



U.S. Department of Education

# LESSONS LEARNED

## from School Crises and Emergencies

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### A COORDINATED RESPONSE TO MULTIPLE DEATHS IN A SCHOOL COMMUNITY HELPS THE HEALING BEGIN

#### The Incident

In the early hours of a Sunday morning in the suburb of a large southern city, seven middle school students riding in a car taken without permission from the driver's home were killed instantly when the unlicensed driver lost control of the speeding vehicle and crashed into a tree. None of the seven students involved in the car accident was of legal driving age or carrying identification. While on the scene, police heard a cell phone ringing; the phone call was from the parent of one student inquiring about his whereabouts. This call was the first step in finding the identity of the seven teens killed in the accident.

The accident had a profound effect on the students' families, friends, peers and school community. Although the incident was managed effectively, some aspects of the response could have been strengthened if the district had had an emergency management plan in place prior to the accident. The event underscored the school's need to have a comprehensive plan to serve the immediate, intermediate and long-term needs of the entire school community when faced with emergencies or other crises.

The principal of the school all seven students attended was notified of the accident at approximately 7 a.m. that Sunday. By 9 a.m., she had contacted the school district's director of Counseling Services, and the two met at 12:30 p.m.

During their five-hour meeting, they: notified school faculty and staff about the accident; established the crisis team; selected locations for counseling students and the victims' families; determined how and when to remove personal effects from lockers and classrooms; discussed working with the media; and created procedures for handling volunteers. By 5 p.m., the sheriff's department had verified the names of the students, and one-half hour later, the public information officer from the sheriff's department met with the director of Counseling Services.

Prior to the incident, the school district did not have a formal Incident Command System (ICS) in place. The response was instead prepared and implemented by the principal, director of Counseling Services and the newly established crisis team, whose members arrived at the middle school on Monday morning, meeting as a group for the first time. The crisis team was composed of 25 professionals—school psychologists, school counselors and school social workers—who had been selected by the district director of Counseling Services. With the exception of two team members who had already attended a National Organization for Victims Assistance training session, the team members had not received any formal training, and they had few resources available to them to prepare them for dealing with the mental and emotional issues now facing the school community as a result of the multiple deaths.

## What Worked Well

### **A crisis team was established.**

On Sunday evening, the director of Counseling Services contacted the members of the school district's crisis team, instructing them to report to the middle school no later than 6:30 a.m. Monday to discuss and launch a response to the tragedy. On Monday morning, the immediate goals for the crisis team were discussed, and the team was briefed about activities it could initiate to support the school's 650 students and 60 staff members. The crisis team was organized into several small groups and directed to:

- Dispel rumors about the accident and the students involved;
- Support the main office in responding to calls from families and media;
- Offer teachers and families tools and resources to help them address student needs;
- Provide short-term counseling for students and identify students who might need more extensive assistance to meet their emotional, spiritual and mental health needs;
- Coordinate volunteers; and
- Help teachers to restore the learning environment.

Also on Monday morning, the principal and director of Counseling Services attempted to obtain the deceased students' class schedules and bus routes via the school's computers; however, the network was out of service. Instead, they accessed the information via district headquarters with assistance from the deputy superintendent.

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The director of Counseling Services then contacted the counselors of the schools the siblings of the accident victims attended as well as the district director of transportation. Transportation staff alerted the drivers of the accident, asking them to keep a watchful eye on students and look for signs of extreme stress or sadness. School staff members were asked to report any concerns to the assistant principal. Crisis team members were also prepared to ride the buses home with students in the afternoon.

### **Structure was maintained and the school environment was kept free of reminders of the tragedy.**

With the deceased students' schedules in hand, crisis team members visited classrooms to collect their papers, projects and personal items and remove any seats or desks assigned to them. Crisis team members placed the deceased students personal items in bags and secured them in an office the principal had designated for the team. At the end of each day, the crisis team removed the teddy bears, balloons, flowers and other tokens of remembrance left at the students' lockers by their friends.

### **A short-term counseling center for students was established.**

The crisis team worked with school administrators to use the school library as a counseling center for students. Manned by members of the crisis team and middle school counselors, the center featured a sign-in sheet for students and was equipped with tissues, stuffed animals, cards, water, information on community counseling resources, CDs, art supplies for creating a wall of remembrance, and paper for writing letters to the deceased students' families. The crisis team reviewed all letters to help identify students who might require additional or long-term counseling and screened the letters for inappropriate content, such as drawings depicting car crashes, before sending them to the families.

Parents and guardians were also contacted and allowed to take home students who exhibited intense reactions such as uncontrollable crying. Each parent or guardian who came to the school to take their child home was counseled by a crisis team member, given information about community resources, and advised not to leave their child home alone. The crisis team also attended memorials and funeral services to support students.

### **Resources were made available to teachers.**

Recognizing that not all teachers would be comfortable speaking to students about the deaths, the crisis team prepared a simple script teachers could read to their classes, developed a fact sheet about the accident to help thwart rumors, and advised teachers about the process for sending students to the counseling center. Several teachers requested that a crisis team member present the information and answer student questions. Other teachers reported being conflicted about using the script to spark a class discussion while trying to respect the feelings of grieving students.

Beginning the day after the accident and continuing through the day of the last funeral service, the crisis team produced a daily newsletter for teachers that contained details about planned viewings and funerals and discussion points for what students might expect to see and experience at the services. Team members visited classrooms as needed to observe student reactions and offer teachers a brief break. They also placed food and flowers in the faculty room, which was greatly appreciated by teachers. Crisis team members monitored the hallways to discourage students from congregating in inappropriate locations, assessed the students' needs and determined if specific students could benefit from additional counseling.

### **Information was distributed and meetings were conducted for families.**

A letter from the principal was sent home with each student that Monday to assist families in helping their children deal with the trauma and loss. The letter described the school-based services being provided and invited students and families to a parent information and support meeting at 6:30 p.m. the following evening. At the meeting,

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counselors and crisis team members delivered a PowerPoint presentation and distributed tip sheets that contained strategies for supporting children who were coping with the death of peers as well as information about pertinent community resources. At times, emotions flared and crisis team members helped defuse the blame and animosity expressed toward the driver of the car and his parents.

The school also provided support to the families of the deceased students. The principal called each family to convey the sympathies of the entire school community and inquire as to whether they needed financial assistance for funerals and burials. If financial assistance was needed, the school worked with the local community to secure the funds. The school also sent flowers to the families. Several parents of the deceased students arrived at the school on Monday morning—some to retrieve their child’s possessions and others to talk with their child’s friends—and administrators designated a room for them to use while on campus. There, counselors met with the parents to provide emotional support for them. The administration and the crisis team had already predetermined that the victims’ families should not talk with other students during the school day, and this was expressed to the parents on their arrival. Counselors contacted the families after each student’s funeral to offer additional assistance.

### **School administrative staff received help.**

To help school office staff handle additional responsibilities after the accident, a member of the crisis team was assigned to the main office as a liaison to parents and others with inquiries or concerns. The crisis team member coordinated procedures and offered support for grieving students who arrived late or wanted to leave school early. For example, the day after the accident, a parent took several girls to the accident scene before dropping

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them off at school midmorning. Several of the girls were crying hysterically and the crisis team member calmed them before they went to class.

A crisis team member also monitored absenteeism and called the parents of absent students each day to identify those who were missing school due to the trauma. Parents were encouraged to send their children to school to participate in healing activities and to receive information about the signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress and when treatment might be warranted.

### **A media-relations plan was established and implemented.**

Due to the nature of this incident, the district’s supervisor of Counseling Services—with the support of the district’s spokesperson—assumed the primary responsibility for media relations. The school counselor assigned to the middle school also interacted with the media when necessary. Both the district’s public information officer and the supervisor of Counseling Services intercepted members of the media who attempted to speak with students as they arrived at school.

## Caregivers were cared for.

The superintendent of schools, the deputy to the superintendent and the assistant superintendent of instruction made visits to the middle school to demonstrate district support for school administration, faculty, staff and crisis team members. In addition, the director of Counseling Services recommended several ways to help members of the crisis team cope with the depression, fatigue, stress and other mental health issues that arose as they delivered assistance. Food was provided and frequent breaks were proposed. Informal debriefings were also offered to crisis team members, although some were too tired at the end of the school day to attend a group debriefing. Despite having taken every precaution to help crisis team members guard against feeling run down, one member of the crisis team did not return after the first day, citing the overwhelming stress of working with traumatized students and teachers.

## Appropriate anniversary activities were planned.

Working with school administrators, the crisis team planned a moment of silence, rather than a permanent marker or structure, to commemorate the first anniversary of the students' deaths. Following the remembrance activity, the crisis team distributed a handout to teachers that detailed possible warning signs of post-traumatic stress in students, suggested topics for group or individual discussion and listed available resources.

## Lessons Learned: Responding More Effectively to Crises

Strong leadership at the school and district levels facilitated a quick, effective and thoughtful response; however, a school-based plan in place prior to the incident would have ensured a more comprehensive approach. In the absence of a

formalized emergency management plan and designated roles and responsibilities for a school-based crisis response, the school and district were forced to establish procedures, manage staff and develop communication methods all within hours of the incident. The experience proved valuable for increasing understanding and the aptitude for designing a comprehensive plan to address both future single- and mass-casualty incidents.

School and district staff developed a response model that could be replicated for a variety of incidents and featured several essential steps:

### Develop a crisis handbook.

To build the crisis team and school administrators' capacity to respond to the diverse needs of students, families and staffs in emergencies, the district developed a crisis handbook the summer after the accident.

### Schedule training for the crisis team.

Select members of the crisis team had already received training through the National Organization for Victim Assistance, which gave

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them the knowledge and skills necessary to assist with the production of the crisis handbook that covered strategies for responding to and recovering from traumatic events. The district also scheduled train-the-trainer school emergency management training for select students and staff. The attendees then presented the information to others in the district.

### **Create memoranda of understanding.**

The coordination of resources can have a tremendous impact on a school and district's ability to provide cohesive and comprehensive services in response to a crisis. A meticulous plan should include broad, written procedural guidelines or models for response and required policies, procedures and protocols and instructions for implementing them. Secured in advance of an emergency, memoranda of understanding (MOU) provide formal mechanisms for communicating with and directing teams of crisis response professionals and volunteers.

For example, many school districts do not have the capacity or facilities to accept and dispense donations of money, goods or services received following a death within their communities. An MOU with a local agency or organization might specify responsibilities for developing a screening process for volunteers, tracking contributions, communicating with district staff, supervising and debriefing volunteers and other tasks associated with handling donations.

The district in this case study had not established systems for accepting and distributing donations or coordinating volunteers. As donations of food, flowers and money began to pour in, crisis team members had to develop a database to monitor donations.

**District personnel learned the importance of documenting the actions and responsibilities of the crisis team, school staff and volunteers. When completed in a timely manner, these records assist officials in gleaning the lessons learned that can be used to improve procedures and protocols.**

They also had to screen offers from area churches to provide individual and group counseling, and work with volunteers to arrange sessions convenient to student and staff schedules.

### **Document needs, tasks and responses.**

No member of the crisis team was assigned to record the processes, timelines and activities comparing the response to the incident. Crisis team members did, however, maintain a list of students referred for additional counseling and consultations at school; but records of students who met with a local psychologist were not kept. When completed in a timely manner, these records assist officials in gleaning the lessons learned that can be used to improve procedures and protocols.

### **Establish processes for communicating with families, teachers and the media.**

Customary communication strategies and procedures often are inadequate during a crisis, especially in the early phases of notification and

response. A thorough crisis response plan should formulate an Incident Command System (ICS) and identify an ICS member responsible for external communications. (For more information on the ICS, visit [www.ercm.org](http://www.ercm.org)). This individual also sets parameters for media contact with students and staff and stipulates a central location where such contact may take place.

Advance planning should include the development of communication materials and resources in diverse, culturally appropriate and age-specific formats to reach multiple audiences. For example, teachers should receive guidelines tailored to their needs to help them assess when students who are experiencing emotional distress should be allowed to leave the classroom. When appropriate, communication material should be created in other languages or in Braille. An annual audit of all communication materials should be conducted to ensure they remain current, valuable and reflective of the communities' demographics.

### **Organize support for school personnel.**

During and following a crisis in the school community, administrators, teachers, administrative support staff and facilities staff are challenged to maintain a sense of normalcy that can be particularly comforting to students. To assist them in promoting a caring atmosphere and restoring a productive learning environment, staff from other schools and district administrators might be recruited to perform some functions at the affected school. In addition, amenities such as food and refreshments may help to offset the depression and fatigue that can emerge as school staff withstand—and often internalize—the force of student and colleague emotions.

### **Conduct mandatory debriefings with caregivers.**

Daily debriefings should be required for the crisis team to prevent emotional burnout caused by prolonged exposure to sadness, anger and other sentiments. The debriefing facilitator should pose several key questions to the group:

- Overall, how was the day?
- What new circumstances or considerations emerged?
- How would you assess your role in the day's events or activities?
- What were students' needs and reactions?
- What would you do differently?
- What stress management or psychological care techniques will you follow to help you take care of yourself in the next 24 hours?

### **Establish a policy for memorial activities.**

In addition to offering counseling pertaining to the birthdays of victims, holidays and the

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first anniversary of a violent death, a school district emergency management plan might include protocols for scheduling public events as outlets for community expressions of grief and opportunities for healing. Activities such as engaging in a moment of silence, donating books to a library, or performing charitable works in the community are often more appropriate actions than the building of a commemorative display or structure. Mental health experts recommend that public memorial activities not be carried out when the death was a suicide. They also agree on the importance of voluntary participation in memorial activities.

## CONCLUSION

The experiences of the specific district, middle school and community mentioned in this newsletter highlight the critical need for emergency management planning, despite the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of any

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emergency. By developing a step-by-step plan that clarifies tasks to be performed before, during and after a crisis, schools and school districts can capitalize on the strengths of both professionals and volunteers rather than spending time directly after an incident creating protocols and procedures from scratch.



The Emergency Response and Crisis Management (ERCM) Technical Assistance (TA) Center was established in October 2004 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS). The center supports schools and school districts in developing and implementing comprehensive emergency and crisis response plans by providing technical assistance via trainings, publications and individualized responses to requests. *Lessons Learned* is a series of publications that are a brief recounting of actual school emergencies and crises.

School and student names have been changed to protect identities. Information for this publication was gathered through a series of interviews with school stakeholders involved in the actual incident. For additional information on other emergency-related topics, please visit the ERCM TA Center at [www.ercm.org](http://www.ercm.org) or call 1-888-991-3726. For information about the Emergency Response and Crisis Management grant program, contact Tara Hill ([tara.hill@ed.gov](mailto:tara.hill@ed.gov)), Michelle Sinkgraven ([michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov](mailto:michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov)), or Sara Strizzi ([sara.strizzi@ed.gov](mailto:sara.strizzi@ed.gov)). Disclaimer: This publication was funded by the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools at the U.S. Department of Education under contract number GS23F8062H with Caliber Associates Inc. The contracting officer's representative was Tara Hill. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government. This publication also contains hyperlinks and URLs for information created and maintained by private organizations. This information is provided for the reader's convenience. The U.S. Department of Education is not responsible for controlling or guaranteeing the accuracy, relevance, timeliness or completeness of this outside information. Further, the inclusion of information or a hyperlink or URL does not reflect the importance of the organization, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered.