations in schools are spilling out into the public domain. Sensible decisions to modernise language have made front page news and been blown up by celebrity tweeters.

These stories are increasingly starting life as (often anonymous) social media complaints, making resolution via conventional mediation procedures difficult; and unlike most policy

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debates, any misstep a school makes in response to a story can attract extensive media attention and further online hostility. This is one for expert advice, media and social media monitoring and a comprehensive crisis communications manual. Often, 'strategic silence' online and in the media stops a story from growing, though naturally it's all on a case-by-case basis.

Explaining unexpected absences

Conveying the news of staff departures can be particularly difficult, especially when interim and transition plans must be implemented quickly. In those cases which involve an HR dispute or even the police, there are both multiple stakeholders wanting information, and limitations on

what can be said. Stringent planning – and the flexibility to respond to circumstances – is critical here. Some stakeholder groups are obvious, but others, such as major donors or high-profile alumni, can easily be forgotten if staff are busy and it's no one's job to think about it. Communications can be prepared in advance, and a leader must ultimately balance the various legal duties to privacy and confidentiality while communicating and reassuring stakeholders.

Media behaviour

Schools have long been safe in the knowledge that should a story break, a journalist will go to the school directly for a quote. While this still holds most of the time, school press offices are increasingly being bypassed (do make sure an out of hours contact is on the school website). One example: a major

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UNPREPARED



newspaper published an inaccurate story about an anonymous school, then pressured the school to name itself and put its side of the story. School governors were even doorstepped in a bid to push someone into a quote. Luckily, they were briefed in advance on what to do. While this is extreme, the relentless pressure of social media and 24/7 news, plus some lack of training, means some journalists' standards are slipping and anything is possible.

Online reputation

A school creates its first impression through its online profile, which has cons as well as pros. Malicious online reviews and hostile media stories have a long tail and need managing if they are not to feature on page one of Google. If left unchallenged, they can continue to tarnish reputation in perpetuity. A poor online profile can have a serious impact on revenue – indeed, a few schools have reported to us that their unmanaged Wikipedia pages have been the primary reason for retracted applications. Clearing up after negative stories is an important yet often overlooked process. While pushing out positive stories definitely helps, it can be worth thinking about consulting someone who understands the bewildering complexities of Google Search.

SCHOOL GOVERNORS DOOR-STEPPED

One school was the subject of serious misreporting in a national newspaper story about a so-called 'culture war' issue, which made allegations about the behaviour of people within the school. The problem arose because the newspaper reprinted allegations made in unregulated media without checking them with the school, although it did not name the school in this initial rewrite. As the media pressure grew the advice was not to provide any on the record response to journalists because to do so would identify the school and potentially put stakeholders at risk. But the newspaper sent three reporters to the homes and workplaces of senior school governors to try to get them to speak when caught off-guard. Had the governors been unprepared the agreed strategy could have been undermined. Fortunately, governors had been briefed ahead of time about how to deal with unexpected approaches from newspapers and the journalists returned empty-handed. In this instance, the newspaper's failure to take care over the original story also worked in the school's favour; strong representations were made to the newspaper's legal department about the damage they would cause if they identified the school against the backdrop of damagingly inaccurate information being put into the public domain. Eventually, the newspaper dropped the story and did not identify the school. But had the governors been unprepared for the approaches from journalists the outcome could have been very different.

Parents

In the midst of a crisis, parents are almost always a key stakeholder group. Playground gossip and prolific use of WhatsApp groups mean that, should a story leak, the press office can quickly be overrun with enquiries and speculation can run rife in the school community. Communications should be timely yet disciplined; overcommunicating about sensitive matters is fraught with danger. 'Town hall' Q&A sessions, for instance, can often create more problems than they solve.

Conclusion

The main lesson we draw from advising on these and many other issues is that time is a precious commodity in a crisis. Much can be done in real time to minimise the impact of bad news, but anything

that can be done in advance – whether that be training, creating crisis manuals or drafting statement templates – greatly increases the chances of weathering the storm. ◀



Authors

Sue Bishop
Specialist education partner at Alder



Tim Toulmin
Managing director at Alder

www.alder-uk.com