

Research

Sound crisis management means being prepared for the worst

When Disaster Strikes

By Susan Black

Lockdown! Moving calmly but handling a fast-breaking crisis with lightning speed, an elementary principal secured her school inside and out.

I was in the building visiting prekindergarten programs when the principal, two-way radio in hand, informed me that two sheriff's deputies had been killed near the school. Police reports said the suspects were "armed and very dangerous."

The principal tapped out a message on her office computer. Then, in a steady voice, she announced over the school intercom, "Staff, please read your e-mail now." The protocol, she later explained, was to alert the staff without alarming children—and, above all else, to ensure the safety of teachers and kids.

In cases like this, when danger looms large, district guidelines call for an extreme lockdown—meaning movement in and out of the building is severely restricted. Children are quickly assembled and accounted for. Key cards used to gain

entry from outside are disabled. Buses are cancelled, and parents are notified by phone and local radio stations about procedures for dismissing students.

Some situations require judgment calls. The principal ran across the street to bring a class of fifth-graders, attending a program at a community center, back inside the school. Then she shepherded children from the school's library—an open area with floor-to-ceiling windows—to their classrooms.

Back at her desk the next day, with the school in limited lockdown, the principal looked tired but relieved. "A few children are still worried," she said, "but overall we're back to business as usual." (The suspects were caught after a two-day, two-state manhunt.)

Safety in numbers

Most schools go about their daily business without threat of violence or danger from disasters. In fact, the federal government's 2000 *Report on School Safety*, issued by the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, says schools are "becoming even safer."

The National Center for Education Statistics also reports that schools are relatively safe. From July 1999 to June 2000, according to the NCEs *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2003*, violent deaths in or around schools totaled 32, including 24 homicides.

Sixteen students were homicide victims, but young people ages 5-19 were 70 times more likely to be murdered away from school than at school. (NCES will publish an updated report on school safety later this year.)

The studies also indicate that certain in-school crimes, such as theft, use of illicit drugs, and threats with weapons, have leveled off and, in some instances, declined. From 1995 to 2001, the percentage of students who reported being victims of crime at school decreased from 10 percent to 6 percent.

The statistics, if not exactly soothing, offer some reassurance. But, says Pauline Pagliocca, with Harvard University's Victims of Violence program, high-profile school shootings have fixed chilling images in the public mind. Many believe that, evidence to the contrary, schools are



generally unsafe and inner-city schools are downright dangerous.

Safety by law

Federal and state governments have taken steps to safeguard schools. Under the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act, for example, the U.S. Department of Education provides health services, drug- and violence-prevention programs, and correctional and character education.

Other school safety initiatives were recently added in an amendment to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Students who attend a persistently dangerous school or are victims of violent crime at school must be allowed to transfer to a safe school. NCLB also requires states to report on school safety to the public, and it requires school districts to implement drug and violence prevention programs “of demonstrated effectiveness.”

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks prompted federal officials to step up campaigns to make schools safe. After visiting Ground Zero, Education Secretary Rod Paige sent each chief state school officer suggestions for managing school crises. In March 2003, Paige and Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge announced a \$30 million program, renewed in 2004, that provides grant money to train staff, students, and parents in crisis response, buy equipment, coordinate crisis plans with local fire and police, and coordinate recovery efforts with local health agencies.

Many states also have school safety plans in place. New York’s SAVE (Safe Schools Against Violence in Education), a 2000 law, requires school districts to develop and maintain safety plans at the district and building levels. A handbook from the state Education Department guides school officials through three categories of plans:

1. Risk reduction/prevention and intervention plans. Includes security policies and procedures; logistic information, such as floor plans, for all school buildings; hazard assessment of playgrounds, athletic fields, and other sites; communication systems, such as a reporting process for violent events; and

training and drills in emergency response.

2. Response plans. Includes procedures for contacting law enforcement officials, parents, and other education agencies; methods for responding to intruders, explosions, weather-related problems, school bus accidents, gas leaks, hazardous material spills, and “critical incidents” such as civil disturbances, epidemics, and biological and radiological attacks; de-escalation strategies to lower threat levels; provisions for evacuation and shelters; and debriefing procedures once a crisis has passed.

3. Recovery plans. Includes collaboration with emergency response teams and local mental health agencies; and evaluation of prevention protocols.

Other states have legislated similar requirements for school safety. Georgia, for instance, requires schools to develop safety plans that address “growing school violence and natural disasters, hazardous materials or radiological accidents, and acts of terrorism.”

Know the drill

William Modzeleski, associate deputy undersecretary with the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, told *Education Week* that schools “have literally been going in a thousand different directions on emergency planning.” It’s important, he said, that schools follow a consistent crisis management plan while taking local factors—such as volatile racial relations and proximity to power plants—into account.

For starters, school leaders need to define and describe crisis events that could occur in their schools. In *Preparing for Crises in the Schools*, Stephen Brock, Jonathan Sandoval, and Sharon Lewis urge school officials to anticipate a wide range of possible crises, from shootings to earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters.

The Virginia Department of Education advises school boards to play a strong leadership role in crisis management. According to VDOE’s *Resource Guide for Crisis Management in Schools*, boards should establish a “policy foundation and framework” that convey the seriousness of emergency planning. Policies should stip-

What’s in your crisis-response bag?

PUTTING TOGETHER grab-and-go emergency items is an important part of crisis management. The Virginia Department of Education recommends that schools designate a School Crisis Control Center that’s responsible for filling emergency kits and classroom crisis bags with the following items:

- Chart of official crisis responsibilities
- Keys with clear identification to all doors in the school
- A floor plan that shows all exits, telephones and wall jacks, computers, and other communication devices
- Blueprints of all school buildings and layout of grounds
- Map of evacuation routes
- Staff roster indicating those with training in first aid, CPR, and EMT
- Cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses for staff and others
- Equipment, including two-way radio, cellular telephones with charged batteries, and bullhorn
- Phone lists for community emergency numbers, including sheriff and police, rescue and ambulance, fire departments, poison control center, and hospitals
- Phone lists for school offices, including the school nurse and security, counseling, and other support staff
- Phone lists for parents and guardians
- Student rosters with home and emergency phone numbers
- Master schedule
- Name tags and sign-in sheets for crisis responders
- Sample letters, statements, press releases, and e-mail messages that can be quickly modified to communicate about the crisis.

Source: Adapted from the Virginia Department of Education Resource Guide for Crisis Management in Schools, www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/model.html.

ulate all aspects of crisis management—from designing, updating, and implementing plans to rehearsing drills in the community, district, and school buildings.

Knowing the drill is at the heart of the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools' May 2003 *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*. The guide recommends that school administrators, crisis response teams, and other responders practice until they know the protocols for each phase of crisis management—prevention, preparation, response, and recovery—by heart.

Effective crisis planning involves paying attention to both large and small details. For example, the agency recommends informing local media about crisis communication plans long before a disaster strikes. And schools should attend to an often overlooked item—the evacuation of severely impaired children, such as those in wheelchairs and on ventilators, and children who don't speak fluent English.

Unanswered questions

Some schools have devised creative plans for crisis management. For instance,

Pennsylvania's Boyertown Area School District, located near a nuclear generating plant, designed a color-coded All Hazards Plan that covers accidents, bomb threats, evacuation, explosion, fire, hazardous materials, natural disasters, radiological emergencies, security situations, and casualties.

Georgia's Bulloch County Schools provides teachers and other staff members with a handheld flip chart that makes it easier to identify emergencies and follow required procedures. And North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg police department has created a computerized virtual tour of every school building. The program, stored on easy-to-carry laptops, includes maps of the school, aerial photographs of buildings and surrounding areas, and the location of areas such as closets and crawl spaces where frightened children—or suspected attackers—might hide.

Such efforts are commendable. But Pagliocca argues that school crisis-management plans—including those required by federal and state governments and those devised by local school officials—are based on "scant research and evaluation." The lack of well-controlled research on the effectiveness of school

crisis preparation and response leaves "many unanswered questions," she says.

One question concerns crisis drills, a provision included in most plans. A 1999 study by the International Association of Chiefs of Police concludes that mock drills can heighten students' perception of threats—and reveal security information to would-be attackers. The extent to which drills actually help schools prepare for a crisis is still unknown, Pagliocca says.

Another questionable practice is crisis counseling. Many schools use "critical incident stress debriefing" (CISD), a structured group method borrowed from psychosocial interventions with adult emergency responders that is aimed at preventing post-traumatic stress syndrome. But, Pagliocca notes, there is no supportive empirical evidence that psychological debriefing is an effective strategy to use with children.

Jerome Groopman, chair of medicine at Harvard Medical School and chief of experimental medicine at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, says many crisis counselors believe in the power of debriefing because of deeply held cultural beliefs—that "a single outpouring of emotion—one good cry," as Groopman puts it, can heal a wounded heart and mind.

Debriefings may be well-intentioned, but the technique has recently been discounted as unreliable. The Department of Defense, the Department of Justice, the American Red Cross, and the Department of Health and Human Services are among the many organizations that have recently abandoned CISD as a therapeutic method.

Perhaps no school crisis plan can be absolutely perfect. But school boards, legislators, government officials, and others responsible for crisis management have a responsibility to make sure their plans are based on the best information possible—to ensure, as Pagliocca puts it, that their plans are good policy, not just good politics.

Susan Black, an *ASBJ* contributing editor, is an education research consultant in Hammondsport, N.Y.

Selected references

Brock, Stephen, and others. *Preparing for Crises in the Schools: A Manual for Building School Crisis Response Teams*. 2nd ed. New York: Wiley, 2001.

Groopman, Jerome. "Annals of Medicine: The Grief Industry." *The New Yorker*, Jan. 26, 2004, pp. 30-38.

"Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2003." Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, October 2003. NCES 2004004; <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/crime03>.

Kramen, Allissa, and others. *Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence*. Alexandria, Va.: International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1999.

"Model School Crisis Management Plan." Richmond, Va.: Virginia Department of Education; www.pen.k12.

va.us/VDOE/Instruction/model.html.

Pagliocca, Pauline, and Amanda Nickerson. "Legislating School Crisis Response: Good Policy or Just Good Politics?" *Law & Policy*, July 2001, pp. 373-407.

"A Practical Guide for Crisis Response in Our Schools." Commack, N.Y.: American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, 2003; www.schoolcrisisresponse.com.

Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, May 2003; www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/.

Rubelen, Erik. "Agencies Offer Security Advice—and Money." *Education Week*, March 19, 2003.