



U.S. Department of Education

LESSONS LEARNED

from School Crises and Emergencies

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DEALING WITH WEAPONS ON CAMPUS

The Incident

Each year, school administrators, faculty and staff must deal with the possibility of students planning and carrying out pranks such as toilet-papering trees, egging automobiles or spray painting school property. These high jinks often occur at the end of the school year, when warmer days and the prospect of summer vacation trigger student restlessness and apathy. At Delaney Middle School,¹ administrators thought they had taken every possible precaution to thwart such end-of-the-school-year mischief, but one incident taught them several valuable lessons for improving their readiness, in particular their emergency and crisis management practices.

On the final day of class, Delaney's administrative staff stopped students at the main entrance to the building to search student backpacks for cans of paint, shaving cream, toilet paper and other items that could be used to deface school property or possibly injure other students. However, the children of school employees who entered the building through other doors with their parents were not checked. One of those students was Tom, a seventh-grader in the school's gifted program, who had planned to smuggle in three rifles in a duffel bag to hold the principal hostage for a ransom and demand the use of a helicopter to leave the state.

Although Tom's mother was aware that his duffel bag was in her car, she was unaware that Tom had a car key and retrieved the bag after they had entered the school together.

While students were in class, the assistant principal conducted his usual 8:15 a.m. sweep of the school, which included a restroom check. As he entered the one near the main office, he spied the legs of a student slipping into camouflage clothing while three rifles lay in an open duffel bag on the floor of the closed stall.

Based on what he had observed in the restroom, the assistant principal announced a schoolwide lockdown to staff members over his walkie-talkie while running down to the main office. Once there, he and the other administrators and the school nurse locked their personal office doors, leaving the main office door unlocked, as the secretaries called 911 while hiding under their desks. The police received the emergency call at approximately 8:20 a.m. Meanwhile, outside on the school field, sixth-graders were signing yearbooks and physical education classes were in session. These students did not hear the lockdown announcement. Worried about the students and teachers outside, the principal climbed out of his first-floor window and moved the students to a safer area behind a row of trees. After doing so, he stayed outside, maintaining radio contact with the other administrators. He, along with the school's security specialist, greeted first responders and relayed to them what the assistant principal had observed in the bathroom.

¹ This issue of Lessons Learned is based on a recounting of an actual event. 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.

Meanwhile, as Tom left the restroom and made his way to the main office, several students asked him if his camouflage outfit and rifles were props for the school play. They also remarked that, if the guns were real, he would get into trouble for bringing them to school. Tom ignored the students and proceeded to the main office. When he entered, he saw a secretary on the phone under her desk. He pointed the rifle at her and told her to hang up the phone. After she did so, Tom reentered the main hall with his gun upright. In the hallway, he came across a teacher who was walking toward the main office to tell the administrative staff that the microphone for the public address (PA) system had been left on, although no conversations could be heard—only background noises. After encountering Tom, the teacher quietly and calmly spoke to him. A few minutes later, Tom held the rifle by the barrel and rested the butt on the floor.

Emergency calls from the school that morning had initiated a response protocol from district police and school security staff. The protocol specified that all on-duty police officers were to immediately respond to the crisis. Fire and medical teams also were dispatched to six preestablished staging areas: Command, Operations, SWAT, Communications, Relocation, and Community Hazards. In consultation with the principal, the first police officers to arrive at Delaney entered the building. Following police instruction, the teacher moved away from Tom, who remained calm and did not resist being taken into custody at 8:40 a.m.

The police spent nearly three hours searching the school for accomplices and evacuating each classroom one section at a time from the building. During that time, the administrators' communication with teachers and students was limited. More than 1,100 students were evacuated to the perimeter of the campus and surrounding the

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Delaney had an established protocol for immediately transporting students by bus to a designated student-parent reunification site at a nearby high school. Approximately three hours after the initial 911 call, bus drivers were instructed by a district administrator to begin to transport students to a different student-parent reunification site, an elementary school, without first consulting the school's emergency management plan. And there was no apparent good reason for the switch as the designated site could accommodate a large number of students and Delaney's reunification procedures.

Before releasing students to their parents, school resource officers and police questioned students about the alleged gunman and identified approximately 10 students who knew of Tom's plan; they were detained and questioned further. Meanwhile, other police and school officials implemented the reunification procedures for the rest of the students.

In addition, reporters swarmed Delaney Middle School and the nearby neighborhood, despite being directed to the predetermined media staging area. To their credit, police did not allow anyone—including teachers who wanted to retrieve their cars and go home—to reenter the school building or the school campus until they completed their investigation. Teachers and other staff members finally were given access to their cars at approximately 10 p.m.; the last police car left the school grounds around midnight—approximately 16 hours after the initial emergency call.

As the event occurred on a Friday, the school reopened on Saturday to allow staff and students to retrieve their belongings. The following Monday, school and school district officials conducted parent and community meetings to provide details about the incident, and also offered counseling services for staff and students.

Lessons Learned

The incident just described demonstrates the extent to which a coordinated emergency management plan, previously agreed to by school district officials, teachers, administrators and community partners—including first responders—contributed to a safe outcome. Delaney Middle School’s emergency management plan, developed by the school district, included the necessary procedures for ensuring student and staff safety and accountability. The community, school district and the school’s Incident Command System (ICS) clearly identified the roles and responsibilities for both first responders and school personnel. School officials believe that their annual review and continual practice of the plan helped everyone to understand and fulfill their responsibilities. In addition, the yearly trainings conducted for all first responders and school personnel supported

effective response and recovery efforts. However, through a series of after-action briefings, school officials found that specific areas in the existing procedures for emergency management response and training needed strengthening.

Delaney’s experience can provide valuable insight for school administrators as they plan and launch comprehensive emergency management activities. If they have not done so already, schools should strive to establish and maintain the following protocols.

Assign administrators to accessible locations.

Delaney’s existing emergency management plan called for administrators to return to and remain locked in their offices. In this instance, the protocol did not help to facilitate communication among teachers, students, administrators and first responders. In its now updated emergency management plan, Delaney’s administrators are assigned to “safe positions” throughout the school, where they can maintain communication with each

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other, first responders and teachers using walkie-talkies or other communication devices.

Create a school ICS.

Effective on-site coordination with first responders—law enforcement, fire and public health personnel—is based on all parties involved sharing and receiving comprehensive and specific information about an incident. To foster collaboration and ensure the coordination of resources, the roles and responsibilities of district, school and emergency response personnel should be outlined in a formal Incident Command System (ICS) that includes setting up an on-site incident command center. With the arrival of the police and fire departments, tactical command should be handed over to those personnel by school administrators, thereby enabling those same administrators to shift their attention to student accountability and the emotional and physical well-being of students and staff.

Maintain communication and command center devices in good working order.

PA systems, telephones and two-way radios are crucial tools for managing hazardous situations. Schools should maintain multiple communication centers with equal capacity to communicate with all learning areas including outdoor areas. Delaney Middle School did not plan for a scenario in which the main office was part of the emergency. After the incident, the school installed additional phones at strategic locations throughout the building. Teachers involved in outdoor activities now carry two-way radios to ensure accessibility to administrators.

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and purchase additional equipment. When making communication equipment acquisitions, one of the primary considerations should be interoperability with first responders. Staff should be trained on how to use communication devices effectively. For example, an instructional poster hung by a PA system's control panel can be a simple yet effective reminder to staff about how to operate the system and can be particularly helpful during an emergency.

Formalize evacuation and reunification procedures.

Delaney Middle School officials recognized that if the designated evacuation and reunification sites were to be at another school, it had to be larger than the affected school to accommodate its own student and parent population as well as the students and parents from the evacuated school. Parents should be made aware of the locations of the evacuation and reunification sites as well as student release procedures before an emergency occurs. Effective avenues to communicate this information to parents include school newsletters, letters to parents, the school's Web site, back-to-

school presentations for parents, listservs and radio and television announcements. Although Delaney Middle School had identified a safe location on the perimeter of the school's grounds where students and staff members could wait for buses that were going to the reunification site, the district administrator overrode the procedures outlined in the emergency management plan, thereby causing a delay in the evacuation of students and creating confusion as to where they were being sent and where parents could pick them up.

The confusion that took place at Delaney shows why it is important to designate primary and secondary evacuation and reunification sites. All schools should designate at least one safe area on campus where students will await transportation to the reunification site. If staffing allows, it also may be useful for medical personnel, mental health service providers and security officers to be available to offer students and staff assistance at the designated evacuation site.

Schedule regular training and practice the plan.

Regular, repeated training in emergency management procedures is necessary for all stakeholders, from community members and first responders to members of teachers unions and district administrative personnel. This practice will ensure that in an emergency, staff and administrators understand and are able to follow established protocols.

Training should be mandatory for all school staff members, including substitute teachers, part-time personnel, cafeteria workers, secretaries, nurses and facilities staff. Drills and exercises should take place at various times of the day (during morning arrival, lunch periods and assemblies) and

in different weather conditions. Ideally, training and drills should be conducted in cooperation with emergency responders and other community partners. Staff and students should be aware of and practice lockdown and evacuation procedures. During the planning process, schools and first responders must agree on policies such as whether or not to lock classroom doors or keep blinds up or down. Additionally, parents and community members should be made aware in advance of any scheduled, large-scale drills.

Conduct parent and community debriefings after an incident.

Following an emergency, staff, students and their families may want and need short- and long-term support services, ranging from basic information about the incident to long-term mental health services. Depending on the intensity of the incident and the number of people affected, the school should offer periodic meetings to facilitate the recovery process and restore the learning environment. An after-incident meeting provides

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the school and first responders with an opportunity to convey accurate and necessary information to parents and community members, as well as offer them mental health services and ensure everyone involved knows about the school's and community's capacity to maintain safety.

Conclusion

Delaney Middle School's experience points to the importance of emergency management planning, training and practice with first responders, community members, students, school and district staff, and administrators throughout the year. Collaboration is essential—no one agency can successfully manage a school-based emergency alone. Delaney's lessons learned regarding the handling of an end-of-the-school-year emergency should assist

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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 or call 1-888-991-3726. For information about the Emergency Response and Crisis Management grant program, contact Tara Hill (tara.hill@ed.gov), Michelle Sinkgraven (michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov), or Sara Strizzi (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.