

Taking the School "Safety Pulse": A Systems Approach

The primary mission of school districts is providing education, not dealing with the effects of a school-related crisis. However, school safety jumps to the top of our priority list if we are unfortunate enough to find ourselves responding to public criticism over the handling of a crisis, particularly if it involves a violent act.

During 2005 and 2006, there were 20 fatal shootings at U.S. and Canadian schools. A survey of 728 school resource officers revealed that more than 90% of respondents considered schools to be "soft targets" for potential violent attacks and more than 70% indicated an increase in aggressive behavior involving elementary school children within

the past five years (National Association of School Resource Officers 2006).

Today, many state education departments require every school to report all violent and disruptive incidents for each school year, including bullying, harassment, intimidation, and other events that disrupt instruction.

In 2000, New York State enacted legislation for comprehensive school safety planning. The Safe Schools Against Violence Education Act addresses (1) mitigation and prevention strategies, (2) preparedness, (3) responses to emergencies and multihazards, and (4) recovery and postincident response and mental health. It's been our experience working in schools that violent and disruptive incident report



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data, professionally developed surveys, risk assessments, and training are effective tools for addressing the act's emergency management components.

Mitigation and Prevention Strategies

During this first phase of emergency management, school officials conduct risk assessments to identify preventable hazards and develop procedures to prevent a crisis. The structured risk assessment process significantly increases the effectiveness of school safety efforts and creates a safe instructional environment by providing a sound basis for determining allocation of human and financial resources.

Preparedness

Preparedness is not an outcome, but a process driven by current data and evaluation, according to Schoolsafety specialist.com. In this phase, the district establishes protocols and procedures both to prevent school violence and to protect students. These protocols and procedures are part of a balanced program that addresses physical safety, educational practices, and programs that support social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students (National Consortium 2006).

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The process also includes an emergency response and crisis management plan. Although the majority of schools and school districts have written crisis plans, many of those plans are renewed year after year with no review or modification. As a result, they lack current information, coordination with community agencies, and incorporation of new technologies and methods.

A comprehensive risk assessment provides reliable data for determining the "safety pulse" of a school facility. Once school officials identify hazards, assess the risk that each hazard poses, and take steps to prevent, eliminate, or mitigate the risk, they incorporate those findings into the crisis plan.

Ideally, a neutral outside agency should conduct the risk assessment and prepare an unbiased report that may include a multiyear plan for a safer school environment. The risk assessment analyzes four main areas: policies and standard operating procedures, safe physical environments, communications and health community-school relationships, and scheduled drills.

Policies and standard operating procedures: School and emergency response agencies are now mandated to

informed about the school's crisis policies and procedures do not hinder emergency response efforts.

Response Phase

A well-designed response plan provides an immediate reaction to a school-related crisis with minimal confusion. Deviations from the crisis plan protocols can lead to unnecessary damage and loss. It is better to err on the side of caution than to fail to initiate a response.

People often believe that crises can be handled in-house and, therefore, do not follow proper procedures. Administrators are sometimes reluctant to disrupt the daily routine with lockdown directives. Common mistakes include failure to call emergency responders immediately, failure to update school emergency supplies and resources, and failure to check the working condition of cell phones, two-way radios, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) weather radios, internal school computers, school-specific Web sites, telephone trusses, school cable televisions, and national school notification services. Emergency radios should feature NOAA weather and AM-FM bands, white light and red flashers, and a built-in cell phone charger.

Recovery

The recovery phase addresses the emotional trauma of a crisis and helps restore the school climate. The mental health needs of youth and adults are often shortchanged or neglected. Depression, anxiety, bullying, incivility, and various forms of intimidation in schools need to be taken seriously.

School building crisis teams should meet regularly with community partners, mental health specialists, social work-

ers, psychologists, and counselors. Every school should have resources to maintain evidence-based programs designed to address not only crisis recovery but also everyday issues of bullying and other forms of student conflict.

Research-based violence prevention and related comprehensive support programs should follow a three-tier approach: schoolwide, targeted (for at-risk students), and intensive (for the most chronically at-risk students) levels.

Take the Safety Pulse
Although our schools are relatively safe, we can make them more secure by offering staff training that is grounded in solid research and does not compromise or diminish the primary mission of education. Taking the safety pulse to create a safe and connected school climate entails multiple measures:

meet compliance criteria set by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the National Incident Management System.

The school emergency plan should address safety and security, dissemination of information, and the immediate emotional effect of a crisis. In addition, an effective plan provides for speedy communication, on-site and off-site command posts, media staging areas, parent-child reunification sites, multihazard evacuation sites, protocols and accountability measures for special-needs students, and emergency kits. Notification protocols should specify graduated levels of seriousness and provide clear instructions for moving to lockdown, lockout, sheltering, or evacuation status.

Safe physical environments: The increased school violence of the past decade has introduced an element of fear and uncertainty that is not conducive to learning. Safety-monitoring systems are an affordable means of securing the interior and exterior of a school facility. Surveillance systems can

- enhance and expedite law enforcement and emergency services to high-risk calls,
- contribute to reliable identification of criminals and reduce the need for eyewitnesses,
- include local and remote accessibility, and
- integrate with closed-circuit systems, thus preserving existing security investments.

Newer cost-effective technology supports wireless Ethernet access for cameras, eliminating the need for powered cable. The systems interface through the Internet with first-response agencies.

Communication and healthy community-school relationships: The U.S. Secret Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and numerous

independent research reports conclude that the most effective way to prevent targeted acts of violence, facilitate reporting, and initiate investigation by responsible authorities is to maintain close communication and trust with students and others in the community (National Consortium 2006).

In addition, good cross-profession relationships help establish integrated response teams for public health, safety, and mental health agencies. Concerned students, parents, educators, and stakeholders in the community should address specific verbal and physical behaviors that signal underlying problems.

Schools and communities must find effective ways to overcome students' reluctance to break the unwritten code of silence against "tattling" or "snitching" on their peers. Students need to understand that their lives or the lives of their friends may depend on reporting signs of danger when they become aware of such information.

Scheduled drills: Scheduled drills provide opportunities to test a plan's effectiveness and foster timely revisions. Repetitive drills elicit a calm, spontaneous reaction during a real emergency. All members of the safety team are aware of their responsibilities and duties, and parents who are

- Assessing the school's emotional climate and mechanisms for development;
- Emphasizing the importance of listening to students;
- Preventing and intervening in bullying and child abuse;
- Using newer technologies in and around facilities;
- Involving members of the school community in planning; and
- Developing trusting, respectful relationships between students and adults at schools.

School business officials can take a leadership role by promoting board of education awareness of the need for safety funding. It is time for school districts to go beyond acknowledging that they have a school safety plan and a crisis response plan and take the safety pulse of their schools. The plans themselves do little to prevent violence; schools that align their plans with training are more likely to foster safe environments for their students and teachers. ■

References

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