

Liability

Crisis Planning for Schools

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Abstract

Natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes, fires, and tornadoes, and violence can strike a community and its schools with little or no warning. Schools (and communities) need to be ready to handle crises, large and small, to keep children and staff out of harm's way and ready to learn and teach. This report provides a summary of the key elements of school crisis planning, as provided in *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*, a publication of the U.S. Department of Education.

Introduction

Natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes, fires, and tornadoes, can strike a community and its schools with little or no warning. School shootings, threatened or actual, while extremely rare, are horrific and chilling when they occur. The events of September 11, 2001 and subsequent anthrax scares ushered in a new age of terrorism.

When a crisis occurs, teachers and staff must know how to help their students through the crisis and return them home safely. Knowing what to do when faced with a crisis can be the difference between calm and chaos, between courage and fear, between life and death. There are thousands of fires in schools every year, yet there is minimal damage to life and property because staff and students are prepared. This preparedness needs to be extended to all risks schools face. Schools and communities need to be ready to handle crises, large and small, to keep children and staff out of harm's way and ready to learn and teach.

The U.S. Department of Education publishes a guide, *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* that is intended to give schools, districts, and communities the critical concepts and components of good crisis planning and to stimulate thinking about the crisis preparedness process.

Crises range in scope and intensity from incidents that directly or indirectly affect a single student to ones that impact the entire community. Crises can happen before, during, or after school and on or off school campuses. The definition of a crisis varies with the unique needs, resources, and assets of a school and community. Staff and students may be severely affected by an incident in another city or state; as examples, the events of Columbine and September 11 left the nation feeling vulnerable.

Merriam-Webster online dictionary's definition of a crisis is "a difficult or dangerous situation that needs serious attention." Additionally, Merriam-Webster notes that "crisis" comes from the Greek word meaning "decision." In essence, a crisis is a situation where schools could be faced with inadequate information, not enough time, and insufficient resources, but in which leaders must make one or many crucial decisions.

This report provides a summary of the key elements of school crisis planning, as provided in the *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*. Additional information on how to prepare a school or community for a crisis is available on the emergency preparedness website of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools at <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/crisisplanning.html>.

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Key Principles for Effective Crisis Planning

Crisis planning may seem overwhelming. Although it takes time and effort, it is manageable. The following principles are crucial to the planning process:

Effective crisis planning begins with leadership at the top. State and local leaders and school administrators must work together to make school crisis planning a priority. Top leadership helps set the policy agenda, secures funds, and brings the necessary people together across agencies. Other leadership also needs to be identified - the teacher who is well loved in her school, the county's favorite school resource officer, or the caring school nurse. Leaders at the grassroots level will help the community accept the planning process.

Crisis plans should not be developed in a vacuum. The plans are a natural extension of ongoing school and community efforts to create safe learning environments. Good planning can enhance all school functions. Needs assessments and other data should feed into a crisis plan. Crisis plans should address incidents that could occur inside school buildings, on school grounds, and in the community. Coordination will prevent duplication and mixed messages, as well as reduce burden on planners.

Schools and districts should open the channels of communication well before a crisis.

Relationships need to be built in advance so that emergency responders are familiar with a school. Relationships should be cultivated with city emergency managers, public works officials, and health and mental health professionals now, as well as with local media. It is important that they understand how the district and schools will respond in a crisis. Crisis plans should be developed in partnership with other community groups, including law enforcement, fire safety officials, emergency medical services, as well as health and mental health professionals. There is no need to reinvent the wheel - these groups know what to do in an emergency and can be helpful in the development of your plan. Get their help to develop a coordinated plan of response.

A common vocabulary is necessary. It is critical that school staff and emergency responders know each other's terminology - work with emergency responders to develop a common vocabulary. The words used to give directions for evacuation, lockdown, and other actions should be clear and not hazard specific. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recommends using plain language to announce the need for action (e.g., "evacuate" rather than "code blue"). Many districts note that with plain language everyone in the school building including new staff, substitute teachers, and visitors will know what type of response is called for. However, some districts have found it useful to use codes, but streamline them. Rather than a code for each type of incident, they use only one code for each type of response. With either approach, it is critical that terms and/or codes are used consistently across the district.

Schools should tailor district crisis plans to meet individual school needs. In fact, a plan should not be one document. It should be a series of documents targeted to various audiences. For example, a school could use detailed response guides for planners, flipcharts for teachers, a crisis response tool-box for administrators, and wallet cards containing evacuation routes for bus drivers. Plans should be age appropriate. Elementary school children will behave much differently in a crisis than high school students.

Plan for the diverse needs of children and staff. Special attention is needed for children with limited English proficiency, or children or staff with physical, sensory, motor, developmental, or mental challenges. Outreach documents for families may be needed in several languages.

Include all types of schools where appropriate. Be sure to include alternative, charter, and private schools in the planning process, as well as others who are involved with children before and after school.

Provide teachers and staff with ready access to the plan, so they can understand its components and act on them. People who have experienced a crisis often report that they go on "autopilot" during an

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incident. They need to know what to do in advance, not only to get them through an incident, but also to help alleviate panic and anxiety.

Training and practice are essential for the successful implementation of crisis plans. Most students and staff know what to do in case of a fire because the law requires them to participate in routine fire drills. But, would they know what to do in a different crisis? Many districts now require evacuation and lockdown drills in addition to state-mandated fire drills. Drills also allow a school to evaluate what works and what needs to be improved.

Crisis plans are living documents. Plans need to be reviewed and revised regularly. Analyzing how well a crisis plan worked in responding to an incident, whether a drill or a real event, is crucial. Documenting all actions taken during and after an event helps in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a plan - this information can be used to strengthen the plan.

Crisis Planning



Figure 1. Phases of Crisis Planning for Schools

One of the first steps in crisis planning is to select a crisis team. One of the key functions of this team is to identify the types of crises that may occur in the district and schools and define what events would activate the plan. The team may consider many factors, such as the school's ability to handle a situation with internal resources and its experience in responding to past events. Plans need to address a range of events and hazards caused both by nature and by people, such as natural disasters (i.e., earthquake, tornado, hurricane, flood); severe weather; fires; chemical or hazardous material spills; bus crashes; school shootings; bomb threats; medical emergencies; student or staff deaths (suicide, homicide, unintentional, or natural); and acts of terror or war.

A school crisis plan should address four major areas: prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Actions that schools should take under each of these areas are provided below.

Mitigation/Prevention



Figure 2. Crisis Planning Phase 1

Although schools have no control over some of the hazards that may impact them, such as earthquakes or plane crashes, they can take actions to minimize or mitigate the impact of such incidents. Schools in earthquake-prone areas can mitigate the impact of a possible earthquake by securing bookcases and training students and staff on what to do during tremors. Schools cannot always control fights, bomb threats, and school shootings. However, they can take actions to reduce the likelihood of such events. Schools may institute policies, implement violence prevention programs, and take other steps to improve the culture and climate of their campuses.

School safety and emergency management experts often use the terms prevention and mitigation differently. Crises experts encourage schools to consider the full range of what they can do to avoid crises (when possible) or lessen their impact. Assessing and addressing the safety and integrity of facilities (e.g., window seals, HVAC systems, building structure, etc.), security (e.g., functioning locks, controlled access to the school, etc.), and the culture and climate of schools through policy and curricula are all important for preventing and mitigating possible future crises.

Mitigation and prevention require taking inventory of the dangers in a school and community and identifying what to do to prevent and reduce injury and property damage. For example:

- Establishing access control procedures and providing IDs for students and staff might prevent a dangerous intruder from coming onto school grounds.
- Conducting hurricane drills can reduce injury to students and staff because they will know what to do to avoid harm. Also, schools in hurricane-prone areas can address structural weaknesses in their buildings.
- Planning responses to and training for incidents involving hazardous materials is important for schools near highways.

There are resources in every community that can help with this process. Firefighters, police, public works staff, facility managers, and the district's insurance representative can help conduct a hazard assessment. That information will be very useful in identifying problems that need to be addressed in the preparedness process. Emergency responders, public health agencies, and school nurses are other sources of help – for example, they can help develop plans for and provide training in medical triage and first aid.

Assessment

The following checklist provides an overview of the critical issues in mitigation/prevention:

- Connect with community emergency responders to identify local hazards.
- Review the last safety audit to examine school buildings and grounds.

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- Determine who is responsible for overseeing violence prevention strategies in your school.
- Encourage staff to provide input and feedback during the crisis planning process.
- Review incident data.
- Determine major problems in your school with regard to student crime and violence.
- Assess how the school addresses these problems.
- Conduct an assessment to determine how these problems - as well as others - may impact a school's vulnerability to certain crises.

Mitigation

FEMA has done considerable work to help states and communities in the area of mitigation planning. It notes that the goal of mitigation is to decrease the need for response as opposed to simply increasing response capability. FEMA defines mitigation as any sustained action taken to reduce or eliminate long-term risk to life and property from a hazardous event.

Mitigating emergencies is also important from a legal standpoint. If a school, district, or state does not take all necessary actions in good faith to create safe schools, it could be vulnerable to a suit for negligence. It is important to make certain that the physical plant is up to local building and fire codes, as well as federal and state laws.

Mitigating or preventing a crisis involves both the district and the community. The regional or state emergency management office should be contacted to help get started and serve as a means to connect to efforts that are under way locally.

Prevention

Creating a safe and orderly learning environment should not be new to any school and district. Identifying students (or in some cases staff) who may pose a danger to themselves or to others is sometimes called "threat assessment." The U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secret Service publish a guide, *Threat Assessments in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*, which may be useful in working through the threat assessment process. The results of a threat assessment may guide prevention efforts, which may help to avoid a crisis.

Many schools have curricula and programs aimed at preventing children and youth from initiating harmful behaviors. Social problem-solving or life skills programs, anti-bullying programs, and school-wide discipline efforts are common across the U.S. as a means of helping reduce violent behavior. The staff in charge of prevention in a school (i.e., counselors, teachers, health professionals, and administrators) should be part of the crisis planning team. Information on effective and promising prevention programs is available at *Office of Safe and Healthy Students* website at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/osh/index.html>.

Action Steps

Know the school building. Assess potential hazards on campus. Conduct regular safety audits of the physical plant. Be sure to include driveways, parking lots, playgrounds, outside structures, and fencing. A safety audit should be part of normal operations. This information should feed into mitigation planning.

Know the community. Mitigation requires assessment of local threats. Work with the local emergency management director to assess surrounding hazards. This includes the identification and assessment of the probability of natural disasters (i.e., tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.) and industrial and chemical accidents (e.g., water contamination or fuel spills). Locate major transportation routes and installations. For

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example, is the school on a flight path or near an airport? Is it near a railroad track that trains use to transport hazardous materials? Also address the potential hazards related to terrorism. Schools and districts should be active partners in community-wide risk assessment and mitigation planning.

Bring together regional, local, and school leaders, among others. Given that mitigation/prevention are community activities, leadership and support of mitigation and prevention activities are necessary to ensure that the right people are at the planning table. Again, leadership begins at the top. Schools and districts will face an uphill battle if state and local governments are not supportive of their mitigation efforts.

Make regular school safety and security efforts part of mitigation/prevention practices. The comprehensive school safety plan and its needs assessment activities should be consulted to identify what types of incidents are common in the school. Clear lines of communication should be established. Because mitigation and prevention planning requires agencies and organizations to work together and share information, communication among stakeholders is critical. In addition to communications within the planning team, outside communications with families and the larger community are important to convey a visible message that schools and local governments are working together to ensure public safety.

Preparedness



Figure 3. Crisis Planning Phase 2

Crises have the potential to affect every student and staff member in a school building. Despite everyone's best efforts at crisis prevention, it is a certainty that crises will occur in schools. Good planning will facilitate a rapid, coordinated, effective response when a crisis occurs. Being well prepared involves an investment of time and resources - but the potential to reduce injury and save lives is well worth the effort. Every school needs a crisis plan that is tailored to its unique characteristics. Within a school district, however, it is necessary for all plans to have certain commonalities.

Also, it is impractical for all schools to work individually with emergency responders and other local agencies, although school staff should meet the people who will respond to a crisis before one happens. It is important to find the right balance and to assign district and school roles early.

A realistic timetable should be established for the preparation process. While it is reasonable to feel a sense of urgency about the need to be prepared for a crisis, a complete, comprehensive crisis plan cannot be developed overnight. Time is needed for collecting essential information, developing the plan, and involving the appropriate people.

Assessment

The following checklist provides an overview of the critical issues in preparedness.

- Determine what crisis plans exist in the district, school, and community.
- Identify all stakeholders involved in crisis planning.

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- Develop procedures for communicating with staff, students, families, and the media.
- Establish procedures to account for students during a crisis.
- Gather information about the school facility, such as maps and the location of utility shutoffs.
- Identify the necessary equipment that needs to be assembled to assist staff in a crisis.

Action Steps

Identify and involve stakeholders. Identify the stakeholders (i.e., the people who are concerned about the safety of the school and the people who will call for assistance when a crisis occurs) to be involved in developing the crisis management plan. Ask stakeholders to provide feedback on sections of the plan that pertain to them. For instance, ask families to comment on procedures for communicating with them during a crisis.

During this process, create working relationships with emergency responders. It is important to learn how these organizations function and how you will work with each other during a crisis. Take time to learn the vocabulary, command structure, and culture of these groups.

It is essential to work with city and county emergency planners. You need to know the kinds of support a municipality can provide during a crisis, as well as any plans it has for schools during a crisis. For example, city and county planners may plan to use schools as an emergency shelter, a supply depot, or even a morgue. Reviewing this information in advance will help integrate resources. Participating in local emergency planning gives school and district administrators' insight into all the problems faced in the event of a community-wide crisis and will help school efforts.

Consider existing efforts. Before jumping in to develop a crisis plan, investigate existing plans (e.g., those of the district and local government). How do other agencies' plans integrate with the school's plan? Are there conflicts? Does the comprehensive school safety plan include a crisis plan? What information from the district's crisis plan can be used in the school's crisis plan? If the school recently completed a crisis plan, efforts may be limited to revising the plan in response to environmental, staff, and student changes (e.g., Has the building been renovated or is it currently under renovation? Is the list of staff current? Have there been changes in the student population?).

Have other hazards revealed themselves? Determine what crises the plan will address. Before assigning roles and responsibilities, or collecting the supplies that the school will need during a crisis, define what is a crisis based on vulnerabilities, needs, and assets. Describe the types of crises the plan addresses, including local hazards and problems identified from safety audits, evaluations, and assessments conducted during the mitigation/prevention phase. Consider incidents that may occur during community use of the school facility and prepare for incidents that occur while students are off site (e.g., during a field trip).

Define roles and responsibilities. How will the school operate during a crisis? Define what should happen, when, and at whose direction (i.e., create an organizational system). This should involve many of the school staff - important tasks will be neglected if one person is responsible for more than one function. School staff should be assigned to the following roles:

- School commander
- Liaison to emergency responders
- Student caregivers
- Security officers

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- Medical staff
- Spokesperson

During the planning process, both individuals and backups should be assigned to fill these roles. If the district has not already appointed a public information officer, it should do so right away. Some large school districts have staff dedicated solely to this function. Many smaller districts use the superintendent, school security officers, or a school principal as their public information officer.

Work with law enforcement officers and emergency responders to identify crises that require an outside agency to manage the scene (e.g., fire, bomb threat, or hostage situations). Learn what roles these outsiders will play, what responsibilities they will take on, and how they will interact with school staff. Especially important is determining who will communicate with families and the community during an incident.

Develop methods for communicating with the staff, students, families, and the media. Address how the school will communicate with all of the individuals who are directly or indirectly involved in the crisis. One of the first steps in planning for communication is to develop a mechanism to notify students and staff that an incident is occurring and to instruct them on what to do. It is critical that schools and emergency responders use the same definitions for the same terms. Don't create more confusion because terms do not mean the same to everyone involved in responding to a crisis.

It is important to determine how to convey information to staff and students by using codes for evacuation and lockdown, or simply by stating the facts. FEMA recommends simply using plain language rather than codes. If students are evacuated from the school building, will staff use cell phones, radios, intercoms, or runners to get information to the staff supervising them? Be sure to discuss the safest means of communication with law enforcement and emergency responders (e.g., some electronic devices can trigger bombs).

Plan how to communicate with families, community members, and the media. Consider writing template letters and press releases in advance, so staff will not have to compose them during the confusion and chaos of the event – it is easier to tweak smaller changes than to begin from scratch. Often the media can be very helpful in providing information to families and others in the community. Be sure to work with local media before a crisis occurs to help them understand school needs during an incident.

Obtain necessary equipment and supplies. Provide staff with the necessary equipment to respond to a crisis. Consider whether there are enough master keys for emergency responders so that they have complete access to the school. Get the phones or radios necessary for communication. Ask for contact information for families. Maintain a cache of first aid supplies. What about food and water for students and staff during the incident?

Prepare response kits for secretaries, nurses, and teachers, so they have easy access to the supplies. For example, a nurse's kit might include student and emergency medicines (e.g., "anaphylaxis kits," which may require physician's orders, for use in breathing emergencies, such as severe, sudden allergic reactions), as well as first aid supplies. A teacher's kit might include a crisis management reference guide, as well as an updated student roster.

Prepare for immediate response. When a crisis occurs, quickly determine whether students and staff need to be evacuated from the building, returned to the building, or locked down in the building. Plan action steps for each of these scenarios. Evacuation requires all students and staff to leave the building. While evacuating to the school's field makes sense for a fire drill that only lasts a few minutes, it may not be an appropriate location for a longer period of time. The evacuation plan should include backup buildings to serve as emergency shelters, such as nearby community centers, religious institutions, businesses, or other schools. Agreements for using these spaces should be negotiated or reconfirmed prior to the beginning of each school year. Evacuation plans should include contingencies for weather conditions, such as rain,

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snow, and extreme cold and heat. While most students will be able to walk to a nearby community center, students with disabilities may have more restricted mobility. Your plan should include transportation options for these students.

If an incident occurs while students are outside, you will need to return them to the building quickly. This is a reverse evacuation. Once staff and students are safely in the building, you may find the situation calls for a lockdown.

Lockdowns are called for when a crisis occurs outside of the school and an evacuation would be dangerous. A lockdown may also be called for when there is a crisis inside and movement within the school will put students in jeopardy. All exterior doors are locked and students and staff stay in their classrooms. Windows may need to be covered.

Shelter-in-place is used when there is no time to evacuate or when it may be harmful to leave the building. Shelter-in-place is commonly used during hazardous material spills. Students and staff are held in the building and windows and doors are sealed. There can be limited movement within the building. Create maps and facilities information. In a crisis, emergency responders need to know the location of everything in a school.

Create site maps that include information about classrooms, hallways, and stairwells, the location of utility shut-offs, and potential staging sites. Emergency responders need copies of this information in advance. During a crisis, designate locations - staging sites - for emergency responders to organize, for medical personnel to treat the injured, for the public information officer to brief the media, and for families to be reunited with their children. Student reunification sites should be as far away from the media staging area as possible. Law enforcement will help determine the plans needed to facilitate access of emergency responders and to restrict access of well-wishers and the curious.

Develop accountability and student release procedures. As soon as a crisis is recognized, account for all students, staff, and visitors. Emergency responders treat a situation very differently when people are missing. For example, when a bomb threat occurs, the stakes are substantially higher if emergency responders do not know whether students are in the school when they are trying to locate and disarm a bomb.

Be sure to inform families of release procedures before a crisis occurs. In many crises, families have flocked to schools wanting to collect their children immediately. A method should be in place for tracking student release and ensuring that students are only released to authorized individuals.

Practice. Preparedness includes emergency drills and crisis exercises for staff, students, and emergency responders. Many schools have found tabletop exercises very useful in practicing and testing the procedures specified in their crisis plan. Tabletop exercises involve school staff and emergency responders sitting around a table discussing the steps they would take to respond to a crisis. Often, training and drills identify issues that need to be addressed in the crisis plan and problems with plans for communication and response. Teachers also need training in how to manage students during a crisis, especially those experiencing panic reactions. Careful consideration of these issues will improve your crisis plan and better prepare you to respond to an actual crisis.

Address liability issues. Consideration of liability issues is necessary before crisis planning can be completed and may protect you and your staff from a lawsuit. Situations where there is a foreseeable danger can hold liability if the school does not make every reasonable effort to intervene or remediate the situation. A careful assessment of the hazards faced by the school is critical.

Response

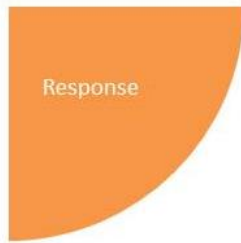


Figure 4. Crisis Planning Phase 3

A crisis is the time to follow the crisis plan, not to make a plan from scratch. The following are some of the major recommendations gathered from experienced practitioners and other experts about points to remember when called on to implement a crisis plan.

Assessment

The following checklist provides an overview of the critical issues in response.

- Determine if a crisis is occurring.
- Identify the type of crisis that is occurring and determine the appropriate response.
- Activate the incident management system.
- Ascertain whether an evacuation, reverse evacuation, lockdown, or shelter-in-place needs to be implemented.
- Maintain communication among all relevant staff at officially designated locations.
- Establish what information needs to be communicated to staff, students, families, and the community.
- Monitor how emergency first aid is being administered to the injured.
- Decide if more equipment and supplies are needed.

Action Steps

Expect to be surprised. Regardless of how much time and effort were spent on crisis planning, the members of the crisis team should know that there will always be an element of surprise and accompanying confusion when a school is confronted with a crisis.

Assess the situation and choose the appropriate response. Following the plan requires a very quick, but careful assessment, of the situation. Determine whether a crisis exists and if so, the type of crisis, the location, and the magnitude. Because the team has practiced the plan, leaders are ready to make these decisions. After basic protective steps are in place, more information can be gathered to adjust later responses.

Respond within seconds. When a crisis actually happens, make the basic decisions about what type of action is needed and respond within seconds. An immediate, appropriate response depends on a plan with clearly articulated roles and responsibilities, as well as training and practice. With proper training, district and school staff and students will respond appropriately within seconds.

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Notify appropriate emergency responders and the school crisis response team. One common mistake is to delay calling emergency responders, such as the police or fire department. In the midst of a crisis, people often believe that the situation can be handled in-house. It is better to have emergency responders on the scene as soon as possible, even if the incident has been resolved by the time they arrive, than to delay calling and risk further injury and damage. For instance, it is better to have emergency responders arrive at a school to find a fire extinguished than to arrive too late to prevent loss of life or serious property damage.

Notifying a district's or school's crisis team allows them to begin the necessary measures to protect the safety of all persons involved. Unless informed otherwise by the incident commander, school crisis team members should proceed with their responsibilities.

Evacuate or lock down the school, as appropriate. This step is crucial and should be one of the first decisions made, regardless of the order in which initial decisions are implemented.

Triage injuries and provide emergency first aid to those who need it. The plan should assign emergency medical services personnel and school staff with relevant qualifications to determine who needs emergency first aid. Designate a location for EMS to treat the seriously injured on the scene.

Keep supplies nearby and organized at all times. If a move to another location is necessitated, remember to take the emergency supplies. Monitor the amount of supplies and replace them as needed.

Trust leadership. Trust the internal crisis team members and external emergency responders who have been trained to deal with crises. Trust will help calm the situation and minimize the chaos that may occur during a crisis.

During a crisis, leaders need to project a calm, confident, and serious attitude to assure people of the seriousness of the situation and the wisdom of the directions being given. This leadership style will help all involved to respond in a similarly calm and confident manner, as well as help to mitigate the reactions of anyone who might deny that a crisis has occurred. In certain situations, it may be necessary to yield leadership to others in the plan's designated command structure.

In some jurisdictions, laws state the protocol for the command structure. This structure may vary from state to state and even from community to community within a state. For instance, in a fire, the expertise of firefighters should lead the way, with others filling designated roles, such as manager of family-student reunification.

Communicate accurate and appropriate information. During a crisis, districts and schools will communicate with the school community, as well as the community-at-large. Use the channels of communication identified in the plan. For instance, all information released to the media and public should be funneled through a single public information officer or appointed spokesperson. This will maximize the likelihood of presenting consistent and accurate information to the public.

The crisis team should communicate regularly with the staff who has responsibility for managing the students. A school's most important responsibility, the safety of the students entrusted to the school, cannot be fulfilled during a crisis without timely and accurate information to those caring for students. At a minimum, families need to know that a crisis has occurred and that all possible steps are being taken to see to the safety of their children. Additional details about assembly and shelter procedures may also be provided, as determined by the plan or those managing the crisis. At some point, families will also need to know when and where their children will be released.

Activate the student release system. Always keep in mind that the earliest possible safe release of students is a desired goal. Often student release will be accomplished before complete resolution of a crisis.

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Allow for flexibility in implementing the crisis plan. It is impossible for any crisis plan, no matter how complete, to address every situation that may arise during a crisis. With proper training and practice, emergency responders and staff will be able to respond appropriately and to adapt the school crisis plans to the situation.

Document. Write down every action taken during the response. This will provide a record of appropriate implementation of the crisis plan. Also, record damage for insurance purposes and tracking financial expenditures related to the incident. Keep all original notes and records. These are legal documents.

Recovery



Figure 5. Crisis Planning Phase 4

The goal of recovery is to return to learning and restore the infrastructure of the school as quickly as possible. Focus on students and the physical plant and take as much time as needed for recovery. School staff can be trained to deal with the emotional impact of the crisis, as well as to initially assess the emotional needs of students, staff, and responders. One of the major goals of recovery is to provide a caring and supportive school environment.

Assessment

The following checklist provides an overview of the critical issues in recovery.

- Strive to return to learning as quickly as possible.
- Restore the physical plant, as well as the school community.
- Monitor how staff assess students for the emotional impact of the crisis.
- Identify what follow-up interventions are available to students, staff, and first responders.
- Conduct debriefings with staff and first responders.
- Assess curricular activities that address the crisis.
- Allocate appropriate time for recovery.
- Plan how anniversaries of events will be commemorated.
- Capture "lessons learned" and incorporate them into revisions and training.

Action Steps

Plan for recovery in the preparedness phase. Determine the roles and responsibilities of staff and others who will assist in recovery during the planning phase. District-level counselors may want to train school staff to assess the emotional needs of students and colleagues to determine intervention needs. Experience

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shows that, after a crisis, many unsolicited offers of assistance from outside the school community are made. During planning, you may want to review the credentials of service providers and certify those that will be used during recovery.

Assemble the Crisis Intervention Team. A Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) is composed of individuals at either the district or school level involved in recovery. A review of the literature shows that there are different models for organizing a CIT. In one model, there is a centralized CIT at the district level, which serves all schools in that district. In another model, the district trains school-based CITs. Even when CITs exist within individual schools, it may be necessary for the superintendent to allocate additional resources on an as-needed basis.

Service providers in the community may want to assist after a crisis. With prior planning, those with appropriate skills and certifications may be tapped to assist in recovery. This will help district and school personnel coordinate activities of the community service providers and see that district procedures and intervention goals are followed.

Return to the “business of learning” as quickly as possible. Experts agree that the first order of business following a crisis is to return students to learning as quickly as possible. This may involve helping students and families cope with separations from one another with the reopening of school after a crisis.

Schools and districts need to keep students, families, and the media informed. Be clear about what steps have been taken to attend to student safety. Let families and other community members know what support services the school and district provide or what other community resources are available. Messages to students should be age-appropriate. It may be necessary to translate letters and other forms of communication into languages other than English depending on the composition of the communities feeding the affected school(s). Be sure to consider cultural differences when preparing these materials.

Focus on the building, as well as people, during recovery. Following a crisis, buildings and their grounds may need repairing or repainting/re-landscaping. Conduct safety audits and determine the parts of the building that can be used and plan for repairing those that are damaged.

Provide assessment of emotional needs of staff, students, families, and responders. Assess the emotional needs of all students and staff, and determine those who need intervention by a school counselor, social worker, school psychologist, or other mental health professional. Arrange for appropriate interventions by school- or community-based service providers. In addition, available services need to be identified for families, who may want to seek treatment for their children or themselves. Appropriate group intervention may be beneficial to students and staff experiencing less severe reactions to the crisis. Group interventions should be age-appropriate.

Provide stress management during class time. Trauma experts emphasize the need to create a caring, warm, and trusting environment for students following a crisis. Allow students to talk about what they felt and experienced during the traumatic event. Younger children who may not be able to fully express their feelings verbally will benefit from participating in creative activities, including drawing, painting, or writing stories. Young adolescents benefit from group discussions in which they are encouraged to talk about their feelings, as well as from writing plays or stories about their experiences. Engage older adolescents in group discussions, and address any issues of guilt.

Conduct daily debriefings for staff, responders, and others assisting in recovery. Mental health workers who have provided services after crises stress the importance of ensuring that those who are providing “psychological first aid” are supported with daily critical incident stress debriefings. Debriefings help staff cope with their own feelings of vulnerability.

Take as much time as needed for recovery. An individual recovers from a crisis at his or her own pace. Recovery is not linear. After a crisis, healing is a process filled with ups and downs. Depending on the traumatic event and the individual, recovery may take months or even years.

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Remember anniversaries of crises. Many occasions will remind staff, students, and families about crises. The anniversary of crises will stimulate memories and feelings about the incident. In addition, other occasions may remind the school community about the crises, including holidays, returning to school after vacations and other breaks, as well as events or occasions that seemingly do not have a connection with the incident. This underscores the notion that recovery may take a longer time than anticipated.

Staff members need to be sensitive to their own as well as the students' reactions in such situations and provide support when necessary. School crisis planning guides suggest holding appropriate memorial services or other activities, such as planting a tree in memory of victims of the crises. Trauma experts discourage memorials for suicide victims to avoid glorification of these deaths.

Evaluate. Evaluating recovery efforts will help prepare for the next crisis. Use several methods to evaluate recovery efforts. Conduct brief interviews with emergency responders, families, teachers, students, and staff. Focus groups may also be helpful in obtaining candid information about recovery efforts. The following are examples of questions to ask:

- Which classroom-based interventions proved most successful and why?
- Which assessment and referral strategies were the most successful and why?
- What were the most positive aspects of staff debriefings and why?
- Which recovery strategies should be changed and why?
- Do other professionals need to be tapped to help with future crises?
- What additional training is necessary to enable the school community and the community-at-large to prepare for future crises?
- What additional equipment is needed to support recovery efforts? What other planning actions will facilitate future recovery efforts?

Summary

Many facets of school safety planning impact families. Much of the literature on school safety planning provides guidelines for communicating with families and advice for families on how to deal with their children after a crisis. Experts have noted that when a crisis occurs, individuals involved tend to go on autopilot.

When a crisis occurs staff immediately need to know how to react. They need to know, for example, the signals for crisis, the protocol for lockdown and evacuation, how to dismiss students, and what to do if staff or students need help. They should know these things ahead of time. There will not be a time during the crisis to think about what to do next. Chances of responding appropriately in a crisis will be much greater if all players have practiced the basic steps they will need to take. Schools need to be ready to handle crises, large and small, to keep children and staff out of harm's way and ready to learn and teach.

References

1. Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2007.
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