

**After Action Report:
Oxford Community Schools' Crisis Communications
Related to the Oxford High School Shooting**

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Overview

This After Action Report summarizes communications issued by Oxford Community Schools (OCS) and its representatives following the November 30, 2021, shooting at Oxford High School (OHS) in which four students died and eight people were injured. This report reviews communications via emails, letters, and video messages issued to the district's parents and students from November 30, 2021, through January 24, 2022. This report focuses on communications directly related to the shooting, its aftermath, and the students' return to school. Findings can inform OCS' ongoing communications and, more generally, guide other education professionals developing or updating an active shooter crisis communications plan.

Crisis

On November 30, 2021, a 15-year-old sophomore opened fire at 12:50 p.m. in the hallway of OHS. Four students, ranging in age from 14 to 17, were killed, and eight people, including a teacher and seven students, were injured. The shooting lasted approximately five minutes, and law enforcement arrested the shooter without incident as students and staff evacuated the building. The shooter is charged with 24 crimes, including murder and terrorism (Brand-Williams & Dickson, 2022). The shooter's parents are charged with involuntary manslaughter for failing to secure the gun used in the shooting (AP, 2021). The suspect and his parents pleaded not guilty and are awaiting trial (Baldas, 2022). A third-party security firm and the Michigan Attorney General's office are conducting separate investigations of the shooting and OCS' response (AP, 2021).

After the shooting, OCS closed schools and provided ongoing counseling and support for the staff, students, and families. OCS, law enforcement, businesses, and community groups from Oxford and beyond supported those affected by the shooting with fundraisers, vigils, and other events. OCS instituted a phased, soft return to academics and extracurricular activities. After closing schools the weeks of and after the shooting, elementary and middle school students returned first on December 10, 2021. OHS students began a hybrid schedule of remote learning and classes at the middle school on January 10, 2022 and returned to the renovated high school on January 24, 2022.

Scrutiny

OCS officials have been scrutinized for their handling of the shooting, primarily for inaction following alleged reports of the shooter's previous disturbing behavior. School officials met with the suspect and his parents the morning of the shooting to address his behavior but did not search his backpack and allowed him to return to classes when his parents refused to take him home (AP, 2021). The district declined Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel's offer to conduct an independent review of the shooting in favor of a third-party private security firm (Wall Howard, 2021). The Attorney General is reviewing the incident, regardless of the district's declination (Eggert & Williams, 2021), and Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald has not ruled out charges against school officials (AP, 2021). There are at least three civil lawsuits filed against OCS, accusing the district and its officials of gross negligence, intentional infliction of emotional distress, failing to prevent the shooting, and attempting to cover up culpability (Snell, 2022a; 2022b). The district refuted all accusations (Altavena & Baldas, 2022). A judge denied the district's request to halt the lawsuits until the trials of the suspect and his parents are completed (Dickson, 2022).

Timeline of Events

- **November 30, 2021:** The shooting occurs at OHS, leaving three students dead and eight people injured. The suspect is arrested on site.
- **December 1, 2021:** A fourth student dies in hospital from injuries related to the shooting. The suspect is charged with terrorism causing death, first-degree murder, assault with intent to murder, and firearm possession.
- **December 3, 2021:** A community vigil is hosted in downtown Oxford. The suspect's parents are charged with involuntary manslaughter.
- **December 4, 2021:** The suspect's parents plead not guilty.
- **December 6-8, 2021:** Staff return to work for trauma response training.
- **December 10, 2021:** Elementary and middle school students return to classes.
- **December 13, 2021:** The superintendent announces intent to delay his planned retirement. OHS athletics resume.
- **December 21, 2021:** OCS launches wellness survey to gather feedback.
- **December 29, 2021:** The superintendent outlines updated safety protocols.
- **January 5-6, 2022:** Telephone town hall events are hosted to gather feedback.
- **January 8, 2022:** Survivors file a lawsuit against OCS.
- **January 10, 2022:** OHS students begin a hybrid return to school with a combination of remote learning and in-person classes at the middle school building.
- **January 12, 2022:** Suspect pleads not guilty.
- **January 17, 2022:** Renovations at OHS are completed.
- **January 20-22, 2022:** OHS open house events are hosted for students and families.
- **January 24, 2022:** OHS students return to classes at the renovated building.

Organization

Located about an hour north of Detroit in northern Oakland County and southern Lapeer County, OCS is one of the largest districts in southeastern Michigan and serves the communities of Oxford, Leonard, Addison, Brandon, Dryden and Metamora (OCS, n.d.). The public district consists of one early learning school, five elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, two alternative schools, and one virtual academy (OCS, n. d.). In 2021, OCS served 7,151 students and employed 401 full-time teachers (OCS, n. d.). Leadership within OCS includes superintendent Tim Throne, school board president Thomas E. Donnelly, Jr., and OHS principal Steve Wolf. Thone, who announced in October 2021 his intent to retire in January 2022, but delayed retirement after the shooting (OCS, n. d. 2). In March 2022, long-time OCS teacher and administrator Ken Weaver was named superintendent (OCS, n. d. 2).

OCS (n.d.) is guided by the mission statement “to provide a world-class education that challenges all students to achieve their maximum potential in academics, arts, and athletics and prepares them to succeed in a global society,” and the declared values of trust, integrity, commitment, collaboration, honesty, and accountability. OHS’ graduation rate ranks among the top 20% in Michigan (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.). The district’s students are predominantly white (80%); minority enrollment is 19% and 25% of students are from economically disadvantaged families (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.). Serving both rural and suburban areas, OCS plays an integral role in connecting residents, local businesses, and community organizations.

Communications

As investigations of the crisis and related trials and litigation are ongoing, this report will focus on communications from OCS to parents and students dated November 30, 2021, through January 24, 2022. This period includes the immediate response to the shooting, information about memorial services and counseling resources, policy updates, the renovation of OHS, and the district's phased return to school. In the nearly two-month period, OCS and its leadership — including Throne, Donnelly, Jr., and Wolf — issued 38 crisis-related communications in the form of written and oral messages via YouTube videos. Throne served as the primary spokesperson, issuing 20 communications, including 18 written messages and two oral messages. OCS issued 11 written messages, predominantly during the initial crisis phase. Wolf issued four communications, including three written messages and one oral message. Donnelly, Jr., issued three communications, including two written messages and one oral message.

Communications related to the crisis, as well as other OCS business, are available on the district's website (OCS, n. d. 3). The documents included in this report were obtained through public access. These documents were selected because they detail OCS's response during the initial and maintenance crisis phases, as well as early portions of the recovery phase (CDC, 2018). This report's attention to documents issued from OCS to its internal stakeholders will allow focus on the crisis response most directly related to the shooting and the school community's healing process, as much external emphasis has been placed on the subsequent trials, litigation, and attributions of responsibility.

Review Worksheets

Best Practice: Be right (CDC, 2018).

Best Practice Defined: Information should be shared as it is available, including what is known, what is not known, and what is being done to fill in the gaps (CDC, 2018). Organizations should work to share accurate information as quickly as possible, to establish themselves as a source of credible information, (CDC, 2018). In instances of active shooter crises on school campuses, people may seek information from unofficial channels – mainly social media – and rumors and false information spread quickly when there are gaps in official communication (Jones et al., 2017). In responding to a mass shooting in which the shooter has been arrested or otherwise neutralized, organizations should share as much information about the incident as possible, but avoid unnecessarily sharing the shooter's name and image to deny them the attention and deter future offenders (Lankford & Madfis, 2017).

What was communicated?

1. **OCS announced a lockdown at OHS related to an active shooter, shared details about the incident and promised to provide more information as it became available.**

“There is an active emergency occurring at Oxford High school right now. Oakland County Sheriff's Department is on the scene and we have activated our emergency protocols and placed the school into lockdown. We will send more information to you as we know it. Please do not go to the school (OCS, 2021a, para. 1).”

“This afternoon there was an active shooter at Oxford High School. Oakland County Sherriff’s Department has secured the scene...All other district schools are in lockdown for safety purposes and are in no danger. We will continue to share information with you as we can (OCS, 2021b, para. 1).”

After the immediate threat was resolved, OCS provided a detailed summary of the shooting:

“...an active shooter opened fire at Oxford High School at approximately 1 p.m. (OCS, 2021c, para. 1).”

“The suspect was apprehended by Oakland County Sherriff’s Department and is in custody (OCS, 2021c, para. 2).”

“The result of the horrific attack at Oxford High School is four young lives lost and injury to six other students and one staff member (OCS, 2021e, para. 1).”

“As many of you know, the first shots were fired during passing time between classes when hundreds of students were in the hallway transitioning from one classroom to the other. Before the shooter was able to walk a short distance to enter the main hallway, students and staff had already entered classrooms, locked doors, erected makeshift barricades and locked down or fled according to their training. The suspect was not able to gain access to a single classroom (Throne, 2021b, para. 4).”

The district promised to keep families informed about plans to return to school:

“we’ll communicate that plan as quickly as possible (Throne, 2021a).”

2. OCS shared information about the suspect’s behavior preceding the shooting.

“there’s been a lot of talk about the student that was apprehended. That he was called up to the office and all that kind of stuff. No discipline was warranted. There were no discipline records at the high school. Yes, this student did have contact with our front office. And yes, his parents were on campus November 30 (Throne, 2021a).”

“On November 29, the suspect was discovered by a teacher to be viewing images of bullets on his cell phone during class.... On the morning of November 30, a teacher observed concerning drawings and written statements that have been detailed in media reports, which the teacher reported to school counselors and the Dean of students...Given the fact that the child had no prior disciplinary infractions, the decision was made he would be returned to the classroom rather than sent home to an empty house (Throne, 2021b, para. 8-12).”

3. OCS acknowledged gaps in information and referenced ongoing and forthcoming investigations.

The district pointed to the ongoing criminal investigation and cooperation with law enforcement as reasons for gaps in public information:

“...Again, I will take any and all questions at a later time. But that’s not now, and this is as much information as we can give you today. (Throne, 2021a).”

“We have been and will continue to be fully cooperative with the Oakland County Sheriff’s Office and Oakland County Prosecutor’s Office with their investigation. We haven’t been able to say more because this is an on-going investigation. We do not have all the facts and cannot interfere with the prosecutorial investigation. We know this has caused frustration and anger but we are doing our best under difficult circumstances (Throne, 2021d, para. 2).”

OCS also referenced its forthcoming third-party investigation as a source of future answers:

“After all the facts have been obtained and released through the course of the prosecution, my recommendation to our School Board will be that we initiate a review of our entire system as other communities have done when facing similar experiences... (Throne, 2021d, para. 3).”

“In this moment of crisis, we must take time to begin to fully understand this tragedy and get answers to the understandable questions many of us have about what happened and why. As your Board President, I want you to know I support full transparency and having a third-party review of all the events that led up to and occurred on November 30 (Donnelly, Jr., 2021a, para. 1).”

“Our board voted unanimously to support Superintendent Tim Throne’s call for a third-party review of the horrific tragedy that took place. This review will help provide transparency and accountability for our Wildcat community and help us emerge better and stronger. This review will be a blue-ribbon-style commission that looks in totality at our schools today, what is asked of our people, our guiding policies, and how we can do better...(Donnelly, Jr., 2021c, para. 2-3).

4. OCS addressed rumors and lawsuits about the shooting.

OCS acknowledged speculation and identified verified sources:

“As is common in traumatic and rapidly evolving events, there is often significant speculation and misinformation. The verified facts have been and will continue to be shared by law enforcement and our District. We will continue to communicate with you as we have information to share (OCS, 2021e, para. 7).”

Throne provided a lengthy and detailed communication after a lawsuit was filed by attorney Jeffrey Fieger on behalf of victims and their families accusing the district of failing to protect its students and prevent the shooting:

“Unfortunately, there have been numerous irresponsible and false allegations as well as inaccurate claims regarding Oxford Community Schools. Additionally, we have received several inquiries related to the events leading up to the tragic incident on November 30. It is important to clarify the details we can address at this time...The school district will respond in detail to the false allegations and reckless statements made by Mr. Fieger. The County Prosecutor has asked that the school district not unduly comment upon the details surrounding the case in order to avoid any interference with the criminal proceedings. Their efforts to seek justice for the victims of these criminal acts takes priority at this time. Your many questions will be answered in short order as the criminal prosecution moves forward and the school district responds to the inaccurate filing by Mr. Fieger (Throne, 2022h, para. 2-11).”

In the same communication, Throne addressed various allegations about the shooting and prior incidents at OHS referenced in the lawsuit:

“The deer head incident that occurred on November 4 was investigated by law enforcement and was in no way related to the perpetrator of the November 30 incident. Social media posts students shared after this event with OHS were also investigated and shared with law enforcement. They were also in no way related to the perpetrator of the November 30 incident (Throne, 2022h, para. 3).”

“On November 11, the head of a bird was found in a jar in a student restroom at OHS. It was brought to the attention of and investigated by law enforcement. In addition to school personnel reviewing video footage over two days and interviewing several students, law-enforcement investigated the bird head incident before November 30 and determined there was no threat to the high school. They were unable to determine when or how the jar was delivered. No threat or other content accompanied the strange act (Throne, 2022h, para. 4).”

“Allegations regarding live ammunition being discovered at school are completely false. We have no record or report of live ammunition ever being reported at any school and we have strict protocols and procedures in place when it comes to weapons on school grounds (Throne, 2022h, para. 5).”

“All OK2SAY tips from that time period (11/01/21-11/30/21) were forwarded to law enforcement. Each tip was fully investigated by law enforcement. The only actionable information received was on November 17 from an anonymous tip stating that a student, who is no longer a student of Oxford High School and not the perpetrator from November 30, was responsible for the bird head (Throne, 2022h, para. 6).”

“The district was unaware of the perpetrator’s social media presence or related posts until after November 30 (Throne, 2022h, para. 7).”

What was done well?

During the initial phase of the crisis, OCS effectively provided critical information as it became available during the rapidly evolving situation, meeting the CDC’s (2018)

recommendation to be timely and accurate. On the day of the crisis, OCS communicated three times: first announcing a lockdown of OHS (OCS, 2021a), then providing details about the active shooter incident (OCS, 2021b), and finally an update after the immediate threat was resolved (OCS, 2021c). In providing families with concise and clear real-time updates and assurances that “we will continue to share information with you as we can” (OCS, 2021b, para. 1), the district’s communications matched the CDC’s (2018) recommendation to address uncertainty by providing as much information and as many updates as possible.

Communications acknowledged gaps in knowledge and shared how OCS was working to fill those gaps and answer questions. Addressing gaps in information is essential to establish and maintain credibility, and to prevent or combat rumors (CDC, 2018). In assuring that “the verified facts have been and will continue to be shared by law enforcement and our district (OCS, 2021e, para. 7),” OCS provided specific sources of credible information and attempted to curb speculation about the shooting. In instances where information was not yet known, such as the details about students’ return to school, Throne (2021a) promised to “communicate that information as quickly as possible,” and then did so in subsequent messages (Throne, 2021c; OCS, 2022; Throne, 2022d). In instances where information was not yet available for public consumption because of ongoing investigation, leadership was firm and specific in explaining the lack of information, with Throne (2021d,) stating, “We haven’t been able to say more because this is an on-going investigation. We do not have all the facts and cannot interfere with the prosecutorial investigation.” OCS’ leadership routinely referenced their third-party investigation as a source of future answers, with Donnelly, Jr. (2021c) promising the “review will help provide transparency and accountability for our Wildcat community.”

Further, OCS and its representatives provided resources for parents to get the most updated information and ask questions, by routinely sharing website and contact information, which were available in every communication following the initial crisis messaging. Additionally, OCS communicated throughout the crisis without naming the suspected shooter, although his name and image were quickly and widely distributed by media. In refusing to name the suspect, OCS followed best practices that dictate organizations should avoid giving unnecessary attention to those who commit acts of mass violence (Lankford & Madfis, 2017).

What was not done well?

OCS and its representatives acknowledged rumors related to the shooting, but did not provide information to refute them in a timely manner. In describing the crisis and the suspect, Throne (2021a) stated on December 1, 2021, that “he was called up to the office” and that “his parents were on campus November 30,” although “no discipline was warranted.” Throne elaborated in another message on December 4, 2021, writing that the suspect was “discovered...to be viewing images of bullets on his cell phone” and that a teacher observed “concerning drawings and written statements” on the day prior to the shooting (Throne, 2021b, para. 8). While Throne shared information about the suspect’s behavior and the events preceding the shooting, he did so after the information had already circulated in media reports and on social media (Dupnack, 2021; Altavena & Boucher, 2021).

Although OCS was clear that certain information could not be shared because of the ongoing investigation (Throne, 2021a; 2021b; 2021d; 2022h; Donnelly, Jr., 2021c), these details should have been provided by the district or law enforcement, not the media. Allowing the media to share the details about the events preceding the shooting first potentially hurts the district’s credibility, and conflicts with the CDC’s recommendation to be accurate and timely because

audiences will tend to believe the first information provided, regardless of the source (CDC, 2018). While it is possible OCS withheld these details at the request of law enforcement, both organizations should have predicted public speculation and proactively developed agreed upon information to share. Such gaps in information distribution may prompt speculation about what other information was withheld, especially considering that school shootings are prone to post-crisis rumors (Jones et al., 2017).

Following the announcement of a lawsuit against the district on behalf of the survivors, OCS addressed rumors dating back to early November on January 18, 2022 (Throne, 2022h). However, addressing rumors should be a continuous process (CDC, 2018). Although Throne refuted rumors and allegations with great specificity and assurance that “your many questions will be answered in short order as the criminal prosecution moves forward (Throne, 2022h, para. 12),” he did so two months after the shooting, and in direct response to a lawsuit. As such, the communications’ timing could be perceived as reactive and somewhat defensive in nature.

How can communications be improved for the next crisis?

In the future, OCS should continue the use of real-time updates during the initial phases of a crisis, as well as adhere to the best practice of not naming the suspect. The district was effective in acknowledging gaps in information and sharing some of the details about the crisis, but could have been more effective in confronting rumors proactively by providing as much information as possible before it reached the media. Further, references to the district’s third-party investigation into the shooting offered hope for a resolution to the unknown, but more specific information about how and when that investigation would be conducted would have provided more transparency.

Best Practice: Express empathy (CDC, 2018).

Best Practice Defined: The physical, mental, and emotional harm caused by a crisis should be acknowledged in words (CDC, 2018). Crisis responders should try to put themselves in the shoes of their stakeholders (CDC, 2018). In school shooting crises, special attention should be paid to acknowledging the victims and survivors rather than focusing solely on the shooter (Peterson & Silver, 2015). Empathy can help reduce anger and create conditions that support forgiveness, recovery, and renewal (Ulmer et al., 2019; Peterson & Silver, 2015).

What was communicated?

1. OCS acknowledged both the loss of life and trauma of the shooting.

“The Oxford Community Schools District and our entire community has suffered a loss that is immeasurable....The result of the horrific attack at Oxford High School is four young lives lost and injury to six other students and one staff member. While this is a cost no community should bear the long-term impacts of this event cannot be comprehended (OCS, 2021e, para.1).”

“The shooting at Oxford High School has tested the resolve of our students, families and staff like never before. Our Wildcat community has been shaken to its core, and our hearts are with the families impacted by this unthinkable tragedy and those still

recovering from their injuries. Please keep the victims and families in your thoughts and prayers (Throne, 2021b, para 1-2)."

2. Officials communicated a shared sense of grief and anger.

"As a community, we are heartbroken...The unspeakable tragedy we are just beginning to process and the immense trauma and grief we're all experiencing has left us all reeling and in shock (Donnelly, Jr., 2021a, para. 1)."

"The rollercoaster of emotions we are all feeling is a normal response to crisis. Our community is experiencing pain and suffering, and many are expressing understandable anger and frustration (Donnelly, Jr., 2021a, para. 4)."

3. An OCS official put himself in the place of the victims' families and survivors.

"We have parents that sent their kids to school two days ago, and they're never coming home. [Crying]. I can't imagine...To say that I am still in shock and numb is probably an understatement (Throne, 2021a)."

"Sadly, this holiday break will be unlike any other our community has experienced. This will be a different and difficult holiday for many in our community (Throne, 2021i, para. 2)."

4. OCS declared the prioritization of the school community's physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

"The safety and security of our students and staff is our first priority (OCS, 2021e, para. 1)."

"The Number One Goal of our plan is supporting the emotional health and well-being of our students by getting them back into a routine and offering an opportunity for them to be together, interact with their fellow students and school staff, share experiences, grieve, and continue their educational journeys (Throne, 2021c, para. 2)."

"The physical safety and security of our students coming back has been our top priority and our guiding light in terms of planning. We are also committed to providing emotional support and counseling to any staff member, student or family member in Oxford (Throne, 2021e, para. 2)."

"The physical and emotional safety of our students remains our top priority. This has been our guide for planning our return to school, and will continue to be our North Star as we make decisions and move on in our planning (Wolf, 2022a)."

"As we start the new year, we remain committed to the physical and emotional safety and security of our Wildcats as they continue their educational journeys (Throne, 2022a, para. 1)."

OCS officials directly told students that they were loved:

“Let me leave you with saying again how proud I am of our students, our employees. You’re loved. We couldn’t be more proud of you (Throne, 2021a).”

“And students, we love you (Wolf, 2022a).”

What was done well?

In keeping with the CDC’s (2018) recommendations, OCS recognized both the immediate loss of life and the subsequent mental and emotional stress caused by the shooting. After referencing the “four young lives lost and injury to six other students and one staff member,” the district recognized the “immeasurable suffering” that was “a cost no community should bear with long-term impacts that cannot be comprehended (OCS, 2021e, para. 1).” Extending its recognition of the multi-faceted impact of the crisis, OCS routinely expressed the prioritization of students’ physical safety as well as their emotional and mental wellbeing. In the week of the shooting, OCS (2021e) declared, “the safety and security of our students and staff is our first priority,” and Throne (2021c, para. 1) elaborated on that priority, stating, “The Number One Goal of our plan is supporting the emotional health and well-being of our students by getting them back into a routine and offering an opportunity for them to be together, interact with their fellow students and school staff, share experiences, grieve, and continue their educational journeys.” This dual emphasis on physical safety and psychological wellbeing continued, and was expanded to include reference to staff, by Throne (2021e, para. 2) in his statement that “the physical safety and security of our students coming back has been our top priority and our guiding light in terms of planning. We are also committed to providing emotional support and counseling to any staff member, student or family member in Oxford.” This prioritization of the physical safety and emotional and mental wellbeing was repeated throughout communications leading up to the students’ return to school (Throne, 2021i; 2022g; Wolf, 2022a), which aligns with the CDC’s (2018) recommendation for organizations to express an understanding of its stakeholders’ concerns and needs.

The district’s communications framed trauma, grief, and anger following the crisis as a mutual, shared experience. The CDC (2018) notes that addressing what people are feeling and sharing how an organization and its leaders share in those feelings builds rapport and humanizes a response. Donnelly Jr., (2021a, para. 1) stated that “as a community we are heartbroken...the unspeakable tragedy we are just beginning to process and the immense trauma and grief we’re all experiencing has left us all reeling and in shock.” He later said “the rollercoaster of emotions we are all feeling is a normal response to crisis. Our community is experiencing pain and suffering, and many are expressing understandable anger and frustration (Donnelly, Jr., 2021a, para. 4).” In his first statement following the crisis, Throne (2021a) directly acknowledged that “we have parents that sent their kids to school two days ago, and they’re never coming home. I can’t imagine...” while openly crying. In further recognition of the exceptional pain among those who had lost a loved one, references to the victims were accompanied by calls for support, thoughts, and prayers (Throne, 2021a; 2021b, 2021i; Donnelly, Jr., 2021c; Wolf, 2022a). On numerous occasions, officials directly told students that they were loved (Throne, 2021a; 2021c; Wolf, 2022a), adding to the level of personal compassion in OCS’ communications. In openly and authentically expressing a shared sense of anger and sadness, OCS’ representatives put

themselves in the position of their stakeholders (CDC, 2018) and worked to create conditions that reduced anger and supported recovery (Ulmer et al., 2019; Peterson & Silver, 2015).

What was not done well?

In the aftermath of the shooting, OCS and its representatives routinely referenced the four lives lost (OCS, 2021c; OCS, 2021e; Throne, 2021a) without specifically naming the victims. However, OHS's basketball and football programs posted social media tributes to individual students on their teams who had lost their lives (OHS Women's Basketball, 2021; Oxford Football, 2021). The lack of centralized recognition of all victims could be perceived as unfair, insensitive, or disrespectful when considered in the context of the OCS affiliates' communications. Further, the names, photographs, and personal stories of the four victims were widely available on national (Albeck-Ripka & Kasakove, 2021; Ebrahimji & Zdanowicz, 2021) and local (Wisely et al., 2021; Rahal, 2021) media, with apparent consent from their families.

How can communications be approved for the next crisis?

OCS and its representatives generally excelled in expressing empathy. Early and consistent recognition of the crisis' impact, including the loss of life, injury, and trauma, should be continued as a means of building trust and promoting healing through empathy (Peterson & Silver, 2015). OCS should also continue to prioritize the comprehensive wellbeing of its community, and frame the natural postcrisis feelings of loss, anger, and uncertainty as a shared experience. Most importantly, OCS should continue communicating with vulnerability, honesty, and compassion (CDC, 2018). OCS's expressions of empathy could have been enhanced by a single message naming and paying tribute to all four of the shooting victims equally, rather than remaining silent of these specifics and allowing inconsistent messaging from affiliates.

Best Practice: Promote healing and restore routine at school (National Association of School Psychologists, 2018).

Best Practice Defined: According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2018), crisis responders should consider both the potential for immediate and long-term trauma after a school shooting. A district should offer immediate grief and trauma counseling for students and staff (NASP, 2018), and be cognizant of the expectations placed on staff to support students before they have had counseling (Alexander, 2021). The NASP (2018) recommends returning to school and routines as soon as possible — while allowing for community building in place of rigorous academics — to reduce traumatic stress and rebuild a sense of security and stability (NASP, 2018). Memorials and tributes can help bring a community together and offer a sense of closure, but should be crafted with stakeholder input (NASP, 2018). In place-based crises, like a school shooting, special consideration should be given to the role the building where a crisis occurred may play in community healing (Wombacher et al., 2017).

What was communicated:

1. OCS implemented a phased return to school buildings and athletics postcrisis.

All district schools were closed the week following the shooting (OCS, 2021c). Elementary and middle school students began a phased return on December 10, 2021 (Throne, 2021c). OHS students returned to a hybrid schedule of remote learning and classes at the middle school on

January 10, 2022 (Throne, 2022d), before returning to classes at OHS on January 24, 2022 (Throne, 2022f).

“Our plan is to move slowly and gradually, balancing social and emotional needs with some low-stress academics. Some children rely on academics as a tool to create familiarity and normalcy...The “soft reopening” of schools will include law enforcement presence as well as the presence of trained clinicians and counselors who will be on-site and visible to support our students and our staff (Throne, 2021c).”

“There is broad agreement that it is vital to the well-being and mental health of our students and staff to come back to a learning environment as soon as possible (Throne, 2021b, para. 1).”

OCS resumed athletics on December 13, 2021:

“The return of athletics is a symbol of our community coming together and embarking on the long journey of healing we are all experiencing. This is an opportunity for our student athletes and greater Oxford community to return to a sense of normalcy (Throne, 2021h, para. 1).”

Staff returned several days ahead of students for trauma response training:

“Our staff is undergoing trauma-response training to be as prepared as possible to welcome our students back. They are using the best practices and data from trauma specialists and crisis response experts who have helped in our planning and training. (Throne, 2021e, para. 8).”

2. OCS encouraged participation in vigils, funerals, and community healing events.

The Oxford DDA and Oxford Bank organized a candlelight vigil in downtown Oxford (OCS, 2021g), and the community was encouraged to attend funerals for the victims:

“We’re going to be having numerous funerals over the course of the next 4-5 days. I want to allow the opportunity to be with the kids, to be with the parents, to be with one another (Throne, 2021a).”

OHS students were invited for casual social events at Oxford Elementary School (OCS, 2021i; Wolf, 2021b), Top Golf (Wolf, 2021b), and at OCS’s Legacy Center (Wolf, 2021c):

“...seeing many of you at our various community events has helped in the healing process. It’s been healing and helpful to share stories, cry together, give hugs and just be together. We plan to create many opportunities to keep connected as we work through this traumatic event (Wolf, 2021a).”

“We have heard countless times from mental health experts over the last two weeks that social interaction and human contact play critical roles in the grieving and healing process (Throne, 2021i, para. 9).”

3. OCS provided trauma intervention, grief counseling and mental health resources.

Crisis counselors were available daily beginning the day of the shooting (OCS, 2021c; 2021e). Grief counselors and trauma specialists were available by phone, text, virtually, or in-person at locations throughout community (OCS, 2021c; 2021d; 2021e; 2021g; 2021h; 2021i; Throne, 2021c; 2021f; 2021i; Wolf, 2021a; 2021b; 2022a). OCS provided long-term mental health resources (Throne, 2021f) and access to therapy dogs (Throne, 2021e; 2022e; Wolf, 2021c).

“This experience is more than anyone can be expected to handle on their own. Our grief counselors are here to help you, and we encourage you to talk to them. Counselors are available to any member of our community, as we are all experiencing this tragedy (Throne, 2021c, para. 4).”

“I strongly encourage our community members to connect with these professionally trained crisis response specialists, therapists and counselors. Having the appropriate support will play a critical role as our students, families, staff and entire Wildcat community begin the healing process and will be a key element of gradually reopening schools while supporting our staff, students and community (Donnelly, Jr., 2021a, para. 3).”

“Being strong means being resilient and courageous enough to seek help. We cannot encourage our Wildcats and their families enough to utilize the many resources and services for coping with trauma found on our website (Throne, 2021e, para. 13).”

“If you feel you or your child is now in need of long term, ongoing mental health support, you have options...(Throne, 2021f, para. 5).”

“And students, remember, being Oxford Strong means asking for help when you need it. Because we’re all going to need some help getting through this (Wolf, 2022a).”

4. OCS updated policies to increase security.

Following the shooting, OCS facilitated security presence at every building (OCS, 2022), announced a zero-tolerance violence policy (Donnelly, Jr. 2021c), required clear backpacks, and implemented new software filters for online safety (Throne, 2021j):

“Moving forward, we are enacting a zero-tolerance policy regarding violent content of any kind, whether in word, deed or on social media. In addition, students who engage in threatening behavior of any kind or are found with violent images, words or online activity either on or off school grounds, will be required to undergo a rigorous threat assessment with law enforcement personnel and mental health professionals consistent with state laws (Donnelly, Jr. 2021c, para. 6).”

“Secondary students will be required to use clear backpacks, which will be provided (Throne, 2021j, para. 5).”

“Every district building will have law enforcement and security firm personnel on site (OCS, 2022, para. 2).”

“The district uses [GoGuardian](#) software that filters incoming web content to any of our district accounts. This software helps protect the online safety of our students, families and staff. [Gaggle](#) software has been activated to help manage student online safety on school-provided accounts. This software manages all outgoing content from students and staff, and flags any concerning images, links to websites and shared items from Google Drive for our technology safety and security team. The software allows the district to work with law enforcement to help ensure any potential online issues, threats or emergencies are immediately addressed (Throne, 2021j, para. 9).”

5. OHS was renovated after the shooting.

“As our school community re-enters our high school for the first time since November 30, you will notice the calming new paint colors and wall graphics, new tile around the classroom entries, drywalled ceilings, and new carpet. With all that is new in the halls and the fact that the lockers will not be in use at this time, it was recommended by trauma experts that loving sentiments be added to the lockers. Our middle school students have created hearts with handwritten, heartfelt messages of love and encouragement and our elementary students have hand-crafted snowflakes to show their love and support to hang on all of the OHS lockers (Throne, 2022f, para. 6).”

“We’ve been through so much to get to this moment. We’ve been grieving together. We’ve been praying together. We’ve attended funerals, vigils, and memorials. We have been absolutely heartbroken. And we’ve been angry. Yet, we’ve been determined to carry on. And I am so proud to say that we are reopening our high school Monday, January 24 and we are reclaiming our high school back (Wolf, 2022a).”

Special resources were provided for OHS families, including open house opportunities to walk through the space privately or with a trauma specialist ahead of the students’ return:

“This week a new step in our healing journey will be taken. After thousands of hours of work from construction crews, mental health experts, interior and graphic designers, and school administration, Oxford High School is opening its doors once again. To help prepare for this next step, trauma specialist Dr. Henry will be doing an in-person presentation, “Being present as your children return to the high school” for OHS parents in the Commons Area at Oxford Middle School on Wednesday, January 19 at 7 p.m. (Throne, 2022f, para. 1).”

5. OCS shared its intention to create a permanent memorial.

The temporary memorial outside of OHS was removed, with advanced notice, ahead of the building's reopening and OCS announced plans for a forthcoming permanent memorial:

“The families of our lost and injured Wildcats will be given the opportunity over the next few days to choose items they wish to take home with them. All other items and signs will be collected and stored until long-term memorial plans are made. We have had the temporary memorial professionally 3-D scanned. We will soon begin to plan for a permanent memorial to honor the beautiful lives that have been lost. This will be a long and well thought out process. It will first begin with consulting the families of the victims and discussing their wishes. Then, a committee of students, staff, and parents will be created to begin this planning (Throne, 2021i, para. 2).”

What was done well?

OCS's communications excelled in promoting healing and supporting a sense of security among students and their families as the district reopened schools. Providing counseling services in-person, online, and by phone also meets the CDC's (2018) recommendation that an organization be aware of its community's access to information and use multiple channels and repeated messaging to provide resources. OCS and its representatives urged the community to take advantage of counseling services, and made coordinated efforts to normalize getting help. This effort help is exemplified in Throne's (2021e, para. 13) statement that, “being strong means being resilient and courageous enough to seek help,” and in Wolf's (2022a) statement that, “being Oxford Strong means asking for help when you need it. Because we're all going to need some help getting through this.” This framing of mental health aligns with recommendations from the NASP (2018) that students, especially adolescents, should be encouraged to use available resources because of potential stigmas and social concerns that might prevent them from seeking help postcrisis.

Further, OCS promoted participation in vigils and community events focused on socialization, which is cited by the NASP (2018) as a critical element in postcrisis healing. This is apparent in Throne's (2021i, para 9) assessment that “social interaction and human contact play critical roles in the grieving and healing process,” and Wolf's (2022a) observation that, “...seeing many of you at our various community events has helped in the healing process. It's been healing and helpful to share stories, cry together, give hugs and just be together.”

Also in line with best practices, OCS communicated a phased re-entry to school as soon as possible postcrisis with prioritization on routine and community over rigorous academics (NASP, 2018). OCS announced that schools would be closed for the week of and after the crisis, but that a phased return would begin the following week. Throne (2021c, para. 2) outlined the logic in a soft return to learning, explaining, “Our plan is to move slowly and gradually, balancing social and emotional needs with some low-stress academics. Some children rely on academics as a tool to create familiarity and normalcy.” Additionally, OCS's celebration of its return to athletics as an “opportunity for our student athletes and greater Oxford community to return to a sense of normalcy (Throne, 2021h, para. 1)” aligns with the best practices emphasizing socialization and community as part of a post-shooting return (NASP, 2018).

Communications related to the renovation of OHS align with findings that suggest the physical space where a crisis occurred can play a powerful role in healing (Wombacher et al., 2017). In decorating lockers with “handwritten, heartfelt messages of love and encouragement (Throne, 2022f, para. 6” and framing the reopening of OHS in the context of “reclaiming our

high school back” (Wolf, 2022a), OCS gave greater rhetorical meaning to the renovated building (Wombacher et al., 2017). Additionally, Throne’s (2021i) description of the he district’s intentions to create a permanent memorial as “a long and well thought out process” that would begin after “consulting the families of the victims and discussing their wishes” and assembling a “committee of students, staff, and parents,” (Throne, 2021i, para. 2), aligns with the NASP’s (2018) recommendation to directly involve students and staff in memorial planning.

What was not done well?

While a robust suite of services was provided by OCS, it was not clearly communicated how staff and administration were expected to balance their own needs and the expectation that they be prepared to support students’ needs postcrisis. The NASP (2018) cites that including teachers, staff, and administrative leaders, are frequently called upon to serve as trauma counselors for students with little training, and without regard to their own trauma. Throne (2021e, para. 8) noted that, “Our staff is undergoing trauma-response training to be as prepared as possible to welcome our students back. They are using the best practices and data from trauma specialists and crisis response experts who have helped in our planning and training. We will continue to have professionally trained trauma specialists available at every building for students and staff.” This message does not provide specific information about how staff are expected to both receive and administer trauma-response services at the same time, and could be perceived as a slight to staff who may not be fully supported in their needs before being asked to provide trauma support for students.

How can communications be improved next time?

Future communications should continue the emphasis on community, socialization, and routine in the healing process. An opportunity for improvement would have been to promote the use of trauma response services to staff and other adults in the community ahead of the expectation that they be immediately trained to support students’ needs without first addressing their own. For example, OCS could have communicated that, “Our schools will be closed the remainder of the week. All personnel are encouraged to meet with trauma response specialists and grief counselors at the community center. Training will be provided in the future to help support our students, but we want you to take care of yourselves first.”

Best Practice: Collaborate with internal and external stakeholders (CDC, 2014a).

Best Practice Defined: In responding to a crisis, an organization should consider the interests and challenges of its various stakeholders, which can include both internal and external publics (Ulmer et al., 2019). Listening to stakeholders is a crucial part of postcrisis communication, and stakeholders should be asked for input (Ulmer et al., 2019). Collaboration with stakeholders – which include an organization’s internal audience as well as law enforcement, government agencies, health professionals, local businesses and organizations, and media (CDC, 2014a) who have an interest in the crisis and its resolution. An organization should consider the perspectives of its stakeholders and leverage prior goodwill to engage publics in supporting collaborative crisis response that is grounded in the support of subject matter experts and community feedback (Ulmer et al., 2019; CDC, 2014a). While research continues to examine the role of media in covering school shootings and its potential effects to perpetuate future shootings (Dahmen, 2018;

Kissner, 2015; Towers et al., 2015), the CDC (2014a; 2014b) notes that the media are an important stakeholder in sharing accurate, timely information.

What was communicated?

1. OCS worked collaboratively with law enforcement.

The district worked closely with the Oakland County Sheriff's Department and the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office:

"...we have been and will continue to be fully cooperative with the Oakland County Sheriff's Office and Oakland County Prosecutor's Office with their investigation (Throne, 2021d, para. 2)."

"The County Prosecutor has asked that the school district not unduly comment upon the details surrounding the case in order to avoid any interference with the criminal proceedings. Their efforts to seek justice for the victims of these criminal acts takes priority at this time (Throne, 2022h, para. 12)."

2. OCS sought the expertise of mental health and trauma specialists, as well as other school communities who experienced similar crises.

"Through a partnership with the Oakland County Health Division and Oakland Community Health Network, we will provide opportunities for community mental health support for all Oxford residents, students, and families. These services will be available at the Legacy Center, 925 N. Lapeer Road, Oxford, MI 48371. If you need support and do not want to attend one of these sessions, you can always access support by using the hotlines, 1.800.231.1127 or 1.844.446.4225 (Throne, 2021i, para. 7)."

"We have also sought advice and counsel from school leaders and families who have been through similar tragedies in other states (Throne, 2021c, para. 1)."

"As our high school welcomes students back to the building on Monday, trauma specialist Dr. James Henry, along with those from other schools that have gone through similar situations, have advised us that the temporary memorial should not be there when our students return to campus in order to further their healing process (Throne, 2022i, para. 1)."

3. OCS sought input from internal stakeholders, and made decisions based on feedback.

The district invited feedback through a variety of channels:

"For the past two weeks, a dedicated team of school employees and district staff has attempted to personally contact the families of all 1,787 Oxford High School students. These personal, one-on-one calls are part of our continued commitment to engaging our families and listening to them as we plan our slow and safe return to school."

We believe input from our parents, families, students and staff will be critical to moving forward together. Below you will find a link to a wellness survey we are asking our families to complete so that we may best serve those needing professionally trained crisis counselors, trauma therapists or mental health support. Additionally, we continue to ask for feedback and input from our families and staff through the oxfordstrong@oxfordschools.org email. We encourage you to please take the time to share your thoughts, ideas, feelings and concerns with us. We truly value and depend on your feedback to make our return to school a success (OCS, 2021j, para. 1)."

"Please do not hesitate to contact us at oxfordstrong@oxfordschools.org with questions, concerns, and other feedback. We truly appreciate your feedback and are receiving, reading, and taking all of your messages into sincere consideration (Throne, 2021j, para. 17)."

"...it's important to listen to our families and garner their feedback and input as we carefully craft a plan to slowly and safely return to school. To that end, we are holding two telephone town hall meetings to share information on student safety, mental health supports and the return to school for high school students, and to answer your questions. We are also using these town halls to listen to your ideas and concerns and gather feedback (Throne, 2022b, para. 1-2)."

"Thank you to everyone who participated in our tele-town halls this week...Be assured, we very much value and are taking into account all of the information, feedback and questions you have shared. We will only grow stronger through this by working together (Throne, 2022e, para. 2)."

The district implemented changes in its crisis response plans based on stakeholder feedback:

"After yesterday's open house schedule was sent out to our district families, we have received concerns from our high school parents and students regarding the Sunday open house for our community...Right now, our first and foremost priority is the emotional well-being, safety and healing of our Oxford High School students. The cries of worry and concern from our high school families over hosting the community open house take precedence over the requests we have received to hold it. At this time, we must prioritize our high school students' needs with the utmost compassion. Therefore, we have decided this is not the right time to open our high school academic halls beyond our current OHS families and staff and are canceling Sunday's invitation (Throne, 2022g, para. 1)."

"As we continue to gather feedback from our school community, we want to let you know we heard from our students and made an adjustment to remove one-way hallway traffic throughout the day. We are so appreciative to them for speaking up and helping us facilitate their safe and successful return to the high school. This week, Mr. Wolf will begin visiting several student groups to gather more formal input and feedback (Throne, 2022j, para. 2)."

4. OCS welcomed support from local businesses and organizations.

“Oxford Bank, Oxford Community Schools and the Oxford DDA have established the “Oxford Community Memorial and Victims Fund” to accept donations for their families and our community. The Village of Oxford and Oxford DDA will administer all funds in partnership with Oxford Community Schools. Genisys Credit Union has also set up an account called Oxford Strong. This account will be used to accept donations for the families impacted by the shootings (OCS, 2021f, para. 2).”

“...the Oxford DDA and Oxford Bank have organized a candlelight vigil on Friday, December 3 at 7:00 pm in downtown Oxford (OCS, 2021g, para. 1).”

“On Monday, December 13, Top Golf will host 400 high school students at their facility in Auburn Hills for free food and play. We are grateful for their support and willingness to allow our OHS students to gather at their facility and enjoy each other’s company (Wolf, 2021b, para. 7).”

“Dozens of therapy dogs, including a whole fleet of puppies-in-training from Leader Dogs, were there for our Wildcats (Throne, 2022j, para. 1).”

5. OCS directly addressed the media.

“We’ve heard loud and clear from our families that you do not want media on our property. And so we’ve asked the media not to be on school grounds until further notice (Wolf, 2022a).”

“Finally, we want to thank the media outlets for giving our students and staff the privacy and space they requested by keeping their distance from our campuses today. It is appreciated (Throne, 2022j, para. 4).”

6. OCS did not elaborate on collaboration with government officials.

Throne briefly referenced a conversation with Governor Gretchen Whitmer once:

“I personally spoke with the governor today, and she has told me that she will do everything in her power to open up the supply chains to get us the resources we need to begin to put this building back in order (Throne, 2021a).”

What was done well?

OCS was especially effective in seeking feedback and listening to its internal stakeholders through phone, email, and town hall events, in alignment with best practices that suggest the importance of such outreach and open lines of communication (CDC, 2014a). OCS’ (2021j, para. 1) attempt “to personally contact the families of all 1,787 Oxford High School students” through “personal, one-on-one calls” showed a strong awareness that some stakeholders were more directly affected than others (CDC, 2014a). In telling families “we truly

value and depend on your feedback (OCS, 2021j, para. 1)” and “we truly appreciate your feedback and receiving, reading, and taking all of your messages into sincere consideration (Throne, 2021j, para. 17),” OCS expressed sincere value for stakeholders’ needs (CDC, 2014a).

Most importantly, OCS used provided feedback from stakeholders in informing and adjusting its crisis response. In canceling the scheduled community open house event at OHS following concern from high school students and their families because “the cries of worry and concern from our high school families take precedence (Throne, 2022g, para. 1)” and implementing a change in hallway traffic protocol after thanking students for “speaking up and helping us facilitate their safe and successful return (Throne, 2022j, para. 2),” OCS showed students and their families that their input mattered. In promising to “visit several student groups to gather more formal input and feedback (Throne, 2022j, para. 2),” OCS signaled its ongoing commitment to working with students to meet their evolving needs postcrisis (CDC, 2014a).

Additionally, the district was effective in working with the external stakeholders in law enforcement and local businesses and organizations, including Leader Dogs for the Blind (Throne, 2022j), Top Golf (Wolf, 2021b), Oxford Bank, Genisys Credit Union, and the Oxford Downtown Development Authority (OCS, 2021f), signaling an understanding that the crisis and its resolution were of community impact and interest (CDC, 2014a).

What was not done well?

OCS was not particularly effective in working with government officials or the media. In general, it’s not conducive to decline assistance or ostracize any stakeholder (CDC, 2014a). While Throne (2021a) did briefly mention a conversation with Governor Whitmer about supply chain issues, OCS did not otherwise openly engage with government officials. The district’s refusal to accept assistance from the Michigan Attorney General in its postcrisis review and instead rely upon an independent security firm — which OCS did not address in its communications, but was covered by the media (Howard, 2021; Snell, 2021) — could potentially be interpreted as a defensive attempt to withhold information. The CDC (2014a) suggests that organizations should avoid behavior that could be interpreted as paternalistic or arrogant.

In prioritizing the needs of internal stakeholders and asking the media “to not to be on school grounds until further notice (Wolf, 2022a),” OCS treated the media as an adversary rather than a partner, directly opposing CDC (2014b) recommendations. Although Throne (2022j, para. 4) thanked the media for “giving our students and staff the privacy and space they requested,” the district did not provide updates tailored for media consumption. As noted by the CDC (2014b), the district’s hands-off approach with the media did not prevent news coverage of the crisis, but rather contributed to a largely one-sided public narrative in which OCS was forced to refute claims and defend its actions (Altavena & Baldas, 2022).

How can communications be improved for the next crisis?

In the future, OCS should balance the needs of its internal and external stakeholders and foster more collaboration with media and governmental agencies. While OCS was strategic in seeking to shield students returning to school postcrisis from the media to prevent further trauma (Dahmen, 2018; Kissner, 2015; Towers et al., 2015), the district could have issued press statements or hosted a press conference along with a media-only tour of the renovated OHS to more broadly share updates and answer questions. While it was important to respect the needs of internal stakeholders, the media plays a key role in sharing updates about the crises’ resolution

with the broader community (CDC, 2014a). The media could have been used as a strategic partner to inform the community and proactively address rumors and correct misinformation.

Further, OCS should reconsider collaboration and cooperation with the Michigan Attorney General on her office's investigation. Conveying to stakeholders – internally and externally – that an organization is pursuing every possible avenue to address uncertainty and prevent future crises is key to an effective response strategy (CDC, 2014a). They might consider a public statement announcing a change of heart: “We’ve reconsidered Attorney General Nessel’s offer to lead an investigation into the shooting. While we are confident in the ongoing independent review, our community deserves transparency and as complete a picture as possible. We were wrong to turn down help and did so in the overwhelming days immediately following the tragedy. We look forward cooperating fully with the Attorney General to better understand the events leading up to and on November 30, and thank her office for their collaboration.”

Best Practice: Leadership should be visible and promote strength and unity (Ulmer et al., 2019).

Best Practice Defined: During and after a crisis, leadership should be visible, engaged, and empathetic (Ulmer et al., 2019). Further, effective leadership should build cooperation following a crisis and work to create consensus (Ulmer et al., 2019). After a school shooting, leadership that projects the appearance of strength postcrisis can serve as a representation of the school’s collective strength and unity for students, staff, and parents whose confidence and feelings of security have been shaken (Fein & Isaacson, 2009).

What was communicated?

1. OCS’ leadership shared statements of community pride, unity, and resilience.

“We’re heartened by the strength and resilience of our community and I know, working together we can emerge from this terrible tragedy stronger (Throne, 2021c).”

“It’s never been more important for our entire Wildcat community to be united and support one another. We’ve seen what happens when our community comes together, and we remain Oxford StrOng...Our strong community spirit and compassion is our light in this time of darkness (Donnelly, Jr., 2021a, para. 4).”

“...throughout the last several weeks, we’ve been reminded again and again of one important fact: our community is strong. And when we stick together, we are incredibly strong. That has never been more true than in the last two months (Wolf, 2022a).”

“For the past seven weeks, we have lived by the mantra “Together we are Oxford Strong.” We have watched as our community and beyond have come together to love one another and provide each other with strength and support. Truly, the kind words, actions, and generous gifts are a constant reminder of all that is good and right in our world. We have heard from those watching from outside of our community how

unique Oxford is and how the love and support we shower one another with is inspiring. Let this encourage you and strengthen you as we take this next step in our healing process (Throne, 2022f, para. 7)."

2. OCS's leadership positioned the crisis as an opportunity to grow and looked to the future.

"I want you to know that you're loved, that these events will not define us... Today may be a dark day in Oxford, but it's still a great day to be a Wildcat (Throne, 2021a)."

"The outpouring of support from our community, the state and the world has helped us pull through these dark and difficult days and has made me even more determined that we will not let this horrific tragedy define us. We will continue on our healing journey together. We will get through this together. And we will emerge stronger than we ever thought possible (Throne, 2021i, para. 11)."

"Students, you have been filling us up with the tremendous amount of love and a tremendous amount of hope. We can't wait to continue pouring that right back into you. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." And students, we love you. We cannot wait to see you on Monday, and it's going to be a great day to be a Wildcat because we're Oxford Strong (Wolf, 2022a)."

3. OCS' leadership was visible and present.

Leadership was physically present at the crisis site, and at other prominent locations known and accessible to the community. Throne delivered his first message postcrisis from OHS, and Donnelly, Jr. delivered his oral message from the OCS' Legacy Center:

"It's currently 4:35 on December 2. I am recording this in our performing arts center lobby at our high school...(Throne, 2021a)."

"There are counselors here at the Legacy Center, that's where I'm at right now. Along these walls, there are students' notes – if you haven't been here, you've got to come, bring your family. We've got counselors, pastors, people who care, roaming through this building center... (Donnelly, Jr., 2021b)."

Throne delayed his retirement to provide consistent leadership through the crisis:

"In recent days, I have been discussing my planned retirement with my family, my pastor, and my Board and have made the decision to hit pause on my planned retirement to avoid adding additional uncertainty or disruption to our school community, which has suffered so much. I remain solely focused on responding to this tragedy, and I am committed to making sure our students, families, and staff are

fully supported during this difficult time for our community. Now is simply not the right time for me to leave (Throne, 2021g, para. 3)."

What was done well?

OCS' leadership was effective in projecting community strength and unity through rhetoric. The phrase "Oxford Strong" was incorporated into every message, usually as a signature send-off, beginning immediately after the crisis (Throne, 2021b) and continuing throughout the crisis. It was also used in oral messages, in which Donnelly, Jr. (2021a, para. 4) stated, "we remain Oxford Strong," and Throne (2022f, para. 7) wrote, "together we are Oxford Strong." This sentiment was also shared by Wolf (2022a), who in his message ahead of the OHS students' return to classes said, "it's going to be a great day to be a Wildcat because we're Oxford Strong." This consistent, optimistic messaging from leadership is exemplary in its strategy to create unity postcrisis to facilitate healing (Ulmer et al., 2019). When delivered with confidence and authority by various OCS leaders, these sentiments celebrating strength leveraged school spirit to represent the collective strength of the community, a tactic shown to aid in healing after school shootings (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). Leaders' ability to position the shooting as an opportunity for growth, including Throne's (2021i, para. 11) claim that "...we will not let this horrific tragedy define us. We will continue on our healing journey together. We will get through this together. And we will emerge stronger than we ever thought possible," contributed to the potential for renewal and healing postcrisis (Ulmer et al., 2019).

Their physical presence of Donnelly, Jr. and Throne at community events and in delivering video messages from recognizable school properties (Throne, 2021a; Donnelly, Jr. 2021b) served to express their active engagement in the crisis, empathy, and their availability to stakeholders (Ulmer et al., 2019). Throne's (2021g, para. 3) decision to delay his retirement, with the explanation that his intent was "to avoid adding additional uncertainty or disruption to our school community, which has suffered so much" and the declaration that "now is simply not the right time for me to leave," conveyed to his commitment to seeing OCS through the crisis.

What was not done well?

While leadership was visible at the onset of the crisis, including Throne's (2021a) statement at OHS on December 2, 2021 and Donnelly Jr.'s statement from the OCS Legacy Center on December 8, 2021, OCS' representatives could have had a stronger visible presence as the crisis response progressed. Relying heavily on written messages as the response progressed could be perceived by some stakeholders as an attempt to "hide" as scrutiny about the districts' handling of the crisis increased. Leaders who do not act to take responsibility can create the impression that they don't care about those who have been harmed, and are primarily concerned about avoiding blame (Ulmer et al., 2019).

How can communication be approved for the next crisis?

In the future, OCS' leaders should continue to build community through messaging that leverages school spirit to emphasize resilience and strength. Leaders should aim to be visible throughout a crisis, and might consider filming further video updates from the remodeled OHS to supplement written messages. For example, leadership could film a joint video update from OHS, showing both their physical presence on-site and highlighting safety protocols at the renovated school.

Summary

In his first message following the shooting, Throne (2021a) expressed a universal truth for those working in education when he said, “While we had hoped that never in a million years we would have to pull this game plan out, we did.” Acts of violence are increasingly common in public spaces, including schools, and an effective crisis response needs to include a plan for both the immediate threat and communications.

In general, the district excelled in some respects and left room for improvement in others. OCS was effective in expressing empathy, promoting healing, and creating unity through leadership. The district made thoughtful changes to its policies and OHS, while leveraging school spirit to build community resilience. OCS was less effective in proactively addressing rumors and providing timely information, and could have improved its collaboration with the media and government agencies. When combined, the district’s hands-off media approach, isolationist stance on the post-shooting investigation, and delayed distribution of detailed information created opportunities for speculation and rumors, ultimately placing OCS in a defensive or reactionary position. In spite of its shortcomings with external stakeholders, OCS remained true to its declared prioritization of the “physical and emotional safety (Wolf, 2022a)” in its messaging.

Moving forward, OCS may still implement changes or improvements to its crisis communications as investigations related to the shooting are completed and trails and litigation continue to play out in the media. In addition to the specific recommendations outlined in this report, OCS may also consider building its social media presence and using those channels in future communications strategies. Social media enables two-way engagement and can be used to refute misinformation quickly and broadly (CDC, 2014c).

While every crisis — and certainly every active shooting incident — is different, the tragedy at OHS can serve as a learning opportunity for OCS and other schools. Crisis response following an intentional traumatic, place-based incident in which the majority of those affected are adolescents presents unique communications challenges. Although OCS’ response was not always aligned with best practices, they achieved one of the most important crisis goals of communicating with compassion and empathy.

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