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## **Emergency Preparedness**

### ***Phases and the all-hazards approach***

By Darlene Marsh and Beth McCullough

There was a chill in the air on the morning of April 16, 2007 in Blacksburg, Virginia. Gunshots rang out in two buildings on the campus of Virginia Tech, killing 33 and wounding at least 150 other students and faculty. This stunning, violent act by a lone gunman became the worst mass shooting in the history of our nation.

We were editing this article, specifically the opening paragraph, on the day the Virginia Tech shootings occurred. At that point, the relevance of what we were writing took on new meaning.

What were your immediate thoughts when you first learned of the shooting on the Virginia Tech campus? Disbelief? Flashes of news reports from previous campus shootings across the U.S.? Could a tragedy of this magnitude happen in my school or school district? Would we be prepared to handle an emergency like this?

Working through an emergency does not have to be a negative experience. Yes, the emergency itself may be a tragedy or unfortunate occurrence, but the way your organization navigates the situation can be affirming and even an opportunity to increase the level of trust that your community has in your organization.

In the event of a crisis, the best tool you can have in your arsenal is emergency preparedness. Recent research on effective crisis management practices reveals no simple solution or “quick fix” to ensure school safety. Preparing for an emergency requires extensive planning, strong partnerships, open communication, regular training and practice, and constant review and revision. The more time and effort you spend on emergency preparedness, the less likely the chances of crisis injury and loss.

An emergency preparedness plan should take an “all hazards” approach and include all emergencies, from pandemic flu responses to active shooter situations to natural disasters and more. In its document, *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*, the U.S. Department of Education proposes four phases of emergency preparedness.

- **Mitigation and prevention:** Addresses what schools and districts can do to reduce or eliminate risk to life and property.
- **Preparedness:** Focuses on the process of planning for the worst-case scenario.
- **Response:** Devoted to the steps to take during a crisis.
- **Recovery:** Deals with how to restore the learning and teaching environment after a school crisis.

### **Mitigation and prevention**

In describing mitigation and prevention, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) notes that these activities can take place before or after an emergency, and the goal is to decrease the need for response as opposed to simply increasing response capability.

Obviously, schools have no control over some emergencies that may occur, such as hurricanes or acts of terrorism. However, schools can take action to mitigate or minimize the impact of the emergencies. It is important to address the safety of the school grounds and facilities, security, and the culture and climate of the schools. Emergency responders in your community can help in identifying facility vulnerabilities by conducting hazard assessments. Activities such as implementing procedures for building access or fencing hazardous areas on school grounds may address the weaknesses.

Look for ways to avoid a crisis by identifying and responding to warning signs and developing policies and programs to help troubled youth. From a study of 37 school shootings from 1974-2000, the U.S. Secret Service identified early warning signs that the shooters displayed prior to the attacks. These include social withdrawal, excessive feeling of isolation, being a victim of violence, depression, feelings of rejection and bullying.

Does your school have prevention programs and procedures in place that can offer assistance to students who present some of these signs? The study revealed that 81 percent of the school shooters told someone they were planning the attack. With this in mind, the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, run by the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, established an anonymous statewide tip line for reporting potential threats to school safety.

### **Preparedness**

Partnerships are critical in emergency preparedness. By incorporating the expertise of law enforcement, the medical community, fire, rescue, and emergency operations professionals, any school or district can create a plan that will enable everyone affiliated with emergency response to effectively support the district in an emergency.

Each region of our nation varies with its weather patterns, environmental concerns, population, and other factors that could lead to a crisis. A well-crafted plan will be inclusive enough to adapt to any type of emergency. The plan and the individuals who implement it must be flexible in utilizing and adapting it to fit the emergency at hand. As stated in the *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*, being prepared involves much time and effort, but “will facilitate a rapid, coordinated, effective response when a crisis occurs.”

By practicing lockdowns in schools on a regular basis, students and staff can calmly handle a real lockdown situation. Media training for all administrators allows a district to speak in a unified voice and have a uniform plan for managing communications in day-to-day interaction and especially during a crisis. Tabletop exercises allow administrators to simulate a crisis and improve their response skills without the pressure of the “real thing.”

Though a large undertaking, a full-scale crisis drill is an excellent measuring stick for emergency preparedness. A drill of this type requires board support, approximately a year of preparation, and the commitment of schools and emergency responders.

### **Response**

Speed is key. In every aspect of an emergency, leaders absolutely must respond quickly. Having fluid, well-constructed emergency plans allow decision-makers to succinctly and efficiently

work through the many areas of managing a crisis. Strong communication, both internally and externally, is not important, but essential.

How many organizations have you seen criticized in the media for failing to react quickly to an emergency? One valuable lesson you learn from dealing with the media daily is to respond quickly. Reporters are generally on tight deadlines. If they don't get a response, they will find someone else to quote. The same idea holds true for your organization's stakeholders. If a student, parent, employee, or community member hears a rumor, they may assume it is fact unless you correct it.

Team is key. Having a small group of individuals trained in emergency response allows an organization to work efficiently and respond quickly to all areas of need.

Versatility is key. The all-hazards approach is based on versatility in responding to any type of crisis. National, state, and local government plans are based on an all hazards approach. No matter what the crisis, the plan can be implemented.

### **Recovery**

Just as medical assistance is applied to the physically wounded, both students and staff will most likely be wounded "psychologically." The major goal of recovery is to provide a caring and supportive environment and return to the business of learning as soon as possible. However, it is suggested to take as long as needed for recovery.

In any crisis the public wants to know, "Am I safe?" Your job, in leadership and communication, is to the public. Be clear, concise, factual, and caring as you do so. Counseling services should be established in your emergency preparedness plan and implemented if a crisis or emergency occurs.

A critical step in crisis planning is to evaluate each incident to strengthen the plan. Chances are the crisis was not handled perfectly because most are not. If we do not learn from our mistakes, we are destined to repeat them. Ask questions. What worked? What did not work? What can we do more effectively? As seen in crises in schools throughout the nation, evaluating the incident leads to more efficient responses.

We would all prefer to know the best ways of handling an emergency before one occurs; however, there are instances in which the only way to fully understand the effect of a crisis on an organization is to experience one. Through the fires of a crisis is born the ability to analyze and evaluate your response and, as a result, make improvements that will better equip your organization to handle future emergencies.

Each year schools across our nation face crisis situations caused by campus violence, acts of nature like tornados and hurricanes, environmental hazards, and other instigators. None of us can assume our schools will not face similar emergencies. Our responsibility as leaders requires us to step forward and take the time to ensure that the best possible emergency preparedness plans are in place for the safety of the students and staff we serve.

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