An Analysis of Secondary Schools' Crisis Management Preparedness: National Implications

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze crisis management plans of schools that have experienced crisis situations in the past. The plans used by these schools to manage these crisis situations will be evaluated for their effectiveness or ineffectiveness in re-establishing stability to their organization. With such information, other schools may more effectively create plans, which enhance their own ability to effectively manage crisis situations. The elements proving most effective may be used to replicate effectiveness, and the elements of the plan that were least effective will be reconsidered to increase successful management of crisis situations in the future.

Every August, administrators, teacher, students, and parents alike prepare for another school year with eager anticipation. As the New Year begins, great expectations are born. For administrators, the hope of having a successful and

high achieving year leads every decision and discussion. Far from most individuals' mind is the thought of the possibility of a crisis occurring on their campus. Although such thoughts are far from the minds of most, the reality of the chance that such events could happen anywhere at anytime must be addressed. To create a greater sense of security and preparedness, organizations must reflectively evaluate their ability to respond effectively to a crisis situation.

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Failure to prepare for a crisis leads to failure to effectively manage the unpredictability of such situations requiring immediate response. Crisis management is a continuous process in which all phases of the plan are being reviewed and revised. Good plans are never finished. They an always be updated based on experience, research, and changing vulnerabilities (Kennedy, 2004). With the safety and lives all of the individuals involved with school activities on a daily basis, schools cannot afford to ignore the necessity of crisis preparedness.

According to Fullen (1991), "There are at least two major purposes to schooling" (p. 14). These purposes include facilitating the development of both cognitive/academic and personal/social skills. Crisis situations have the ability to interfere with both of these goals (Cowen and Hightower, 1986). Crisis intervention is not only in line with the purposes of schooling, but is essential to continued learning (Brock, Sandoval, and Lewis, 1996, p. xi). Experience has taught us that a crisis may occur at any time and strike with varying degrees of severity. In the event of a crisis situation, calm, responsible personnel and reactions are essential to the effective management of the emergency (Decker, 1997, p. 3).

Gone are the days of believing that such events cannot happen in "good American schools." In simply watching the news, reading the newspaper, and unfortunately for some, going to school, it has become evident that schools experience major crisis situations on a more frequent basis than most care to consider. The potential for a school crisis exists every day classes are in session. A few may believe that these traumatic events will never happen in their schools. For school personnel, the real question is not "Will and emergency happen in my school?", but "When the emergency occurs, how prepared will we be to handle the situation?" (Hull, 2000). Failure to consider the possibility of a crisis event occurring does not exempt anyone from the possibility of a crisis occurring on their campus.

Several tragic school violence incidents occurred in the United States in the 1990's and sent Americans in a search for answers as to why these events occurred, how to prevent future events, and how to prepare to better manage such incidents which are unpreventable (Trump, 2000, p. 1). In acknowledging this, schools are faced with the urgency to prepare, plan, and evaluate their state of readiness to effectively manage a crisis situation. Since the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 and the terrorist

attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the federal government has put together several resources to help administrators and security personnel at the nation's schools and universities to ensure that schools remain vigilant about the safety of students, staff, and facilities, and are prepared for terrorist threats, violence, and other catastrophes (Kennedy, 2004).

   Living in a time where crisis situations seem to become more common, the nation has placed greater emphasis on the readiness and ability to effectively respond to any crisis situation. Major crisis situations such as terrorist attacks, unknown sniper attacks, school shootings, and natural disasters to name a few have created a sense intense questioning concerning the country's ability to protect and provide for the citizens of our country. The best defense to any situation is to have a plan or strategy to return stability to the situation. With such a plan, the effectiveness of the document must be measured to insure the success and efficiency in carrying out the strategies for defense.

   Schools must also analyze their own abilities to respond effectively to crisis situations. Schools may not be adequately prepared to deal with major crisis situations that are becoming more common. Nichols (1997) reported that today's campus has become vulnerable to many of the same threats that plague our communities. The reality of our modern society, including its academic institutions, is that there are few places where one can assume to be safe. (p. 66) Crisis situations are occurring more frequently in school systems, and many systems are not prepared to handle the crisis effectively.

   Many schools have plans to manage crisis situations. Various methods are used in creating these crisis management plans. Government, state, and local agencies provide assistance to organizations assembling a crisis management plan. Good planning will facilitate a rapid, coordinated, effective response when a crisis occurs (Kennedy, 2004). According the American Red Cross, crises are managed in four stages: mitigation and prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery (The Masters of Disaster). The extent to which organizations are prepared to carry-out each stage of a crisis determines how effectively an organization manages such a situation.

   In a report to Congress, Kenneth Trump (2001), president of National School Safety and Security Services and member of the American Society for Industrial Security (ASIS) stated that schools are so concerned about protecting their public image that they often underreport school violence statistics. Trump also indicated that when faced with other schools' high profile shootings, principals hurry to adopt haphazard security measures without thoroughly assessing security threats and dangers specific to their own environments. It was also reported by Trump that although schools have crisis management plans, and some even carry out practice drills, few have actually conducted simulations that lead to real knowledge on how well plans work in an actual crisis.

   Previous to conclusions stated by Trump, Schriro (1985) concluded that the presence of the problem of school violence was often a problem of perception. Trump charges that effective crisis planning is made vulnerable by denial, image concerns, and political influence (Maier, 2002). Another argument made by Trump is that before 9/11, airline security was of relatively low priority in America because no one wanted to create fear or panic, and a similar dilemma. It is also stated by Trump that with weak, ill-planned crisis plans, schools are especially in a dangerous position: "Our nation's

education policy states that no Child will be left behind, but to me we are leaving every child behind (Maier, 2002, p. 3).

Under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2003,* schools must have crisis management plans that outline ways in which schools will keep the schools safe and drug free (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education along with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security have been working to keep schools prepared for any emergency, including natural disasters, school violence, and acts of terrorism.

Historically, schools and youth have perceived to be ever-changing for the worse. In the 5th century B.C., Socrates reflected on children as now loving luxury, having bad manners and contempt for authority, showing disrespect for elders, and loving to chatter in place of exercise. Children were tyrants, not servants of their households. They contradicted their parents, and tyrannized their teachers (Futrell, 1985, p. 4).

Once, school administrators mainly supervised reading, writing, and arithmetic. Harper (1989) found that from the earliest stages of their careers, school administrators realize that if schools were ever "islands of safety," they are no longer (p. 2). After the shooting in Columbine, a number of reporters asked Kenneth Trump (2000) if the incident was a wake-up call to educators. In response was that the question was not whether Columbine was a wake-up call, but whether or not society would keep hitting the snooze button and going back to sleep. The tendency is often to react rather than act is a common American trait. The tendency to run hot and cold is even more entrenched in the education community because of the absence of any type of accurate, strong, coordinated, and ongoing national information source on school crimes, violence, and related prevention, intervention, enforcement, and crisis preparedness strategies.

The bombing of the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11, 2001 was a horrible reminder that a crisis can hit at any time and the tragedy felt as a result of a crisis. A crisis is defined as more than a school shooting or bombing. A crisis can be simply defined as a an event that is so far from ordinary that it may overwhelm previously developed problem-solving or coping strategies (Herman, 1992). In other words, a crisis is a problem that had never before been encountered or imagined, and no solution developed. Leaders of today must go beyond this simple definition of a crisis. It may be a situation never before encountered and beyond imagination, but solutions for managing the situation must be developed before the crisis occurs, and immediately following a crisis, response teams must make several important decisions as to how to respond to a crisis (Brock et al, 2002).

Incidents such as September 11 and Columbine demonstrate how crucial the actions taken within the first few minutes of responding to a crisis are to the management of the situation. Schools and communities must prepare for an emergency before it happens (Sloan et al, 2004).

According to Decker (1997), schools can no longer believe that crisis situations only happen to others or that disasters only happen in other parts of the country. There is overwhelming evidence that a crisis situation will occur in your building as early as within the next five years. Schools as well as districts must be prepared to manage crisis situations. Because it is difficult to make all the necessary decision to contain the crisis on the day of the event, preplanning is a school's greatest asset at that time.

"The question is not whether theses incidents of school shootings and bombings are wake-up calls. The real question is whether or not we keep hitting the snooze button and going back to sleep again instead of maintaining balanced, proactive school security and crisis preparedness measure in all of our schools (Trump, 2000, p. 3)." Brock (2002), states that importance of school crisis preparedness cannot be understated. While it is impossible to prepare for all possibilities, crisis preparedness efforts place schools in a better position to respond to crisis.

According to Brock, Sandoval, and Lewis (1996), the *situational crisis* is most commonly associated with the need for school preparedness. Slaikeu (1990) describes situational crises as events that are relatively rare, unexpected, unpredictable, have a sudden onset, seem to strike from nowhere, and have an emergency quality.

Local authorities are clearly encouraging the development of procedures designed to both prevent crises from happening in the first place and to enable schools to deal with them effectively should they occur (Kibble, 1999). After visiting Ground Zero, Education Secretary Rod Paige sent each chief state school officer suggestions for managing school crises.   In March of 2003, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge and Rod Paige announced a $30 million program, renewed in 2004, that provides grant money to train staff, students, and parents in crisis response, buy equipment, and coordinate crisis plans with local authorities and officials (Black, 2004, p. 37).

Crisis planning is multi-faceted and takes time. Too few districts have conducted a "Chicken Little" review of crises. Corporations conduct them on a regular basis while recognizing that it is possible to be really prepared for "the sky to fall" (Wayne, 1998). According to the American Red Cross (2005), good planning will facilitate a rapid, coordinated, effective response when a crisis occurs. Crisis management planning is a continuous process in which all phases of the plan are being reviewed and revised. Good plans are never finished. They can always be updated based on experience, research, and changing vulnerabilities.

The first step in developing a comprehensive plan is identifying key individuals who are able to provide leadership in creating the plan. These core team members use data and assessments of strengths and weakness to organize planning, build effective planning teams, and sustain the training process (Brock, et al, 2002, p. 24). Brock, Sandoval, and Lewis (1996) note that these leaders must learn as much as possible about crisis preparedness, attend conferences and workshops dealing with crisis intervention, collect crisis intervention policies, plans, and procedures used by other districts, and finally form a Crisis Response Planning Committee (CRPC).

Crisis management is a continuous process in which all phases of the plan are reviewed and revised. As cited by the U.S. Department of Education, there are four phases of crisis management. Phase one is mitigation and prevention, which addresses what schools and districts, can do to reduce or eliminate risk to life and property. Phase two focuses on preparedness and the process of planning for the worst-case scenario. Phase three is devoted to response steps taken during a crisis. During phase five, recovery, attention is focused on restoring the learning and teaching environment after a crisis (Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities, 2004)

In conclusion, historically schools have had to manage all types of crisis situations. Unfortunately, today's situations are potentially more dangerous and life threatening. It is important for educators to analyze their level of crisis preparedness. Fortunately, several resources are available to aide in the process of planning. Schools that have performed extensive crisis management planning will respond more effectively when a crisis situation occurs.   By examining levels of preparedness, schools can evaluate their own level of planning and improve in the areas in which they are lacking.

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