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School Crisis Plans: Are You Prepared?

Developing emergency response protocols is a challenging yet critical aspect of school leadership.

By David A. Dolph, Ph.D.

The majority of states have statutes requiring school districts to develop school safety plans focused on preventing and responding to crisis situations. Plans may include protocols for disseminating school safety plans to appropriate personnel; mandatory fire, tornado, or active drills; and community involvement.

Although the degree of comprehensiveness of those plans depends on state legislation, all should include the basic elements offered here, focused on creating secure school environments.

Emergency Management Phases

School safety plans should be written clearly and available to all stakeholders. Individual plans should be based on local school district and building characteristics and formulated in conjunction with community members.

The four phases of emergency management are 1) prevention and mitigation, 2) preparedness and planning, 3) response, and 4) recovery (HSEM 2011).

Prevention and Mitigation

The first component of crisis management focuses on prevention. This stage includes safety audits of school facilities, identification of local resources, and review of traffic patterns related to emergency situations (Kowalski 2011).

School safety audits—conducted by trained school officials or outside experts, such as police or fire personnel—should include analyses of current policies, including student and staff behavior expectations; opportunities for obtaining police, fire, and hospital services; analyses of physical infrastructures, such as surveillance equipment, building access,

windows, lighting, staff and student identification systems, parking lots, locker rooms and restrooms; and visitor controls.

Floor plans for all buildings should indicate room number systems, shelter areas, entrances and exits, and locations of utility controls, such as gas, electric, and fire. Safety plans should include the location of such equipment as automated external defibrillators, cameras, fire alarms, and fire extinguishers.

District leaders should review student discipline data that could identify chronic issues affecting the safety of staff and students. At the same time, teaching positive student behavior should be emphasized.

Building safety plans should include the locations of area businesses, highways, other transportation modes, and community resources, such as police, fire, hospital, media, counseling, and emergency management personnel. Unique community characteristics that might affect school operations should also be identified.

Preparedness and Planning

Preparedness consists of developing school safety plans, determining who responds to emergencies, and outlining courses of action during emergencies. Preparedness also includes planning for central office, building, and community coordination during emergency situations; holding drills; and forming building and district-wide response teams to react during crises.

District-level response teams are ordinarily responsible for developing school emergency plans in conjunction with appropriate community organizations, such as police and fire departments, and for ensuring training and drill opportunities for staff members and students. District teams may also be responsible for monitoring and recording school district and building compliance with all statutory requirements.

District teams are usually composed of superintendents, principals, maintenance and custodial supervisors, food service directors, key teachers, and district public relations officials. If available, school resource officers and school nurses should be involved.

Individual school buildings should also have response or crisis teams that can adapt to those unique environments in emergencies. Building teams include building administrators; food service, custodial, and secretarial personnel; nurses; teachers; and if available, school resource officers. Kowalski (2011) suggests building crisis or response team members should be individuals who are respected in the schools and communities, who are adept at communication, and who are capable of dealing with stress.

Additional aspects of preparedness include risk assessment strategies, inventories of staff skills relative to emergency management, prescribed drills, and staff training in safety procedures and communication protocols (HSEM 2011).

The response phase puts the plans selected by school business officials and other education leaders into action to respond to crises.

Response

The third phase of emergency management is response. Response is the process of actualizing corrective procedures to deal with and manage emergency situations. In other words, the response phase puts the plans selected by school business officials and other education leaders into action to respond to crises. Response may include lockdown, shelter in place, reverse evacuation, severe weather shelter, evacuation and relocation, and reunification dependent on the nature of the emergency (HSEM 2011).

Lockdowns protect staff and students from intruders entering buildings. Shelter in place is used when evacuation to designated shelter areas is more dangerous than remaining in the current location. Reverse evacuation, as the name implies, is implemented when conditions are safer in buildings than outside. Severe weather shelter is proper when bad weather poses danger to schools. Evacuation takes place

when the appropriate administrators deem conditions in buildings unsafe. Finally, student reunification and release protocols occur when appropriate.

These procedures should be communicated to parents and guardians at the beginning of each school year and reviewed regularly.

The time required for recovery varies and is proportional to the level of trauma experienced by students and staff and the damage to facilities.

Recovery

The fourth phase of emergency management is recovery, the act of returning schools to normal operations as soon as possible. The recovery process includes restoration of the physical and structural, fiscal and business, academic, and emotional dimensions of school organizations (HSEM 2011). The time required for recovery varies and is proportional to the level of trauma experienced by students and staff and the damage to facilities. Recovery can take hours, days, or even weeks.

In looking at recovery in more detail, each level requires different activities for school business officials and others to consider and implement. For example, physical and structural recovery entails assessing the damage and determining whether repair or replacement is the most feasible strategy. Physical and structural recovery can encompass relocation, transportation, and food service considerations, in addition to repair or relocation of facilities. Fiscal and business recovery can include restoration of systems pertaining to payroll, accounting, purchasing, and personnel, as well as student data. Academic recovery focuses on returning learning environments to normal by working with teachers and technology, transportation, food service, and buildings and grounds personnel.

The final aspect of recovery deals with helping all stakeholders cope with a crisis and its aftermath. This should include providing counseling or other avenues of support for students, staff members, and other stakeholders.

Recommendations for Planning

Kowalski (2011) suggests a seven-step process for safety and security planning:

1. **Define which events qualify as emergencies or crises.** Typically, violent acts or threats of violence, intruders, terrorism, natural disasters, student or employee death, and infrastructure failures are all considered school crises. Different types of crises require varying levels and types of responses; therefore, it is important to define specific levels of crises when developing responses.

2. **Review and understand the four phases of emergency management: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.**

3. **Appoint crisis team members at both the district and building levels.** Selecting appropriate team members requires prudence and thoughtfulness—people on these teams with the wrong expertise or temperament can make a difficult task more complicated.

4. **Conduct safety and security audits.** Gillens (2005) suggests dividing the audit process into three subtasks: (a) policy analysis, (b) infrastructure and asset identification, and (c) assessment of opportunities for acquiring services that prevent crises and help return schools to normal operations.

5. **Develop safety plans.** This critical part of safety planning includes such activities as identifying planning teams, reviewing any existing plans, determining roles on crisis teams, developing methods of communication, writing plan documents, and collecting the necessary supplies for plan implementation (Kowalski 2011).

6. **Train students and staff members in how to implement plans in times of crisis.** This step is best accomplished by presenting the plans and practicing drills that simulate various crises and appropriate responses.

7. **Evaluate the plan.** Plans should be evaluated after incidents or drills and reviewed annually. Only through summative and formative evaluation can plans be improved.

Conclusion

Developing emergency response protocols in the form of school safety plans is a challenging task for school business managers and other district leaders; however, it is critical to successful school leadership. Failure to understand state regulations or essential components of emergency planning can ultimately compromise the safety of a school's staff and students.

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