

The Crisis Management Plan: Promoting School Safety

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ABSTRACT

A serious problem facing school administrators today is the increasing level of lethal violence in schools. It is essential for school administrators to anticipate and be prepared for every imaginable crisis. Therefore, all schools need to have a comprehensive crisis management plan. In this article, I discuss the nine steps contained in an ideal crisis management plan.

One of the most serious problems that school administrators face today is the increasing level of lethal violence in schools. The Columbine High School massacre is just one example (Marsico, 2011). It is essential for school administrators to be prepared for such incidents. Schools need to have a comprehensive crisis management plan in order to prepare for every imaginable crisis (Philpott, 2010). By adhering to the following steps, school administrators can ensure to the greatest degree possible that their schools are safe for students and staff alike (Fox, 2011; Hauserman, 2011; Lindeen, 2012; Reeves, 2010).

Form a School-wide Crisis Management Team

The team should be made up of school staff and parents, as well as representatives from social service and mental health agencies, the religious community, recreational organizations, and law enforcement. The charge of the crisis management team is to develop and evaluate a comprehensive plan for school safety.

Conduct an Ongoing, School-wide Safety Audit

A firm knowledge base has emerged, called Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), which examines the design and use of school spaces according to how well they enhance school safety (Hauserman, 2011). A CPTED evaluation prescribes changes in the design of the school building, in patterns of building use, and in supervision processes to reduce the likelihood of school crime and violence.

Items addressed in a CPTED analysis would include the design and location of bathrooms; the height of windows; how entrances and exits to the school are monitored and managed; the use of lighting, natural surveillance capabilities, and obstructions thereof; where locker bays are located and how they are managed; identification of low-traffic areas requiring an increased adult presence; identification of school sites that tend to be inhabited inappropriately by certain groups of students; scheduling procedures that result in large groups of students coming in contact with each other in crowded spaces; how students and other adults who belong in the school are recognized and identified; and procedures that allow students to communicate anonymously their concerns about other students or situations.

Develop Policies and Procedures for Various Emergencies

Specific policies and procedures must be developed to address a wide range of potential problems at the district, school, and classroom levels. These could include a violence-prevention policy, a zero-tolerance policy for weapons and drugs, a dress code, and an intruder policy.

It may be helpful if the principal divides policies and procedures into categories like the following (Reeves, 2010):

1. The *people crisis* category could include medical emergencies, intruders, drive-by shootings, student runaways or abductions, deaths of students or staff members, and bomb threats.
2. The *natural disaster* category could include fires, tornados, earthquakes, other severe weather, or floods.
3. The *physical plant* category could include policies that address power outages, nonworking phone lines, gas leaks, hazardous materials, or explosions.

Conduct Safety Drills

Every aspect of the crisis management plan should have at least two people responsible for coordinating each task. Staff members should be assigned to respond to emergency teams, parents, and the press. Each school should carefully consider its physical plant and analyze where students should be directed to go from wherever they are in the school. Upon hearing a predetermined signal or tone, teachers should lock down classrooms (Fuentes, 2012; Lassiter, 2010). Every room should have two methods for communicating with the office (i.e., a two-way public announcement system and a phone, cell phone, or walkie-talkie).

Develop a School-wide Discipline Plan

School discipline should be consistent, predictable, and perceived as fair by students in the school (Thompson, 2011). It is essential that every crisis management plan include a carefully developed school-wide discipline plan that has input from teachers, students, parents, administrators, and other adults in the school (Bear, 2011).

The plan should be posted throughout the school with clearly stated rules that govern classroom, cafeteria, playground, gym, and hallway behavior.

Provide a Means for Students to Communicate Information to Staff

A recent report notes that in several instances of school violence or student suicide, some students knew in advance of the activity but did not tell anyone (Juhnke, 2011). It is essential in such situations that children have a way to communicate their concerns or fears to the staff in a way that maintains confidentiality, respect, and safety.

Teach Students Alternatives to Violence

In any program aimed at averting student violence, it is first necessary to focus attention on students' individual needs and problems (Gallant, 2011). School staff should address such topics as self-esteem, conflict resolution, impulse control, consequences of gang membership, and stress management (Yell, 2009). Schools also need to foster a sense of belonging among students. One reason why students join gangs is that these groups meet their need for belonging (Soliz). After-school extracurricular activities and clubs also may help reduce violence (Barbieri, 2009; Jones, 2011).

Evaluate Administrative Practices of the School

How a school is operated can have a strong impact on its relative safety. Academically effective schools, for example, tend to be safer schools (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008). Schools that provide a positive, inclusive climate tend to have less conflict and fewer instances of aggressive, bullying behavior (Espelage, 2011). Schools that have the number of students for which they were designed tend to have fewer behavioral incidents and problems (Reeves, 2010). Safer schools tend to have clear behavioral and performance expectations for everyone (Drolet, 2011; Locke & Latham, 2012).

Use Resources to Identify Students “At-Risk” for Violent Behavior

School administrators can use an excellent resource for identifying troubled youth and responding to their needs. It is called the *Early Warning/Timely Response Guide* for making schools safer and violence free. This guide was jointly developed by the U.S. Attorney General's Office and the U.S. Department of Education. It contains comprehensive guidelines and recommendations for the early profiling of troubled youth and the role that schools, teachers, parents, communities, and peers can play in responding to their problems and meeting their needs. It is a valuable tool for addressing the current crisis of school safety. The guide is a public-domain publication. It costs nothing. The guide can be downloaded from the Internet at the following URL: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywrn.html>. Table 1 provides a sample checklist that school administrators can use to identify violence-prone students.

Table 1

Checklist for Identifying Students at Risk for Violent Behavior

Children and adolescents at risk may:

express self-destructive or homicidal ideation
have a history of self destructive behavior
articulate specific plans to harm self or others
engage in “bullying” other children
have difficulty with impulse control
evidence significant changes in behavior
engage in substance abuse
become involved with gangs
evidence a preoccupation with fighting
have a history of antisocial behavior
evidence a low tolerance for frustration
externalize blame for their difficulties
evidence a preoccupation with guns and weapons
have engaged in fire setting
evidence persistent bed wetting
appear to be, or acknowledge, feeling depressed
talk about “not being around”
express feelings of hopelessness
give away possessions
appear withdrawn
evidence significant changes in mood
experience sleep and eating disturbances
have experienced prior trauma or tragedy
have been, or are, victims of child abuse
have experience a significant loss
evidence a preoccupation with television programs and movies with violent themes
evidence a preoccupation with games with violent themes
have harmed small animals
have brought a weapon to school
evidence frequent disciplinary problems
exhibit poor academic performance
have frequently been truant from school

Conclusion

One of the most serious problems that school administrators face today is the increasing level of lethal violence in schools. The Columbine High School massacre is just one example. It is essential for school administrators to be prepared for such incidents. Schools need to have a comprehensive crisis management plan in order to prepare for every imaginable crisis. The model crisis management plan I have provided consists of the following steps: form a school-wide crisis management team; conduct an ongoing, school-wide safety audit; develop policies and procedures for various emergencies; conduct safety drills; develop a school-wide discipline plan; provide a means for students to communicate information to staff; teach students alternatives to violence; evaluate administrative practices of the school; and use resources to identify students at-risk for violent behavior.

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