



Preparing for the Unthinkable

Is your district's safety plan up to date? Are you ready to respond when a crisis occurs in one of your schools?

Gary Salmans

Words like “safety plans” and “crisis management” have taken on new meaning for schools in the wake of shootings and other acts of violence over the past decade. And while violent deaths at schools are relatively rare, districts should take the time to research and review safety plans so they can be prepared.

Periodically, the Bureau of Justice Statistics publishes a report called *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*. The 2005 report, which provides the latest data available, includes detailed statistical information on the incidence of violence in America's schools.

Most of the information detailed in the report now is five years old, but the data presents a startling picture for schools. From 1992 to 2002, U.S. elementary and secondary schools reported 462 school-associated violent deaths. Of those, 261 were homicides and 55 were suicides of school-age youth.

In a 2003 survey sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 6 percent of students reported that they had carried a weapon on school property. More than 55

million students were enrolled in U.S. schools in 2003, meaning that about 3.3 million kids took a weapon to school that year.

What should you do to make sure your safety plans are up to date? A good place to start is the U.S. Department of Education's *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*. Known as “the Guide,” the report is designed to aid schools in the development of emergency response plans. It outlines four phases of crisis management: mitigation/prevention, preparation, response, and recovery.

For many school districts, this type of planning is not new. But it is worth reviewing each phase to make sure you have the right procedures in place. It is never too early to start preparing for the unthinkable.

Mitigation and prevention

Schools should work with community emergency service responders in developing the district's safety plan. Doing so will help schools avoid the missteps and ensuing confusion that can result when multiple agencies respond to an incident without an integrated critical incident plan, also known as a CIP.

Your district's CIP should have four main components: command communications; incident control; evacuation procedures/shelter-in-place; and recovery protocols. Because students often are the first line of defense in preventing a crisis from escalating, the CIP also should include procedures that help them identify and report unusual people or incidents at school.

Every person with a legitimate reason for being on campus, regardless of that person's level of contact with the public, should be trained to identify, isolate, and communicate a potential incident. This includes vendors as well as part-time and seasonal employees.

Training should include sessions on enhanced communication skills; methods of nonviolent intervention, including conflict resolution alternatives; and notification protocols. This training is essential because every staff member must be prepared to identify and mitigate potentially threatening situations. Someone's life may depend on it.

Preparation

Despite your best efforts at prevention, it's inevitable that crises will occur in one of your schools. As "the Guide" notes, "Being well prepared involves an investment of time and resources."

This means districts should have professionals who know their roles and will be on standby to respond when needed. Post-crisis counselors also should be available, and you should have a crisis communications plan for dealing with the media for key constituent groups. Someone outside the school family may be in the best position to be available and to remain clearheaded in a crisis.

The expectation, of course, is that school districts will be in a ready financial position to execute the response and recovery phases of their plans when necessary. In districts where a crisis has not occurred and budget restrictions are a reality, this might seem unlikely.

One solution may be insurance. In the last few years, at least two insurers have developed insurance policies to help schools with financial preparedness in the event of an act of school violence. The insurance policy essentially funds the costs associated with executing the emergency response plan when an event occurs. Also, at least one insurer provides a first-party benefit in the event that a school's security equipment is confiscated by the authorities as part of a criminal investigation.

The immediate availability of post-crisis funds is critical. Without those resources, schools may not be fully prepared to make their response plans actionable. Further, without funding, schools might not be in the position to begin the healing process, which can include getting the physical facility back to the "before" as soon as possible.

Response

Districts should develop their crisis response plan so that it

For more information on school safety, check out these two stories in the "Bonus Articles and White Papers" section on ASBJ.com:

■ Thomas A. Gavin, chief of the Pinellas County Schools Police Department in Florida, writes about preparing security plans for sports events in "Friday Night Lights."

■ In "Emergency Preparedness," authors Darlene Marsh and Beth McCullough provide practical information on planning for a crisis in your schools.

can be maintained and delivered in a multimedia format. This allows staff and outside emergency response teams to have crucial information quickly in an easily accessible format.

Crisis response plans should include 10 elements: facility floor and site plans; emergency contact numbers; evacuation routes; lock-down/shelter-in-place areas; high-profile areas; emergency utility shut-off locations; command flow charts; hazardous material lists and locations; site-specific emergency procedures; and default positions for emergency responses.

By understanding the need for this plan, school administrators and emergency responders can implement programs that address the concerns of today's parents, students, and communities. Although such programs cannot guarantee that critical incidents will not occur, they do provide a proactive approach for ensuring that individuals are educated, alert, and prepared to mitigate the outcome.

Recovery

As part of your emergency response preparation, you also should have a post-crisis recovery plan. Among other things, you will have to work with authorities in the criminal investigation. If your facility is damaged, you also will have to organize and conduct a review.

Determining when and where classes will resume is critical to the recovery process, as is organizing, publicizing, and managing access to crisis counselors. The plan should also outline your ongoing communications efforts, as well as how memorials and remembrances will be designed.

Again, much of this is not new material for proactive school districts. If you are not confident that your staff, students, parents, and vendors are prepared to identify, respond, communicate, isolate, insulate, evacuate, and recover from an act of school violence, then be confident that multiple local and national resources are available.

Integrated critical incident planning will give you some measure of assurance that you are as prepared as anyone can be should the unthinkable happen. ■

Gary Salmans (gary_salmans@ajg.com) is executive vice president of Critical Incident Management, a division of Arthur J. Gallagher Risk Management Services.