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August, 2013

Imagining Safer Schools: An Analysis of the Comprehensive Nature of Crisis Management Plans

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Available at: http://works.bepress.com/samuel_smith/46/
Imagining Safer Schools

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Presented at the
National Council of Professors of Educational Administration
Annual Summer Conference
August 6 – 9, 2013
Rutherford, NJ
Abstract

School should be a safe place for students to learn and interact, but far too often there are reports of instances in which students end up in harm’s way. From natural disasters to school violence, a crisis can occur at any time, without warning, and in unlikely locations. Although there is no way to prepare for every possible emergency that could occur on a school campus, having a comprehensive emergency plan can help avoid, or prepare for, some of the most common crisis situations. A well-thought-out plan can also provide general guidance for unusual situations that cannot be anticipated. This paper addresses key components that should be considered when preparing and communicating emergency preparedness plans to a school community. It also address types of school emergencies and common scenarios for which school leaders should be prepared.
Although one of the most difficult aspects of leading a school, safety is of utmost importance. Therefore, providing students with a safe learning environment should be a top priority for the school leader. The difficulty lies in preparing for situations that are often unpredictable, unforeseen, and unprecedented. Whether it is a natural disaster or a human act of violence, educators must learn from past experiences to help protect current and future students from harm. Still, there is no way to be totally prepared for all potential scenarios regarding school safety.

This paper will discuss the basics of evaluating, preparing, and implementing emergency preparedness plans and procedures. It is important for all school leaders to have a written plan in place and to communicate that plan to all stakeholders. Although there is no one school emergency plan that would fit all schools, there are common elements that should be addressed in most schools. School leaders should develop plans that specifically address common school-wide and individual emergencies, while also addressing general, potential emergency categories. These plans should address issues of both school safety, which is the prevention of unsafe situations, and crisis management, which includes how to respond to a crisis once it occurs.

Background

In recent years, there has been no shortage of school crises reported in the news. From tornadoes to school shootings, a regular school day can quickly turn into a school crisis without warning. Whether school emergencies have actually increased or whether the awareness simply is amplified due to instantaneous electronic media, society increasingly demands that school leaders ensure that schools are safe for their children.
Indeed, school leaders should do everything within their power to create a safe school environment.

One of the most notable school tragedies was the Columbine shooting in 1999. This incident sent a shock wave across the country and left school leaders and communities asking how such instances could be prevented in the future. In the decade that followed, school systems scrambled to develop policies and guidelines to help prevent another school calamity. Parents and community members became increasingly sensitive to any comments, even rumors, of threats from students. Unfortunately, these precautions have not prevented such random acts of violence from recurring in schools.

School leaders can hope they will never experience a school crisis of the magnitude of a shooting, but most will experience at least some crisis situations. It is difficult to identify trends in school safety, as information often contains political bias. Some individuals insist that schools are becoming increasingly unsafe. Others, however, argue that school safety is actually improving per capita but that increased media coverage makes schools appear to be unsafe. Either way, the issue of school safety has been brought to the forefront.

From a theoretical perspective, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs supports the importance of school safety. Once students have their basic physical needs met, the next most important area of need is safety (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). When students feel like their environment is unsafe or that their personal safety is being threatened, they can become distracted and lose academic focus. Schools that are identified as being unsafe are often also categorized as low achieving. Although poverty and other factors may contribute significantly to low achievement in schools, ongoing occurrences of violence
or other criminal activity can significantly hinder student achievement. Isolated yet serious incidents, such as a natural disaster, can have a negative residual effect on student achievement long after the incidents have occurred.

**School Safety in Action**

Periodically, parents will approach a principal—especially after their child has been a victim of violence or has experienced an injury on campus—and will demand a guarantee that their child will be safe in the future. The principal may respond, “School is one of the safest places for your child to be, but I cannot guarantee that any child will never suffer harm while at school.” Parents do not usually like that answer, but the truth is that no one can guarantee a child’s safety in all situations, although all caregivers are obligated to strive to that end. School is indeed one of the safest places a child can be. Most schools implement standard security measures, and there are few places a child can go on campus without an adult being present nearby. Parents should have the confidence that school is one of the safest places for their children, but safety cannot be guaranteed at school any more than a parent can guarantee the safety of a child while driving home in the family car. Educators should have the same perspective regarding school safety that they have with their own children—to do everything within their power to protect their students.

Schools in and of themselves are not dangerous places but are reflections of society and, as such, are not immune to the problems experienced in their communities. If there is crime in the community or those who want to do harm to children, harm can find its way into the school. If children in the community want to fight, get involved in drugs, or commit a crime, these acts can find their way into schools. Many of the
questions and concerns regarding school safety are also questions about our society as a whole.

Even though it is possible to implement plans and strategies to reduce the number of accidents and human acts of violence, there is little that can be done to prevent natural disasters. In 2011, a tornado struck the town of Joplin, Missouri, destroying six schools and devastating the community. The effects on the schools were both immediate and long term, both direct and indirect. Thanks in part to school and community leaders, students were given hope in a situation that seemed hopeless. After the rescue efforts turned to rebuilding efforts, education leaders began aggressive efforts to resume classes as soon as possible. Getting the schools up and running became an important part of the recovery effort, both physically and emotionally. In the aftermath of widespread death and destruction, the school system gained national admiration for its resilience and for the commitment of school leaders toward recovery.

Whenever there is a large-scale school catastrophe that includes injuries and/or fatalities, news media make the situation public within minutes. However, individual emergencies, even fatalities, occur at schools across the nation almost daily. The number of individual students experiencing medical emergencies during the school day has increased significantly in recent years. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2008) estimated that up to 25% of injuries among children occur while they are at school but that most schools do not employ medical professionals or maintain adequate medical equipment on-site.

What can school leaders learn from these and other catastrophes that happen in schools across the country almost daily? Although it may not be possible for school
leaders to prevent all emergency situations, there are strategies that can effectively reduce the possibilities, or reduce the severity of the outcomes of school emergencies.

**ISLLC Standards Relating to School Safety**

Several ISLLC standards are addressed in this chapter. The most relevant ones related to school safety are as follows:

*Standard 3.C:* Promote and protect the welfare and safety of students and staff.

*Standard 4.D:* Build and sustain productive relationships with community partners.

*Standard 5.D:* Consider and evaluate the potential moral and legal consequences of decision making.

*Standard 5.E:* Promote social justice and ensure that individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling.


**Proactive Measures**

**Emergency Preparedness Plans.** One of the first steps in school safety and crisis management is preparation of a written plan. Most schools and districts have some form of written plan in place, although the types and names of plans vary significantly. Some of the common names of school emergency plans include crisis management plan, emergency management plan, school safety plan, or some other variation. Although there is an assortment of names for these plans, most of them have one thing in common, and that is a goal of keeping students and employees safe.

A common misconception regarding written emergency plans is that more is better. Some schools try to develop detailed procedures for every conceivable scenario.
They produce bulky documents with multiple-step procedures and plans that are complicated and possibly even confusing. They have drills, run-throughs, and practice emergencies; they plan, debrief, discuss, rewrite, and conduct more drills. Although a thorough plan might be expected when it comes to something as serious as school safety, these plans can become so unwieldy that, in a true emergency, it would be difficult to follow such plans.

An example of this occurred at a large urban high school upon testing its intruder alert procedures. The school had developed a color-coded intercom announcement (code red, code yellow, and code green) that would indicate to the faculty the seriousness of the alert. For the most serious situations, administration would announce over the public address system that the superintendent was in the building. This was supposed to alert the faculty, who knew the superintendent was never announced when in the building, while not alarming the students, who were not supposed to know the code. This was often ineffective, as many faculty members would forget the meaning of the announcement, and many students knew what it meant. In addition to the announcement, instructions were placed on the back of each classroom door. The instructions stated what students and teachers should do in case of an intruder alert; instructions included locking the door, turning off the lights, remaining silent, and moving the students into a corner in the classroom away from the door. On the back of the classroom doors, beside the instructions, were laminated color-coded cards in an envelope. If the situation inside the classroom was safe, the teacher was to place a green card under the door to be seen from the hallway. If, however, there was a dangerous situation in the classroom, a red
card should be placed under the door to indicate the problem. These were just the first steps among many subsequent ones for a potential intruder alert.

None of these strategies are wrong in and of themselves, and it may be that many schools have effectively incorporated similar strategies into their emergency plans. At this particular school, though, administration developed concerns during the first few intruder alert drills of the newly adopted plan. The drills did not go smoothly to say the least. In general, many of the teachers did not follow the instructions. Some teachers reported that they had not heard the announcement, some had lost their materials, others claimed they were given incorrect information, and a few admitted that they were simply confused. To compound the situation, there were complications securing the portable classrooms; cards got blown by the wind, intercoms were difficult to hear, and many students could not be located—just to name a few of the problems.

After the drills, administrators, school resource officers, and lead teachers joined together to debrief. There was a brief summary of the many problems that were reported or observed, and the discussion quickly evolved into an argument of how best to fix the problems. Some began to suggest additional instructions to make the expectations clearer. Some recommended scenarios that had not yet been considered, and therefore proposed yet even more steps to the plan. Still others advocated disciplinary actions toward those teachers who failed to follow the instructions. After several more drills that year, the problems persisted—not always the same people and not always the same problems, but problems nonetheless.

A young assistant principal at the school recalled thinking, “If this school ever has an actual intruder, it’s unlikely that the faculty will remember this plan because it’s been
changed so many times.” If the steps mentioned previously were the only steps in the plan and if an intruder were the only potential emergency, the staff might possibly have performed well in the emergency situation. However, there were many more steps to the plan than those listed here, and a potential intruder was only one of the numerous possible emergency situations in the school’s written plan.

Subsequently, how does a school develop an emergency plan that covers the most common crisis situations while not making it cumbersome or convoluted? The key is to be concise. Classroom teachers are often taught to develop three to five general classroom rules that cover most of their expectations. If a teacher implements 15 to 20 rules, they become difficult to manage. The same principle applies to a crisis management plan. Include general directions for the most common emergencies but avoid multistep processes for every conceivable scenario. The truth is that there is wisdom in planning, but every situation is different and will require some discretion, reaction, and decision making on the fly.

Because there are so many factors determining what a school emergency plan looks like and what details are important, plans may vary greatly among school districts and even among schools within the same district. One example of a factor that may significantly change emergency plans between schools is the age of students. What might be expected of first-grade teachers and their students would be significantly different from the expectations for a high school teacher with 17- and 18-year-old students. Other factors that might be considered when developing a plan include the availability of and relationship with local authorities, the size and location of the school, and available resources. Many schools develop some kind of safety team or committee
that involves stakeholders from various groups. This not only allows for diverse perspectives in developing the plan but also develops cooperation and support when there is a school emergency.

Brunner and Lewis (2004) suggested developing a safety checklist in which the primary components of the emergency plan are reviewed annually. An annual review can be beneficial when considering that many schools experience changes in personnel, school policy, laws, and building codes from one year to the next. The best starting point is with an emergency plan audit, or checklist. There are many templates online if your school does not have one in place. There are also experts who can evaluate school safety and procedures, but these audits as well as the recommendations often focus on facility issues and can produce expensive proposals.

**Building Security.** Securing school buildings has become increasingly important. Many schools adopt security measures from the business world by adding security cameras, access cards, one-way doors, and alarms (McLester, 2011). It is not unusual to see a school secure all exterior doors except for one main entrance. Visitors are usually required to check in at the front office and may even need to press a button (similar to a doorbell) to alert school personnel to open the door. Increasing numbers of schools are equipped with cameras and alarms to monitor building access. Schools are secured in order to keep unauthorized personnel out of the building, as well as to keep students inside, where they can be properly supervised.

Building security varies significantly between elementary and secondary schools. In an elementary school, students rarely go very far without the direct supervision of an adult. Students often travel as a class or a group and are not allowed outside of the
building unless accompanied by an adult. Additionally, elementary schools are usually smaller than secondary schools and it is easy to differentiate between students and adults. Such a structured environment would make it more difficult for an intruder to enter the building or for a student to leave the building unnoticed.

Conversely, securing a secondary campus can be a significant challenge. Envision a high school with over 3,000 students in which upperclassmen follow abbreviated schedules that permit them to arrive later in the morning or leave early in the afternoon. Many students drive their own vehicles, and there might be multiple streets where the students can enter and exit the parking lot. During a typical day, there may be six or seven transitions where students are traveling from one class to another—to or from lunch, jobs, clubs, sports, dentist appointments, and so forth. During these transitions, doors throughout the building are opened and closed incessantly. Even if students are directed to use the main entrance or main driveway and to follow proper check-in and checkout procedures, the opportunity for someone to enter the building without properly checking in or for a student to leave without permission is significantly great than for an elementary building. Furthermore, in a school with thousands of students, there are likely more than a hundred adults. In this environment, it is less likely that a visitor would be noticed, and a young adult visitor might even be mistaken for student.

Equipment to secure a large building that is highly populated can be costly. Although helpful in maintaining building security, electronic access, security cameras, and extra personnel on hand to supervise hallways and parking lots are high-ticket items. In times of shrinking budgets, however, school leaders can still improve building security
through awareness education and staff development. One of the most effective resources in maintaining a safe building is improving safety procedures and building awareness among faculty and staff. When faculty and staff consistently wear proper identification, such as a name tag or badge, it becomes more apparent when someone is in the building who has not properly checked in. Furthermore, increased faculty awareness might cause a school employee to question someone without proper identification or students who do not appear to be where they are supposed to be.

Building security is an issue for which school leaders can really set the tone. If they do not, the faculty will likely develop a casual attitude. It is not uncommon for a faculty member to prop a door open to avoid having to walk around the building. In the teacher’s mind, this may not be an act of rebellion but merely reflects a lack of seriousness or understanding regarding the security of the building.

**Facility Maintenance.** Proper maintenance of school facilities is an important, yet often overlooked, aspect of keeping a school safe. Building maintenance is related to school safety in at least two ways. First, a well-maintained building supports many aspects of a crisis management plan. Some examples include lighting and communication systems. If an announcement must be made during an emergency situation, a faulty intercom system may hinder dissemination of critical information. Many facility and equipment issues may be taken for granted on a daily basis, but neglect can cause significant problems during a crisis. Some common facility or equipment issues that should not be overlooked include the following:

- Smoke detectors, fire alarms, and fire extinguishers
- Intercom system
• Well-maintained doors and locks
• Proper lighting in hallways, secluded areas, parking lots, and sidewalks
• Severe weather warning system (with battery backup)
• Two-way radios for key personnel
• Emergency lighting for power outages
• Clearly identified and maintained emergency exits

In addition to the support aspects of well-maintained buildings during a crisis situation, some emergencies can be caused by the building itself. A gas leak or a faulty electrical system may result in a dangerous situation at a school. In such a case, students should be removed from these dangers immediately. Most dangerous facility issues can be avoided or eliminated. Exposed sharp objects, slippery floors, and elevated areas without railing are examples of potentially dangerous situations that can be avoided. It is unreasonable, however, to expect that students can be protected from any and all potential harm. Students will experience injuries in school from playground equipment, stairs, food on the cafeteria floor, and many other accidents. It is important that school and district officials make issues of safety a top priority when allocating resources for building repair and maintenance. Although accidents in schools can never be totally avoided, a well-maintained building can reduce the probability of such incidences.

For many years, it was the responsibility of the school and school district administration to set standards for building maintenance. Today, most schools are inspected and monitored by a government agency, such as the local fire marshal. Although the expectations of these government agencies may not be consistent nationwide, they are at least likely to address the most egregious safety concerns. At the
other end of the spectrum are government inspectors who attempt to alleviate any and all potential dangers to students, sometimes making it difficult for the schools to meet strict guidelines.

**Types of Crisis Situations**

**Natural Disasters.** Natural disasters are among the most frightening school emergencies because of the potential magnitude of the dangers and damage that may occur. In recent years, numerous natural disasters have devastated communities and affected schools either directly or indirectly. Tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes can turn a typical school day into a nightmare within minutes. The results of a natural disaster on the school or community can be anywhere from an inconvenience to a life-altering calamity.

One of the advantages educators have in dealing with natural disasters is that there is often a warning of potential danger before the event. Several powerful hurricanes have come ashore in the United States in recent years, and although the storms decimated schools and communities, because there were hours and, in some cases, even days of advance warning, there was usually time to evacuate the community for those who heeded the warnings. For this reason, hurricanes rarely cause a crisis situation during a storm. The school crisis in these situations usually lies in the aftermath of the wind-damaged or flooded school buildings. School crisis management in these situations may involve helping to provide food, shelter, and clothing to community members. It may be difficult to conduct school when community members are still facing many difficult challenges.
Tornadoes are another common natural disaster for which schools must prepare. Because tornadoes are more prevalent in certain areas of the country, many schools develop some type of tornado preparation plan. Although tornadoes may spontaneously occur with little or no notice, meteorological technology has improved warning systems and can give schools precious minutes, sometimes hours to prepare for potential storms. Schools in high-risk areas operate early warning systems that indicate a tornado has appeared or that conditions are favorable for one to develop. When the threat of a tornado occurs during the school day, a common response is to move students into the safest areas of the building, away from doors, windows, and high roof areas. Tornadoes are a unique type of storm in that they can destroy one building while having no effect on a building just across the street. If a tornado does strike a school building, the storm will likely dissipate within minutes; therefore, decisions have to be made quickly, often more as a reaction than as a result of a detailed plan. Moving students to safety in such circumstances is only the first part of a crisis management plan that may need to be sustained for hours, even days, after the storm has passed. School leaders, along with faculty and staff, should immediately begin evaluating the situation to provide medical attention where needed and to reduce any potentially dangerous situations or additional harm to students.

**Medical Emergencies.** Medical emergencies are common occurrences in most schools. These emergencies can range in seriousness from minor injuries to life-threatening conditions. At a minimum, schools should have in place a process for dealing with minor medical emergencies such as cuts, scrapes, headaches, and stomach aches. School leaders should communicate very clearly the process for addressing the needs of...
students experiencing a minor medical emergency. Questions such as the following need to be answered:

- When should a student be sent to the office?
- When should a parent be called?
- What emergencies can and should be handled by faculty?

Some schools benefit from the services of a school nurse in the building. In these cases, the medical professional can help determine the seriousness of the emergency. Although many medical issues are easy to categorize as minor, one of the difficulties in dealing with medical emergencies lies in identifying what constitutes a more serious medical crisis. Even an issue that may be considered a serious medical emergency in one situation might be considered minor in another. For example, students who are diabetics, experience seizures, have serious allergies, or have medical disabilities may have frequent and ongoing episodes. Many of these students learn how to self-monitor and prevent problems associated with their medical conditions. Additionally, when caregivers are aware of the issues and are trained in how to deal with a medical emergency involving the student, the chances of experiencing a major emergency are significantly reduced.

Unfortunately, not all medical emergencies can be anticipated, and some may be life-threatening. If a student experiences a serious or potentially life-threatening medical emergency, a quick response will be required. In many cases, one of the first actions to be taken in a health-related emergency is to seek out a medical professional. In some of these situations, the decision to call 911 can be a matter of life or death. The minutes between the time a call is made and the arrival of first responders can be critical.
Therefore, if there is a school nurse, this person would be the obvious first contact. In schools where nursing positions have been cut because of budget limitation, training faculty in basic first aid becomes increasingly important. School leaders should identify and train key personnel in the use of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), automated external defibrillators (AEDs), and/or basic first aid. School personnel have avoided numerous fatalities by implementing CPR or using an AED while waiting for an ambulance.

One of the more disconcerting trends regarding medical emergencies in schools is the increasing expectation for educators to provide medical services. Traditionally, it has been common for teachers, office personnel, or school nurses to distribute student medication or provide basic first aid. There seems to be, however, an increasing expectation that educators will be trained to respond to even more complicated health conditions. Many teachers are accepting this responsibility for the sake of the students, but others are uncomfortable accepting responsibilities for which they have insufficient experience or training. These concerns are exacerbated by an increase in the number of students who come to school with complicated medical conditions. A study by Garrow (2011) estimated that over 2 million school-age children in the United States have serious food allergies and that the number of food allergies is increasing. Furthermore, approximately one out of six students with food allergies will have an allergic reaction while in school. Not only does this raise concerns about school personnel being qualified to deal with allergic reactions, but also how educators can best prevent students from coming in contact with substances that cause these reactions in the school setting.
Threats and Cyber-Threats. Another situation that falls into its own category is incidents involving threats and, more specifically, cyber-threats. Threats can occur on or off campus and may result in a school crisis regardless of whether students are actually in danger or not. They are exceptionally difficult for a school leader to deal with because they often necessitate addressing an emergency that has not yet occurred and may or may not actually happen. Threats can happen at all age levels but usually become more frequent and serious at the secondary level. A threat from one individual to another can be a significant disruption to the school day. Rumors of a fight can quickly result in classroom disruptions, non-school-related conversations, and the congregation of groups of students waiting to watch the anticipated event. This scenario can become intensified when the threat involves more than one student. The situation can quickly get out of hand when parents begin to catch wind of the situation and try to get involved at the school or in the community.

Threats may occur at school or in the community, and both can cause serious concerns. Most educators are aware of news stories regarding students who have threatened to bring a weapon to school to harm another student or a group of students. There have also been numerous incidents of students writing “hit lists” of others on campus they plan to harm. School leaders must take all of these threats seriously, even when the chances of a student being harmed seems unlikely. In many cases, parents are understandably quick to become upset and demand that something be done immediately. However, threats often require lengthy, detailed investigations to determine the actual chain of events. The perpetrator of a threat often claims it was merely a joke and not a
genuine threat. Regardless of what conclusion the administration comes to in this type of situation, at least one parent is likely to remain upset.

In recent decades, use of electronic communication has complicated the process of dealing with threats. Today, making a threat is as easy as a few clicks of the mouse and is often referred to as a cyber-threat. Students can threaten each other using email, text, social networks, and many other electronic media. Furthermore, students seem to experience an increased sense of boldness in their threats because of the perceived anonymity of the Internet and the reduction of face-to-face conflict. For a school leader, investigating a threat becomes more complicated when the origin of the threat is electronic. The ability of the school leader to address cyber-threat issues may depend on whether the threat was sent during the school day or on a school computer, or from an off-campus location outside of the school day. Developing a clear, written policy, including potential consequences, reduces the impact of these disruptive situations.

Off-Campus Emergencies. Off-campus emergencies are some of the most difficult situations school leaders face. One of the primary challenges is determining if an off-campus crisis is even appropriate for the school to address. Some school leaders may want to avoid off-campus situations altogether by taking the stance, “If it does not happen at school, it is not my problem.” This, however, is not a reasonable or wise position to take. The reality is that there are many potential off-campus situations that may affect the school setting. Guidelines are necessary for dealing with off-campus emergencies.

The tragic death of a student or school employee is an example of an off-campus situation. In a matter of minutes, a school or community can be turned upside down by
the loss of a classmate or coworker. This is more common at the secondary level because such fatalities are often automobile related, but elementary schools are not immune to such tragedies. Despite the number of years an administrator may serve, these types of tragedies are never easy to deal with, and there is no policy manual with sufficient guidelines to dictate how to respond in every type of loss.

As is the case in most crises, the first step in addressing a school fatality is to provide for the needs and well-being of the student body, staff, and faculty. When a life is lost during the school year, leaders can expect the next few days or weeks of school to be very difficult for students and faculty. It is common for schools to bring in extra counselors, community members, and even local church staff to provide additional support. The number of people who will need additional support is often unknown, as students and communities respond differently in different situations. It is also important for school leaders to communicate with faculty regarding what is expected of them. Teachers need to know what changes will be made to the school day, how they should conduct the class, and how to respond to students and colleagues who are having exceptional difficulties dealing with the situation.

As a high school principal, I received a call from a local pastor late one Saturday night, just a few weeks into the school year. The pastor informed me that there had been an automobile accident involving several of our students and that there was one fatality. I immediately drove to the scene of the accident where emergency crews were still on hand and a number of students had gathered just a few hundred feet from the accident. Although I had experienced these types of situations numerous times as an assistant principal, I was not sure what to expect when Monday morning arrived. The student was
a football player, so I had already met with the football team and many of the parents on Sunday afternoon. Much of that afternoon and evening had been spent communicating with community members and district office personnel to prepare for Monday morning. I also called a faculty meeting for first thing Monday morning to inform the faculty of the situation and to instruct them on procedures for that day. As a relatively new school, the faculty had not yet experienced such a tragedy as a group. The emphasis of my message to the faculty was to be sensitive, to be flexible, and to meet the needs of the students as best possible. As the students began to arrive on campus, we invited them to report directly to the auditorium, where we had small-group counselors available while faculty members throughout the building were involved in less formal counseling situations. Students were allowed to leave class if they needed to, and those who wanted to cope with the situation by continuing with their routines were encouraged to do so. It was not easy, but many in the building turned to their faith, and almost everyone turned to others, for support.

There are many other emergency situations that can occur off campus but still have a significant impact on a school. For example, a school that is located in a high-crime area may experience community issues that overflow into the school. The concerns may be anything from the destruction of school property to gang activity near the campus. Although the criminal activity may not be as prevalent during the school day, the fears and anxieties of the students do not disappear when students walk through the school doors. A study by Milam (2010) indicated that exposure to perceived safety concerns and community violence had an adverse effect on the academic performance of students, even at the elementary level.
An off-campus natural or man-made disaster may have a significant impact on a community but not a direct impact on the school building. School leaders must still be prepared to address students who are affected by this type of crisis, some whose families and homes may have been affected. In those situations it is in order for the school to be a place of support and normalcy. The school may also be able to play a major role in supplying basic needs to families such as food, shelter, and clothing. An example of a man-made disaster might be a chemical spill or an explosion in the area. Although it is common to have a plan in place for inclement weather, it is difficult to plan for an almost unlimited number of man-made-crisis scenarios.

From the examples just discussed, it should be clear that school leaders are responsible to respond to off-campus situations. However, there are many other potential situations in which the expectations of the school’s involvement are not as clear. What if the student is seriously injured in a fight that took place off campus? How should the school deal with a threat to harm students that occurred off campus? What is a school leader’s responsibility regarding emergencies involving students waiting at a school bus stop, driving to or from a school event, or skipping school? Although answers to these questions may vary from one district to the next, it is important for school leaders to understand their role in off-campus emergencies.

**Human Relations in Crisis Management**

**The Human Element.** The unpredictable nature of a natural disaster adds to the difficulty of dealing with the crisis, but human behavior potentially adds an unpredictable element as well. To respond to this factor, school leaders can improve the emergency preparedness process through effective communication and relationship building. From a
preparation standpoint, students and faculty need to feel that they can trust leaders in a crisis situation. A consistent pattern of open communication and sincere caring for the well-being of students establishes a climate of trust. When students and faculty believe that school leaders hear and address safety concerns appropriately, effective communication is more likely to occur.

Accompanying most stories of a school tragedy are examples of adults and students who reacted in a heroic manner. When student safety is threatened, there are often those who put their own safety at risk to protect and care for others. These selfless individuals are an important part of dealing with a school crisis and serve as positive models of how the human element may be beneficial in times of crisis. Conversely, a negative aspect of the human element during a crisis situation is that humans can respond in an inappropriate, even harmful, manner. One such situation involved a bomb threat at a high school. Because of the seriousness of the threat and the location of the school, students were not only evacuated from the school but were relocated to an alternate site, which was a church several blocks from the school building. As students were escorted from the school to the church, numerous students attempted to exit the school grounds in a different direction or to run across the street to their personal vehicles. This resulted in an unsafe situation as students crossed a busy street. Once most of the students had settled in at the church, panicked parents began to arrive, demanding they be allowed to take their students home. With 2,500 students spread throughout the church building, it was difficult to find students or to determine if in fact the adult requesting to take the child was actually the child’s parent. The conflict between school personnel wanting to protect the students and parents demanding access to their children was a challenge
throughout the afternoon. Similar situations transpire during any school crisis, as parents are immediately made aware of the situation via cell phone, text, or social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Parents may often arrive on campus within just minutes of the crisis. Fortunately, schools are beginning to use technology to their benefit by communicating with parents through email, text, and websites to broadcast information instantaneously regarding emergency situations.

Ensuring procedures are in place to communicate with parents before, during, and after a crisis situation is an essential component of any school emergency plan, but even more critical is a communication plan for students. Such a plan may be instrumental in preventing a student-initiated crisis by increasing awareness and providing resources for troubled students. Although not all acts of school violence involve troubled students, many school tragedies are carried out by students who have shown signs of disturbing behavior. To be proactive in identifying and responding to these signs, schools should have in place a process for students to report school safety issues such as bullying, sexual harassment, and any criminal behavior that negatively impacts the school climate. Two effective measures in this process are (1) training adults to be aware of signs that indicate disturbing behavior and (2) providing a specific place for students to discuss concerns. Programs to educate students in personal safety and crime prevention may also be helpful.

Another preventive measure to reduce human-initiated school emergencies is a clear and consistent behavior management plan. Although students may not always admit it, they feel safer when firm discipline guidelines are in place. Firm discipline must be tempered with common sense and caring, but dealing with minor discipline
issues quickly and consistently will reduce the likelihood of the development of more serious disciplinary problems. The contrary is also true; when students receive only minor consequences for violence or weapon possession, they are more prone to become repeat offenders. Although zero-tolerance policies are occasionally implemented without a reasonable amount of common sense, the point has been made in many schools that weapons of any kind will not be tolerated.

Although school administrators cannot prevent every instance of evil in their schools, they can indeed implement both proactive and reactive measures to minimize them. One misconception that school leaders often have is that all school crises are distinct instances to be dealt with individually and in a reactive manner. However, Cornell and Sheras (1998) found that most crisis situations are the culmination of a series of individual instances that have been improperly handled, which in turn creates a campus culture ripe for such an unfortunate incident. For example, a school that does not deal with fighting, weapons, or bullying in a serious manner invites the escalation of more serious incidents in the future.

Collaboration with Outside Agencies. In the case of a serious emergency, the first call may be to an organization outside of the school. A call to 911 summons assistance from police, the fire department, or medical personnel in a matter of minutes. Building a positive relationship with these organizations improves communication and ultimately improves the probability of a quick and adequate response.

One of the benefits of building a relationship with outside organizations is familiarity with the school. For example, if police were called to a large high school campus to deal with an act of violence, familiarity with all entrances and exits, access to
the building, navigation of hallways, and so on shaves precious moments off their response time. Furthermore, familiarity with emergency personnel reduces student anxiety and increases cooperation during a crisis situation. It is also beneficial to request emergency personnel to assist in the preparation of the crisis management plan.

Full-time school police officers, often referred to as school resource officers (SROs), have become common, especially on secondary campuses. Although the SRO program began in the 1950s, it gained prominence in the 1990s in response to several school shootings. Today, over a third of all public schools report having an SRO (Weiler & Cray, 2011). These officers are often mistakenly perceived as serving dual roles. They are employees of the local police department but are also often mistakenly perceived as employees of the school by teachers, students, and parents. When officers are placed in a school setting on a full-time basis, their effectiveness can be increased through relationships and familiarity with students, faculty, and facilities. When SROs interact with students on a daily basis, the students are often more comfortable interacting with them during a crisis situation than they would be with officers with whom they are unfamiliar. Another proactive benefit of a police officer on campus is that students might share concerns or information when they otherwise would not have contacted the local police department.

There are many other outside organizations that interact with schools during school emergencies or to help prevent them. Social services and mental health facilities can work with students and families to help avert dangerous behaviors. Organizations such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and local churches provide much-needed assistance after a crisis or disaster. Building positive relationships with outside
organizations benefits both the school and the outside organization. Common partnerships, for example, involve local fire and police departments. In such partnerships, firefighters and police officers visit campuses to conduct safety seminars and to mentor students who express an interest in serving as a future firefighter or law enforcement officer. These relationships are positive public relations for public safety entities and also reduce the anxiety that students sometimes feel around emergency personnel.

**Communication.** One of the most important aspects of dealing with a crisis situation is communication. As mentioned in the section on developing a crisis management plan, communicating in a clear and concise manner is crucial. Putting a plan in writing is just the beginning of communicating emergency preparedness plans. When communicating emergency procedures, administrators must make sure that the right people are getting the necessary information. For instance, students need to know the location of the nearest exit and understand the procedures for exiting the building in an orderly fashion, but they do not need to know where the bullhorn or two-way radios are located.

Crisis management information should be provided to different groups on a need-to-know basis. Neither students nor parents need to possess a copy of the entire crisis management plan. They do, however, need to understand certain procedures, locations, and contact personnel. Emergency information can be distributed to students during an assembly in a small school or through classroom teachers in a larger environment. Most schools provide practice activities, such as fire or tornado drills, to familiarize students
with common emergency situations. Students may also be instructed on what to do during a lockdown, evacuation, intruder alert, or severe weather.

Teachers and support personnel need to understand emergency procedures at a much higher level. This information may be communicated to teachers at faculty meetings, through personal communication, or via electronic communication for less urgent matters. Teachers need to be instructed on how and where to direct their students, what part they will play in securing the building, what will happen after the emergency is over, and how they will find and convey information. Because teachers are most likely to be an integral part of managing a crisis situation, they may be asked to care directly for an entire class of students. Teachers need to be familiar with the basic aspects of an emergency plan and may also need information on emergency equipment such as fire extinguishers and AEDs as well as whom to contact for support. The larger the school, the more important the role of the teacher will be, as the administration cannot be in every classroom. It is important that the teachers have enough information to deal with the situation appropriately, but not so much as to confuse their role.

School leaders, primarily principals and assistant principals, often carry the responsibility of providing and managing school emergency plans. Furthermore, they will most likely be an integral part of guiding, directing, and making decisions during a crisis situation. It is important that key leaders throughout the school are familiar with the entire crisis management plan.

**Media Relations.** “Never have a school emergency on a slow news day” is an adage that principals might wish they could follow but over which they have no control. The media is quick to report a school crisis, especially one that is dramatic. What
constitutes a news story may not always be consistent, depending on the day and location. A school emergency in a small town may be newsworthy, whereas a similar situation in a large city might go unreported. Likewise, a school emergency on a typical day might not make its way into the news at all, but on a slow news day, the same situation could become a prominent story.

A concern for school leaders is that the media may not accurately report a crisis situation. For lack of accurate information, comments and opinions from students and parents may be used to fill in the gaps, and this information may or may not accurately reflect the situation. The most effective strategy for school leaders to avoid one-sided reporting is to ensure the media have accurate information from the standpoint of the school. Rarely does a school leader improve the situation by refusing to make comments to the media. There are occasions in which information may be delayed during an investigation or comments may be deferred to district office personnel, but the key is to be reasonably cooperative with the media and to share appropriate information when it is available.

School leaders also gain favor with the media by building positive relationships during non-crisis situations. Sharing information and providing positive stories about your school builds goodwill among media outlets and with the community. Inviting members of the media into the school for special events can be a win-win situation for the school and members of the local media. School leaders who seem friendly and cooperative when called upon by a reporter improve their chances of receiving the benefit of the doubt when an emergency situation is reported.

[H2]Funding of School Safety
There are many ways to improve school safety at little or no expense to the school or school district. Developing an emergency preparedness plan and providing information to school faculty may require little more than the time involved to develop and disseminate the information. Unfortunately, there are also many potential safety needs that are difficult to address without significant funding.

Funding needs may include personnel expenses such as hiring a school nurse or a school resource officer. These are ongoing expenses that would need to be included in a school’s annual budget. There are also facility and program issues that require a recurring expense or at least a one-time purchase. For example, installing railings on a stairway might be a one-time expense, whereas installing additional lights in the parking lot would result in a one-time expense as well as an ongoing electrical expense.

School leaders may be required to make difficult decisions regarding dollars spent on safety. Leaders can also impact safety funding by being advocates for their schools before district-level officials or school boards. The principal should communicate school safety needs to those making financial decisions within the school district. If principals believe there is a safety need, but there are no district funds available, they may need to pursue outside funding sources such as grants, business partners, or fundraising events.

**Conclusion**

Crisis management is one of the most difficult aspects of school leadership. Although school leaders can prepare general guidelines for some of the most common emergencies, most occur unexpectedly with little or no time to plan—only time to react. Even when thorough crisis management plans are in place, they may not be appropriate, as every crisis is different. They do, however, need to be thorough and yet reasonable,
prepared and yet flexible. Then, when school leaders find themselves in a crisis situation, they are better prepared to be decisive but cautious, firm but caring—always acting in the best interest of the students.

Although increased media attention has heightened anxiety in students and parents regarding safety, school campuses continue to be one of the safest places a child can be. Despite media attention given to school violence, it is not on the rise. In fact, incidents of school violence have been declining in the past two decades (Neuman, 2012).

A reasonable approach to school safety is needed. School leaders cannot totally eliminate the possibility of a school crisis, and trying to anticipate every possible safety scenario will cause anxiety and confusion. Educators may be better served when they try not to make schools like prisons or develop excessive emergency plans and procedures. Just as automobile drivers will buckle their seat belts and try to drive in a safe manner—all the while understanding that an automobile accident is always a possibility—educators should manage schools with a similar attitude, adopting reasonable precautions and guidelines to make school as safe as possible.
References


