

Chapter 2

SCHOOL CRISIS PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS RATIONALE, GOALS, AND OBSTACLES

Preventing and preparing for school crisis events are essential elements of the PREP_aRE model. This chapter begins to explore these elements by offering a discussion of the rationale and goals of school crisis prevention and preparedness, as well as the common obstacles that often interfere with the development of school crisis prevention and preparedness protocols.

RATIONALE FOR CRISIS PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS PLANNING

Many researchers in the field have suggested that it is essential for educators to have established crisis prevention and preparedness protocols and plans (Brock & Poland, 2002; Brock, Sandoval, & Lewis, 2001; Capewell, 2000; Dwyer & Jimerson, 2002; Jimerson & Huff, 2002; Nickerson & Heath, 2008; Osher, Dwyer, & Jimerson, 2006). Although large-scale disasters such as fatal school shootings are rare, many other crises that have the potential to significantly affect schools and their surrounding communities occur with relative frequency (e.g., accidental deaths and acts or threats of violence). For instance, during the 2005–2006 academic year in the United States, 78% of schools experienced one or more violent crimes, 17% experienced one or more other serious violent incidents, approximately 6% of students ages 12 to 18 reported that they avoided school activities or one or more places in school because they thought someone might attack or harm them, and students ages 12 to 18 were victims of about 1.5 million nonfatal crimes of violence or theft at school (Dinkes, Cataldi, & Lin-Kelly, 2007). Furthermore, crises are associated with a range of student reactions that have the potential to negatively affect their behavior, adjustment, and education. Given these observations, it is clear that there are important reasons for crisis prevention efforts.

Although crisis prevention is necessary, it is not sufficient. Even the best of prevention programs will not be able to stop all crisis events from occurring. Thus, crisis preparedness planning is also required. Such planning helps to ensure that all crisis response and recovery needs are met and available resources are effectively deployed. Foremost, crisis preparedness is important because crises typically result in an overwhelming requirement to attend immediately to multiple demands that are outside of normal routines. Without a crisis preparedness plan, important crisis response and recovery activities and needs may be overlooked.

The need for crisis preparedness is reinforced by the results of research, which suggested that it is not a matter of *if* a school will face a crisis, it is a matter of *when*. In a survey of 228 school psychologists, 93% reported that their schools had experienced and responded to serious crises (Adamson & Peacock, 2007). It is safe to say that all schools need crisis teams and plans. Without plans in place, schools facing a crisis can neglect important tasks during and following a crisis event, which can lead to unnecessary chaos, trauma, and panic.

Legal Rationale for Preparedness Plans

An additional reason for crisis prevention and preparedness efforts is that the failure to address these issues can result in litigation (Bailey, 2006). Although it has been argued that schools are exempt from litigation because of local governmental immunity, the financial cost of defending these lawsuits (Brickman, Jones, & Groom, 2004) and the potential negative public relations can be very damaging. Conversely, with the relative calm and control generated by having school crisis teams and plans in place, schools are in a much better position to help school communities recover from crises. For example, following a crisis, the school that presents itself as having and following a crisis plan will foster perceptions among crisis survivors that the crisis can be managed and thereby increase the belief that crisis-associated challenges can be solved. These schools also will be better able to reduce the level of chaos that occurs during an emergency, to aid in the identification of individuals in need, and to help school communities return to normalcy more quickly.

Legislation Supporting Crisis Prevention and Preparedness

In addition to the motivations described above, some legislative initiatives provide additional reasons for school districts to engage in school crisis prevention and preparedness efforts. Federal acts that have provided funding for crisis preparedness efforts include the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, the Schools Safety Enhancement Act of 1999, the Goals 2000 Educate America Act, and the School Anti-Violence Empowerment Act of 2000. Although primarily concerned with academic progress, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 also requires local school systems that receive federal funding (under Title IV, Part A, Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities) to provide assurances that they have a crisis plan. Furthermore, in July 2004, President George W. Bush signed Executive Order 13347 (Individuals with Disabilities in Emergency Preparedness), which requires public entities to include people with disabilities in their emergency preparedness efforts (U.S. Department of Education, 2006b).

Local and state laws and regulations also affect a school district's prevention and preparedness efforts (National Education Association, 2007b). For example, some individual states have passed laws that require prevention programming, yearly crisis response training, regular practice of safety drills, or submission and practice of building- or district-level crisis plans. According to the School Health Policy and Programs Study (SHPPS, 2007), 92% of states require districts or schools to have a crisis plan. However, many federal and state laws lack specific guidelines or definitions, which results in great variability in how the laws are interpreted and implemented.

Other legislation that is relevant to crisis prevention and preparedness is the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA). FERPA allows schools to disclose otherwise confidential student records to appropriate officials without parental consent under certain circumstances, such as in cases of health and safety emergencies (Bailey, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

GOALS OF CRISIS PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS

The primary goal of school crisis prevention and preparedness efforts is to develop school crisis teams and plans. In turn, these teams and plans work to develop procedures and protocols that (a) reduce the likelihood of crisis events occurring; (b) ensure response readiness for crises that are not, or cannot be, prevented; (c) provide direction immediately after a crisis event to minimize crisis impact and restore equilibrium; and (d) help repair crisis damage and return to precrisis (or baseline) operation and functioning (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). In other words, school crisis teams should be engaged in crisis prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

School crisis teams and plans provide leadership and guidance relevant to each of Raphael and Newman's (2000) and Valent's (2000) phases of crisis (see chapters 3, 4, and 5). PREP_aRE articulates additional goals of these activities, including that all school districts and schools have *comprehensive* crisis teams and plans that (a) take an "all hazards" approach to address likely events, (b) are developed collaboratively with community-based partners, (c) are based upon data and information, (d) are practiced on a regular basis, (e) are continually reviewed and updated, (f) make use of the National Incident Management System's (NIMS) Incident Command System (ICS), and (g) are tailored to the needs of individual schools (Reeves et al., 2006a).

OBSTACLES TO CRISIS PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS

The literature suggests that common obstacles to crisis prevention and preparedness include problems with crisis plans. Specifically, plans are not (a) comprehensive; (b) practiced regularly; (c) coordinated with community-based emergency response agencies; (d) discussed with families, staff, and students; (e) attentive to the unique considerations of students with special needs; (f) based on factual data and circumstances; or (g) regularly updated and used (Burling & Hyle, 1997; Graham, Shirm, Liggin, Aitken, & Dick, 2006; Kano & Bourke, 2007; Phinney, 2004; Trump, 2000). Additional obstacles to crisis prevention and preparedness were previously described by McIntyre and Reid (1989). Unfortunately, almost 20 years later, many of the following obstacles are still prevalent.

Myths

The first obstacle is the belief that “it won’t happen here.” Consequently, many schools wait until a crisis has occurred before engaging in crisis preparedness and planning (Brock, Sandoval, & Lewis, 2001).

Territorial Issues

A second common obstacle is territorial, or “turf,” issues, which include disagreement regarding who will initiate and/or lead crisis prevention and preparedness efforts, who pays for needed training and supplies, who pays for long-term support services, and who is the incident commander when multiple agencies are involved. These issues emphasize the importance of collaborating with key stakeholders, such as school boards, administrators, and other community-based response agency personnel.

To facilitate collaboration and thus avoid such turf issues, school boards and educational leaders need to take a leadership role in crisis team development and planning. An example of such leadership is provided by the Virginia Department of Education, which advocates that school boards establish a policy foundation and framework conveying the seriousness of crisis prevention and planning (Black, 2004; Virginia Board of Education, 1999). These policies need to reflect various aspects of crisis prevention and preparedness, from designing, updating, and implementing prevention efforts and preparedness plans, to rehearsing drills, developing a school board policy statement, and integrating crisis roles and responsibilities into job descriptions.

Limited Resources

A final common obstacle is limited resources, such as time for planning, training professionals, and securing funding (Bischof, 2007; Nickerson & Zhe, 2004). Financial constraints are prevalent in today’s schools as funding for federal and state planning becomes less available. Furthermore, because of the recent focus on academic achievement and associated consequences of not demonstrating academic growth (e.g., those generated by the No Child Left Behind Act), principals have to make difficult monetary decisions, with crisis prevention and preparedness often taking a back seat to academic initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Crisis prevention and preparedness can be overwhelming when considering all that is involved. To make these activities more manageable, school districts must develop a multidisciplinary school crisis team to help with preparedness and follow best practice crisis planning guidelines. A successful approach is to begin with two or three crisis goals to improve the school’s or district’s plan, and to implement these well, rather than to try to do too much at once. Once those goals are met, another two to three goals should be chosen to continue working toward comprehensive plans that encompass prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery, while addressing the

unique needs of the school setting. Ultimately, the objective is to develop comprehensive school crisis teams and plans that include protocols and procedures for prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

