



Clovis Unified School District

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Clovis Unified Case Study
School Trauma
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The District: Clovis Unified School District is a high performing suburban school district of approximately 39,000 students and 5,000 full- and part-time employees. The district's student population is 46.6% white, 31.6% Hispanic, 3.3% African American and 12.8% Asian. Approximately 32% of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, with eleven schools designated as Title I schools.

The school district enjoys an overall positive relationship with its community, and has a number of pre-established methods to involve parents in their child's education. While the organization is large, efforts are continually underway to create personalized environments on our campuses. Annual student, parent and staff surveys historically show a high degree of trust and confidence in the district by all three of these groups.

Because of the 198 square mile size of the district, it encompasses three law enforcement jurisdictions (Fresno and Clovis city police and Fresno County Sheriff) and portions of the City of Clovis, City of Fresno, the rural communities of Millerton and Friant, and unincorporated portions of the County of Fresno. A mid-sized media market, Clovis Unified is covered by English, Hmong and Spanish daily and weekly print newspapers, and multiple broadcast stations.

The Situation: The January 27 arrest of a second grade teacher in Clovis Unified presented the district's leadership team with a school's worst nightmare: compelling evidence supporting more than 40 state and federal charges involving sexual abuse of a student initiated by a teacher, in the classroom, during the school day. Compounding the challenge facing the district's leadership was the fact that the arrested teacher's spouse is a principal of a neighboring school with three students from the family attending district schools. Not only was one school community directly and heavily involved, but a second school community was affected by the indefinite absence of its principal, and a third school was impacted as related to supporting children of the affected family.

The Leadership Challenge: The public release of specific and graphic details of the federal investigation by local media further compounded the district's challenge to preserve and repair the trust and confidence of its school communities, while at the same time minimizing the impact on staff morale as they were placed under the public microscope.

The Clovis Unified Approach: Birds, when flying in mild weather, will allow the up- and down-drafts of air to carry them where they may, with little care for their final destination. However, when facing a storm, birds instinctively turn and face into gale force winds. This action, while seemingly the harder path to follow, allows the birds to be carried up and over a storm, and keeps them on course to reach their planned destination. This is a great illustration of Clovis Unified's leadership decisions in the face of the above-described crisis.

The Superintendent, working closely with law enforcements, our legal counsel and other school and district leaders, intentionally chose to fly Clovis Unified into the storm of public scrutiny, but well-prepared with a solid plan of action and a thorough communication plan that involved every level of our organization. Following is a summary of the actions taken by the District in the hours, days and weeks following our initial meeting with police to learn of the planned arrest of our second grade teacher on what later became 45 state and federal charges involving the on-going sexual molestation and exploitation of a 7-year-old student in his classroom.



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Friday Night:

- 6:00 – 8:00 p.m. District Superintendent, Executive Cabinet, Area Superintendent and Principal met with Chief of Police and investigating officers. Police were willing to share details of the investigation and plans for an arrest. Discussion of timeline of events, arrest and public announcement occurred and it was at this time that the conscious decision was made to be transparent, do our best to deliver news of the situation ourselves vs. through the media and/or solely law enforcement, and that the district and Clovis PD would walk arm-in-arm through the aftermath of this arrest and its corresponding criminal charges.

Saturday:

- 8:00 -10:00 a.m. Met with police and district officials to develop strategies, timeline, plan for remainder of weekend and Monday morning when school re-opened; identified trusted messengers of key facts (e.g. law enforcement would speak to safety, district leadership to oversight and next steps for the classroom) developed media statements; community outreach plan.
- 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Refined strategies and involved all of Cabinet level leadership; began roll out of communication plan, discussed Monday morning staff meeting and messaging across the district; anticipated possible reactions/copycat reports and possible response process, outreach to all principals, directors and key support staff to attend afternoon meeting, development of presentation to leadership team, counseling plan, and script writing for use by leadership team, teachers, office staffs and school psychologists. Scheduled parent meeting for entire school community to occur Monday night and arranged additional staff support to be present at meeting and at start of school day for school primarily affected.
- 2:00 to 3:30 p.m. Breaking the news, sharing communication plan, finalizing media release with Clovis police personnel, sending media announcement, media began arriving at District Office for interviews, and staff finalized scripts for use at parent and staff meetings. This meeting allowed the district leadership team to work out logistical issues such as timing of routine deliveries to the affected schools that might be disrupted by the additional traffic around schools, possible technology support that would be needed, etc. The inclusion and attendance of front line clerical staff in this meeting was an intentional leadership decision designed to support and empower those employees who would be first on the phones and first in our school offices and lobbies. In essence, we wanted to bring everyone into the process in order to increase understanding on their part. As Michael Fullan wrote in *Motion Leadership*, “By taking the mystery out of complexity, [leaders] reassure people that progress is probable.” This was certainly the outcome we experienced as support staff went on to be effective communicators in the days to follow.
- 4:00 to 6:30 p.m. Called parents in room affected to break the news, and to invite to a parent-only meeting Sunday afternoon; called staff at schools affected with invitation to Sunday meeting (occurring before parent meeting in order to equip staff to support parents).

Sunday:

All meetings occurred with police officers in attendance as well as school psychologists and a clinical psychologist present, and involved to offer information and support.

- Throughout the day media coverage continued.
- Met first with staff at the school whose principal was affected.



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- Next met with staff at school affected. Discussed plans for Monday morning, provided resources for teachers to use with parents and students. Decision was made to relocate entire classroom affected, long-term substitute teacher was identified and assigned.
- Parent meeting with room affected, several teachers remained present for support. Introduced new teacher (also a parent at the school), answered questions, provided information from police department, superintendent and clinical psychologist.
- School leadership and volunteer teachers and custodians relocated the entire classroom of desks, student work, etc. in order that Monday morning would start fresh in a new classroom environment.

Monday:

- Before school, additional leadership presence at affected school to support team and to answer parent questions.
- All principals and departments met with their respective staffs to give brief summary of events and the district's planned actions, and to equip teachers with age-appropriate scripts to use with students.
- Media coverage continued, and challenges were raised by media about decision to bar media from parent meeting that night.
- Decision to move for dismissal of employee based on evidence released through court filings, call for special board meeting and other actions related to employee were decided on Monday as well. This decision was again based on the belief that true leadership in this situation required decisive and responsible action. This decision eventually resulted in the employee's dismissal some 30 days later.
- Parent meeting attended by 600 parents, district administration, police, school and clinical psychologist, and staff at the school primarily affected.

In the days and weeks that have followed, the district continued to be open and transparent with our community. Opportunities to address this situation were taken, and while media interest soon moved on, we recognize that our staff's and community's confidence remains shaken. The school principal and vice principal have stayed in close contact with their community, and in May will hold a follow up meeting with parents of the classroom impacted to touch bases. This informal meeting will include opportunities for parents to view student work, talk to the new teacher, and to learn of additional steps the district is taking to introduce curriculum that focuses on empowering communities and students to improve child safety.

After meeting with this group of parents, a school-wide letter will share updates with the entire parent and staff community.

Our choice to fly into the storm was intentional, and it revealed the strength of our organization's leaders. Not one of our leadership team hesitated when called in on a weekend to prepare for action, and each applied their area of expertise to identifying and addressing possible needs related to the crisis. Since January, we have closely examined attendance data (which showed attendance at the affected school remained high even as early as Monday following the teacher arrest), staff climate assessments (which remain as high as in year's past) and parent satisfaction survey results (which showed only 3% of parents rating the school poorly on safety, a 1.5% increase over the previous year). These data points, as well as the anecdotal feedback we have received across the community, affirm that our decisions were the right ones under the circumstances.



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Key Learnings

While the arrest of a teacher on such allegations is something we hope never to face again, as an organization we have learned much from the experience. First and foremost, the experience has reaffirmed our district-wide philosophy that trust is built over time, and that every day our work to be effective educators and to demonstrate integrity and transparency to our students and community is critical. This incident required our district to make a huge withdrawal in the “trust account” we have established with our community, and the fact that our additional leadership steps to be transparent in this situation were received in good faith by our community is in large part because we acted in a manner consistent with their previous experiences in Clovis Unified.

We have also seen that being the one to break your own bad news to people (staff, parents and the community at large), cannot be undervalued. It took a conscious decision on the part of our Superintendent, the Clovis Police Department and our top district leadership to work non-stop over the course of a weekend to prepare the organization top to bottom to address this situation. And, in the days that followed, to respond decisively and with confidence to our community’s questions.

In their book *Building Teams, Building People*, Thomas R. Harvey and Bonita Drolet wrote, “To build a strong organization, you start by building strong, powerful people.” Empowering our leaders to inform and equip their employees to meet the needs of their students and parents; our Governing Board with wise counsel on actions available to them regarding the disposition of the arrested employee; and the community with answers to their questions solidified our team. A message was clearly sent and received:

- To our site and department leaders that they were trusted enough to be bearers of the information;
- To our teachers that they played a key role in maintaining a calm and focused instructional environment and deserved to have a complete understanding of the situation;
- To our classified staff that we recognized the value of their role, and the need for a good flow of information in order that they could best complete their jobs;
- To our students that we understood they might have questions and that it was OK to ask those questions; and
- To our parent community that we understood the fears and concerns they would have over the incident and over the District’s ability to protect the safety of our students, and that they deserved answers.

Jim Collins, in his quintessential leadership book *Good to Great* describes a Level 5 leader as an individual who embodies traditional leadership qualities, but who also has mastered the dual responsibilities of being humble and willful enough to pursue the right course of action under any circumstances. That principle is what presented the overarching theme of Clovis Unified’s response to this crisis. We had to demonstrate the humility to accept what had been done to us and to our community while at the same time applying the will to withstand criticism, fault-finding and the emotional trauma generated by these events.