



Emergency Preparation & Crisis Planning

Resources

- Emergency Planning, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, US Department of Education,

<http://www.ed.gov/emergencyplan/>.

Offers numerous resources for schools related to emergency preparedness for terrorism and violence.

- Decker, R.H. (1997). When a Crisis Hits Will Your School Be Ready?

Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

This book provides numerous checklists and other practical information on crisis management for schools.

- Hill, M. S. & Hill, F. W. (1993). Creating Safe Schools: What Principals Can Do. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

- Quarles, C. L. (1993). Staying Safe at School. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

These two books, one oriented towards teachers and the other for principals address a variety of topics including legal rights, prevention, victimization, crisis planning and related topics.

- Poland, S & McCormick, J. (1999). Coping with Crisis: Lessons Learned, A Resource for Schools, Parents, and Communities. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

This book is an excellent guide to the issues involved while a crisis is occurring, as well as after the immediate crisis is over.

- The National School Safety Center (NSSC), 4165 Thousand Oaks Blvd., Suite 290, Westlake Village CA 91362, 805-373-9977, Fax 805-373-9277;

<http://www.nssc1.org>

This center is a resource to schools in planning related to crisis prevention, management and aftermath, and offers many resources including training for school staff.

In spite of our best efforts, emergency situations can still happen in schools.

Therefore, it makes sense to prepare for the worst situations so that, if they were to occur, the risks can be minimized. Schools may employ many strategies to prevent violence from occurring, but one of the lessons of recent school shooting incidents is that these incidents can happen anywhere. Preparation can minimize the likelihood of death or injury during a violent crisis situation, and possibly influence a more positive outcome than would otherwise have occurred.

Many states now require an “emergency plan”, sometimes called “safety” or “crisis” plans, for each school building which addresses a wide variety of emergency situations that might occur in schools (Decker, 1997). Emergencies might include fires or explosions, bomb threats, natural disasters, hazardous materials emergencies, suicides, accidents, as well as violence or behavioral emergencies. While some of the planning and preparations for these situations may be similar to each other, this fact sheet focuses on those emergencies involving violence or behavior such as fights, shootings, the use of weapons in school, hostage or kidnapping situations and the like.

What is Emergency Planning or Crisis Preparation?

Emergency planning is a process to make sure that as many people as possible know what to do during various emergency situations, that as many people as possible are protected from violence while a potentially violent situation is occurring, and that the safety resources needed in these situations are available when and where needed within a school. The emphasis here is what to do while the crisis is occurring. There may also be important actions that should be taken immediately after a crisis situation. (See fact sheet on “Crisis Response Following a Crisis”)

There are a variety of topics that become critical to managing a crisis or emergency situation while it is occurring for which planning, training of staff, and practice might be important (Poland & McCormick, 1999). Most of these issues are also different for each school building due to differences in architecture, location, and community setting. Effective emergency management plans require creativity, careful analysis, actual practice and regular updates to create plans that are specific to that building. Checklists are available to assist schools in the process (Decker, 1997; Hill & Hill, 1994). As a part of the planning and training process, some examples of the topics that should be addressed may include:

Communications. It is essential to know how communications will occur during an emergency situation in a school. Knowledge about the number of telephone lines in a school building, where they may be accessed, and how to interrupt busy lines to make an emergency call should be provided to staff. Training should be provided to staff including school secretaries regarding how to make a 911 call and the importance of maintaining contact with the 911 dispatcher until police arrive at the scene. While individual or school cell phones can be useful, experience has shown that they are unreliable during a school emergency. As a result, many schools have found two-way radios very useful. If there is an intercom system, its features and limitations should be understood for maximum usefulness during various emergency situations.

Command and Control. One person should be designated as the person in command on behalf of the school during a crisis situation. Once police arrive, they will designate an officer in charge. However, it is important that someone on the school staff be in charge until police arrive and serve as a police command liaison after they arrive, thus establishing a command center. While the liaison might be the principal, alternates should be identified in the absence or incapacity of building administrators. Several other roles are important in an emergency including securing the environment, dealing with parents and

media, and obtaining information about perpetrators. These should also be defined and discussed with numerous staff capable of assuming responsibilities for these roles depending on the nature of the emergency and the actual people available during that specific emergency.

Access. Many schools now have floor plans on file with local police and fire officials, as well as other locations in the building. Knowledge of who has keys and how to access all spaces in a building is also important. Some schools have numbered their entrances/exits and corridors to facilitate identification of the locations of an emergency situation and to more easily direct emergency responders.

Dealing with Media. Unfortunately, news media might arrive at a school crisis situation before the police. It is important for school personnel to know their legal rights in dealing with media, as well as the needs and expectations of media to prevent them from exacerbating the situation. Typically, effective media relations might require that a school staff member be assigned to provide information to the media and to manage their presence on the scene during an extended emergency situation.

Dealing with Parents. If word of an emergency situation at a school were to become known in the community, many parents might phone the school or even arrive in person. School staff should plan for this situation and have prepared strategies to deal with parents in these situations.

Containment Procedures. While evacuation of a school may be appropriate in some emergency situations, most often with potential violence emergencies a “lock-down” procedure is more appropriate. One immediate goal in a crisis is to contain the crisis in order to prevent additional students or staff from becoming engaged in the crisis inadvertently. A lock-down is typically accomplished by having a signal that triggers all teachers to lock their classroom doors, not letting anyone in or out. Other staff is assigned to secure students or others in corridors, rest rooms, and other spaces, and to account for all students and staff in these locked spaces. Sometimes partial or a complete evacuation of a building where the crisis is occurring is needed. Unlike a fire evacuation, these may require that all students and staff assemble at a predetermined safe location within the school, or some distance away from the school. Like fire evacuation, these procedures need to be practiced and tested from time to time, with the resulting experience used to improve and fine-tune procedures.

Obtaining Information. In an emergency, it will be critical to be able to obtain records and information about students who might be involved in the crisis. This could include a variety of records (enrollment, special education, grades, etc.) which may be located in multiple places or computer systems and require password-protected access. Therefore planning for accessing these records when normal procedures or access terminals are disrupted is essential.

First Aid, CPR, and Medical Supplies. An adequate number of staff should be trained in first aid and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and, if not, this training should be provided. Adequate first aid supplies, including complete

trauma kits, should be located in multiple sites throughout each school to improve access when a portion of the building might be inaccessible.

Conflict De-escalation Procedures. Skills at negotiation and conflict de-escalation are critical during an emergency. These skills are also important conflict prevention skills, and require staff training and practice.

What Do We Know About Emergency Planning?

While there is virtually no empirical research related to emergency planning or management in schools related to violence or behavior, there is much evidence that planning and preparation can minimize the impact of an emergency or crisis situations. The process is similar to the emergency planning that occurs at the community level for natural disasters and other situations typically coordinated by a county or city emergency preparedness teams. Such preparations for disasters can save lives, prevent injury, and protect property. The value of this planning has been proven in numerous emergency and disaster situations of all kinds.

Making It Work

In order to appropriately prepare for emergencies, a committee which includes the school leadership team, representatives of local police, fire and emergency preparedness departments, physical plant engineers, as well as teachers and other staff should be charged with identifying issues, writing a school plan, obtaining necessary training, and developing drills and simulations to practice and improve the plans (Quarles, 1993). This team may be the same team that develops security plans to prevent emergency situations and which develops post-crisis response plans, though these responsibilities may also be spread among several committees.

Once plans are drafted, it is critical to inform all school staff regarding the plans so that they are aware of the concepts underlying the plans. Also, appropriate training and practice drills or simulations must be conducted and plans modified based on careful analysis. It is also important for all to recognize that flexibility and adaptability are essential in the implementation of plans; while general plans are important, any plan needs to be adapted to the specific circumstances of the particular emergency.

Summary

Discussion, planning, training and practice are each important to make a school staff effective during an emergency situation. Such preparedness may minimize the negative effects of a crisis and protect people and property.

Reece L. Peterson, June, 2002

References

- Decker, R.H. (1997). *When a Crisis Hits Will Your School Be Ready?* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Hill, M. S., & Hill, F. W. (1994). *Creating Safe Schools: What Principals Can Do.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Poland, S., & McCormick, J. (1999). *Coping with Crisis: Lessons Learned, A Resource for Schools, Parents, and Communities.* Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Quarles, C. L. (1993). *Staying Safe at School.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

About the Safe and Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing prevention-based approaches to school safety, discipline reform and behavior improvement in schools.

Websites: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/> or <http://www.unl.edu/srs/> Or Contact:

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