



Robin L. Flanigan

Calming Fears, Creating Partners

Are your schools prepared to handle a crisis? Do parents turn to—not on—you when problems erupt?

The phone calls and e-mails had been pouring in for hours before the nonprofit Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) opened for business one morning last January. Anxious parents, some of them crying through their voicemail messages, were frightened by an episode of the “Boston Legal” television show that had aired the night before.

The plot centered on a peanut-allergic student who died within seconds after accepting a piece of candy from a classmate. The teacher, who was on her cell phone with her back to the class when the reaction began, tried unsuccessfully to stop the reaction with an epinephrine injection and was subsequently sued by the student’s family.

The family lost.

Though televised fiction, the storyline is an all-too-real possibility for thousands of students in U.S. schools. Even though the episode misrepresented a few key facts about food allergies—fatalities do not occur 20 seconds after ingestion of an allergic substance, for instance—parents nationwide were frantically second-guessing whether their children’s schools were prepared to handle a similar incident.

To school officials who were among the callers, says Anne

Munoz-Furlong, founder and CEO of FAAN, based in Fairfax, Va., “we said, ‘Here’s what you can do. Here’s what parents are going to be worried about.’ We wanted them to use this as an opportunity” to prove that schools were equipped to handle such a crisis.

The unpredictable and serious nature of physical and mental-health crises on school campuses—from the pandemic flu and school shootings to food allergies and suicide—can leave parents feeling vulnerable and helpless. With research suggesting these incidents are on the rise, schools have a responsibility not only to know how they will respond, but also to tell parents—ahead of time—how schools will respond.

“Parents need to know there will be a connection with the school and there will be a system in place,” says Munoz-Furlong. “Without that communication, what you have is chaos.”

Quick response is best

Scott Poland, a school psychologist and professor in the Center for Psychological Studies at NOVA Southeastern University, in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., has no shortage of real-life examples to prove why administrators in crisis situations

should “tell the truth and do so in a timely manner.”

In 2005, a middle school student in Texas’ Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District threatened to carry out an act of violence at school, reportedly in retaliation for someone breaking his thumb on the bus. Police found that the student had access to guns and they confronted the boy’s parents.

The middle school principal wanted to send parents a letter telling them that the threat occurred, that the boy had been transferred to an alternative school, and that the district was doing everything possible to ensure their children’s safety. The superintendent, hoping that the situation would be swiftly—and quietly—resolved, refused to approve the letter. The next morning, the story was front-page news in the *Houston Chronicle*.

Poland says that administrators often forget the importance of communicating honestly with parents. “The overarching feeling is, ‘Let’s sweep this under the carpet and nobody will know,’ and then it blows up,” he says. “Administrators need to realize that they will be evaluated not on a crisis situation but how they respond to it.”

Ohio’s Girard City School District continues to recover from its mishandling of an environmentally toxic situation almost seven years ago, according to fifth-grade science teacher Chris Notareschi. Days after the new Girard Intermediate School opened in September 2000, teachers and students began complaining of burning eyes, sore throats, nausea, and other symptoms.

Notareschi, the building representative, notified the principal and the superintendent, who ordered environmental testing. Results showed that the species of mold in the school were “capable of being pathogenic to humans,” but the superintendent at this point only shared with teachers that formaldehyde and other airborne toxins were below detectable levels. He sent home a letter stating there were no problems with the new building.

When symptoms worsened over the next several months—Notareschi says she was using an inhaler and crawling up her stairs at night—community members formed the Girard Concerned Parents Group. By spring, according to news reports, while administrators continued to deny any problems, the school nurse was treating more than 60 students a day and sending many of them home. Finally, the school’s 21 teachers made a pact to hold classes outside. The teachers’ jobs were threatened, the media arrived, and, that weekend, the school board announced it was closing the school for repairs. The school remained closed for 16 months.

“It’s made parents much more alert,” Notareschi says. “There isn’t that blind trust, the ‘You have the education, you know what you’re doing.’ There has been a lot of suffering, but in the end it has increased parent involvement and that is a good thing.”

Sometimes parent involvement and media coverage can overshadow a district’s best attempt at being forthright in

times of trouble. In 2004, when the 46,000-student Seattle school system began dealing with higher-than-normal levels of lead in about one-quarter of its drinking fountains, it sent a letter home explaining that all fountains in schools more than 10 years old would be shut down and bottled water would be provided. The letter, which promised continued communication, included links to the district’s website for additional information, such as data about how elevated lead levels affect children.

The story was a hot one for a city with two competitive daily newspapers. A couple of parents in particular “made it their cause” to keep reporters busy on the story, going so far as to draw a connection between lead levels and a particular child’s development—without any input from the health department, says district spokeswoman Patti Spencer.

Today, after several years battling contaminants in its drinking water, Seattle has some of the most stringent water-testing standards in the country and a permanent water oversight committee that makes sure testing is done every three years. Parents can go online to see when their child’s school is scheduled for retesting.

“We’ve been quite nimble in communicating on this topic, but there’s no way we can be as nimble as an individual or small group of community members,” Spencer says. “As much as we think ahead and plan ahead and want to communicate ahead, there are some times when we end up being reactive.”

Found in translation

Disseminating information in a timely manner gets more complicated in districts with high numbers of non-English-speaking students.

More than 70 languages are spoken in Arizona’s Tucson Unified School District, which became a model for the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights after resolving a discrimination complaint in 2002. The complaint charged that the district failed to communicate with “national-origin language-minority” parents and students in a language they understood, which in turn diminished academic performance.

To resolve the issue, district officials screened and trained bilingual community members to serve as translation assistants on an as-needed basis—not an easy task given the number of languages involved.

The solution serendipitously laid the groundwork for dealing with a prolonged crisis just two years later, when a large influx of students arrived from Somalian refugee camps. Reacting to the trauma they had been through, a number of the students began routinely—and without provocation—assaulting their new peers, prompting worried parents to question their children’s safety at school. There were even rumors that a gang had formed.

In response, schools sent home letters and began hosting monthly meetings to help the community gain insight into different cultures and learn about efforts to stop the violence.

Mental health issues at the forefront of Virginia Tech tragedy

The stories started to emerge just days after the shootings. The English professor who tutored him in poetry when his writings terrified classmates. The roommates who said he had an imaginary girlfriend who traveled through space. The high school classmates who never heard him speak. The distant relatives who said that as a young boy, he hated being touched and didn't respond to his own name. His Facebook entry with no face.

Seung Hui Cho showed signs of being a very troubled young man long before that cold morning in April when the Virginia Tech senior shot and killed 32 students and teachers, injuring many others before turning a gun on himself.

To make sense of the senseless, educators, law enforcement officials, parents—everyone, really—are sifting through clues of Cho's mental state. The shootings were eerily similar to the Columbine tragedy, even to the date. Cho called Harris and Klebold "martyrs" in the video that he mailed to NBC right before he chained the doors of Norris Hall and opened fire on trapped students and teachers.

Health care professionals and advocates see the focus on Cho's emotional and mental health as an opportunity to call attention to issues faced by thousands of college and high school students. However, they also worry that people will associate such extreme violence with mental illness, which could unfairly label students living with mental illness on college campuses.

"It needs to be made clear that people with mental illness are no more violent than people without mental illness," says Alison Malmon, the executive director of Active Minds, a student-run mental health organization with 65 chapters on college and university campuses nationwide. Malmon started Active Minds when she was a junior at the University of Pennsylvania for a very personal reason: During her freshman year, her brother, a student at Columbia University, committed suicide. His family discovered that he had been able to



cover his depression and psychosis and that shame over his condition kept him from getting help.

It remains a mystery how a young man as troubled as Cho stayed under the radar for so long, in high school and then in college. He did come to the attention of Virginia Tech officials and local law enforcement in 2005, when Cho apparently harassed and frightened two female students and told his roommate he was suicidal. As a result, he spent some time in a psychiatric clinic and was released.

Cho, says Malmon, "represents an undersupported group of students who are living with mental illness and are not getting the resources they may need. They are not feeling comfortable talking about what they are experiencing."

Virginia Tech English professor Lucinda Roy, who tutored Cho, advised the young man to get counseling; she even offered to take him to the campus counseling center. She also warned school officials, she told the *Washington Post*, but was told that unless Cho made direct threats, there was nothing they could do.

Federal and state privacy and confidentiality laws prevent school officials from talking to each other about student mental health records. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, schools may not ask applicants for a mental illness history, nor can they remove a student without due process. High school counselors cannot tell college admission counselors about students' mental health issues, either.



Left: Virginia Tech's Burruss Hall, the university's main administrative building where mourners have gathered in the thousands since the shooting. Above: The makeshift memorial of 33 "Hokie" stones for the 33 dead, including one for Cho, placed in a semi-circle on the campus's drillfield. The stones are covered with flowers, open letters, and trinkets from those saying their goodbyes.

The Virginia Tech shootings have increased the call for more transparency in these areas, but college and university officials remain wary of incidents like the one faced recently by George Washington University. A student sued the university for requiring him to leave school after he sought treatment for depression.

"All we want to do is the right thing," Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, president of George Washington University, told the *Washington Post*, "and we can't get a clear signal as to what the right thing is.

"If we keep a kid in, and the kid hurts himself or hurts other people, people say to us ... 'Why didn't you do something?' If we act, people say, 'You're being mean; it's your duty to nurture the children.'"

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Translators helped out with both the correspondence and the meetings, at a whopping cost of \$300,000 during the 2004-05 school year.

Steve Holmes, director for the Tucson district's school improvement programs, has no doubt the assistance was worth every penny. Incidents were down dramatically by 2005-06, and not one incident made its way to Holmes' office in 2006-07.

"The translation piece has been a real blessing," he says. "This has been about three years of work to get to this point, where we feel we're addressing everyone's needs. I don't want to say we're perfect; there are still holes, there are still gaps. But with the lessons learned, I think we can respond better to the next influx."

Fifty more families from Africa were scheduled to move into the district this spring.

Grief counseling

In upstate New York, the 950-student Dundee Central School District has had to test its crisis protocol too often in the past two years, according to Superintendent Nancy Zimar.

In 2005-06, the tight-knit system lost two students by suicide—a 10th-grader and an eighth-grader, six weeks apart. In March 2007, a 13-year-old boy died with his parents in a weather-related car crash, leaving behind a sister, a junior at the system's only high school.

Letters sent home to parents included help in spotting signs of grief and depression, which experts warn can take up to three months to show up. Three months after the deaths, as the school year was coming to a close, another letter went home reminding parents of the district's summer counseling hours. With the most recent tragedy, when teachers overheard a group of students talking about walking to the funeral home from school, the district—knowing this would be the first visit of its kind for many—called parents of seventh- and eighth-grade students to reinforce counseling tips and urge them to spend time with their children.

Particularly in cases involving suicide, school officials should obtain facts from the families affected before addressing the public, suggests Mark Lerner, a clinical psychologist and traumatic stress consultant who wrote a book about schools handling crises.

"Especially in this litigious climate, the last thing you want to do is start making statements about what happened without knowing the wishes of the family," says Lerner, acknowledging that administrators are unaccustomed to seeking approval before releasing information. "School officials are

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not used to having to run information by parents before they share it. It's the antithesis to what they do. They usually construct policy and expect fallout from parents. This is all a little bit different."

Flu planning

Administrators for Bellingham Public Schools in northwest Washington state added a question this past year to an annual parent survey on school safety: Did they need to know more about how their children would be released in an emergency? About one-quarter of parents with children in elementary or middle school said yes. (Responses from the high school level were still filtering in.) As a result, the district urged parents to sign up for an e-newsletter that goes out as many as several times a week and has recently begun including information on the district's planned response to a flu pandemic.

"In a high-stress or any type of crisis situation, I wouldn't want to be using a communication tool that we don't use on a regular basis," says Tanya Rowe, communications

director for the 11,000-student system.

New Jersey's Ridgewood Public Schools sent letters home in December 2006 and posted information online explaining the nature of flu pandemics.

"It was important to walk people along, one step at a time," says Garland Allen, Ridgewood's director of wellness. "I felt from day one that education, even if it's a little bit unsettling, is the most important tool we have. And until we educated people, there was no use putting out a response plan because that would have caused panic.

"When you talk about a potent disease that can actually kill people, the great fear you have is whether you'll create more anxiety," he adds. "It was a real challenge to avoid that. So far it seems like it's worked." The response plan does exist, and it may be posted on the district's website soon.

Districts should never underestimate the value of planning for the unexpected, notes FAAN's Munoz-Furlong. If there is a bright side to the panic caused by January's "Boston Legal" episode, she reasons, it is that her group encouraged parents to hold schools accountable for reviewing existing crises protocols and making necessary revisions.

"You don't want to start creating your plan when you're in the middle of a crisis, and you should never assume how you'll respond when the time comes," she says. "There is no way to predict that." ■

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