

## **PROTECTING A SCHOOL'S REPUTATION**

### **Reputation Risk Management Strategies for Heads of Independent Schools**

- ✓ Maintain a policy of “bad news first.” Make it safe for students and faculty to tell you what’s really going on.
- ✓ Make a list of all the things that could go wrong. Meet regularly with key staff to review and add to the list. Read the papers, watch television news, and talk to your peers – what has gone wrong at other schools should be on *your* list.
- ✓ For each thing that could go wrong, make a corresponding list of what you do right. This becomes your defense, and the basis for your key messages in a time of crisis. Up to date statistics and fact sheets that reflect your track record in key areas (e.g. financial aid, diversity, academic achievement, fundraising, and faculty hiring) demonstrate that you’re on the ball.
- ✓ Make sure your key constituents know what you do right. Keep them informed of your safeguards, policies, and procedures.
- ✓ Adopt a press policy to guide students and faculty who may be questioned by the press (if you don’t have one already) and make sure students, parents, faculty members, and trustees know what it says. Have it ready for any reporter who shows up at your door. A good press policy protects not only the school – but the students as well.
- ✓ Maintain good relations with state regulators, local selectmen, and police and fire officials. Make sure they know you support their efforts (by involving the school in community activities) and respect their regulations. Make sure all health/safety codes are met and related inspections are up to date. In a time of crisis, the press will look for them to pile on. You may need these people to comment positively about the way you manage your school – and this relationship building will give them reason to want to help you.
- ✓ Line up parents and other third parties who would be willing to go to bat for you in a public way (e.g. be quoted in newspapers, write letters to the editor). Third party endorsements and testimonials are critical.
- ✓ Give reporters reason to like you. Invite those who cover your school to meet with you now and then - one on one or as a group. Include the editor of your own student newspaper. Tell them what you’re up to. Find out what they care about. Build a relationship and a reservoir of goodwill with each of them.
- ✓ Decide who your spokesperson will be in a time of crisis and speak with that one voice. Your spokesperson shouldn’t be your school head – nor should it be your school’s attorney. It shouldn’t be anyone who might be perceived to be shifting blame or protecting his or her own reputation in the context of a firestorm. Line up a professionally trained reputation risk manager to protect you, in the same way that you have an insurance policy in place to cover liability or damage to school property. Keep that person informed of developments, what you do right, what questions have been raised, what disciplinary actions have come down and where trouble might be brewing.