School Crisis Teams within an Incident Command System

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Despite the increasing attention given to the need for schools to be prepared to respond in a variety of crisis situations, there is a lack of information about how to coordinate with multiple agencies following a crisis. This article describes the U. S. Department of Homeland Security's (2004) National Incident Management System and its Incident Command System (ICS), which provides a common set of concepts, principles, terminology, and organizational processes to facilitate crisis response activities. The traditional school crisis team structure is compared to the ICS structure and the overlap and integration of the two are highlighted. Two case scenarios are presented to illustrate how the school crisis team may operate in compliance with the ICS in different crisis situations.

Crises are sudden, uncontrollable, and extremely negative events that have the potential to impact an entire school community (Brock, 2002). Thus, they require an organized and carefully coordinated response to meet the needs of the affected individuals. During the past two decades, there has been increased public, professional, and legislative interest in school crisis prevention and intervention. It has been recommended that comprehensive crisis teams be established at the school, district, and regional or community levels (Brock, Sandoval, & Lewis, 2001), of which school psychologists are often active members (Allen et al., 2002; Nickerson & Zhe, 2004). Whereas recommendations have been made about the structure and function of these teams, there is a notable absence of literature on how these teams coordinate with other emergency personnel. In particular, guidance regarding how the school crisis team fits within the federal government's National Incident Management System (NIMS) has been scarce.

The U. S. Department of Homeland Security (2004) developed the NIMS to help facilitate a standardized response to emergencies. A central component of NIMS is the Incident Command System (ICS). Consistent with guidance offered by Brock, Jimerson, and Hart (2006) and required in some states (e.g., California), it is important that school crisis teams conform to the NIMS and its ICS so that these teams can communicate in a common language with the many other agencies and response personnel that may be involved in responding to a crisis at school. Despite the use of the ICS by agencies such as the American Red Cross, electric companies, emergency management, fire, law enforcement, public health, and public works/highway departments (Landesman, 2005), a review of the literature indicates that school crisis teams are rarely described within this infrastructure and when they are, the ICS is mentioned only briefly (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2003). However, this issue has received attention recently. For instance, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offers an independent study course on Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Schools (http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is362.asp). In addition, Brock et al. (2006) have offered an in-depth description of how the ICS can provide the infrastructure for delineating the roles and duties of

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school crisis team members, specifically with regard to the prevention, preparation, response, and recovery from school violence. The following provides a description of the ICS, reviews the current status of school crisis teams, proposes how school crisis teams can comply with the ICS, and provides two examples of how the school crisis team may operate within the ICS in different emergencies affecting schools.

School Crisis Teams

Recent surveys of school psychologists provide evidence that crisis response teams are prevalent in schools, with 93% of respondents in Nickerson and Zhe's (2004) study indicating that their schools used these teams and 76% of respondents in Allen et al.'s (2002) study reporting that their districts had these teams. However, Graham, Shirm, Liggen, Aitken, and Dick's (2006) recent study of school superintendents revealed deficiencies in school emergency/disaster planning. Of school superintendents who responded, 86% had a crisis plan but only 57% had a prevention plan. Although 95% had an evacuation plan, almost 30% had never conducted a drill and 43% had never met with local ambulance officials to discuss emergency planning.

Experts in school crisis prevention and intervention have emphasized the importance of having a comprehensive school crisis team to address the safety and mental health needs of students, staff, and families through prevention, response, and recovery (e.g., Brock et al., 2001; Poland, Pitcher, & Lazarus, 2002). Although it is important to have building-level crisis teams and ensure that local school resources are the primary providers of crisis team assistance, district, regional, or community-level teams, consisting of members with more advanced crisis knowledge, expertise, and access to additional resources, are also important. Multiple hierarchical teams are necessary given that some crisis events are so severe that they can quickly overwhelm local resources. School crisis situations are also unique because they often impact the school caregiver(s), either physically or psychologically, which may complicate crisis response. Depending upon the nature of the school crisis event the district-level and/ or regional or community-level team may provide consultation to school teams or offer direct services (Brock et al., 2001).

A hallmark of school crisis teams is multidisciplinary membership. Some have recommended that teams be comprised of specific staff members, such as the principal, guidance counselor, nurse, psychologist, and teachers (e.g., Peterson & Straub, 1992). Others, however, have advocated a functional, rather than a discipline-specific, approach to team formation (Brock et al., 2001; James & Gilliland, 2001; Pitcher & Poland, 1992). These functions include a crisis response coordinator, counseling coordinator, media liaison, security/law enforcement liaison, medical liaison, and parent liaison (Brock et al., 2001; Pitcher & Poland, 1992; Poland et al., 2002). Organizing teams according to function, instead of being discipline specific, also allows back-up trained personnel to assume duties if a particular individual is not available.

The crisis response coordinator is typically a school administrator who is responsible for coordinating the development of the school crisis plan, overseeing the response to an actual crisis, and evaluating the response (Brock et al., 2001). Most school teams also designate a person to coordinate the school's response to the psychological needs of students and staff. This role has been referred to as the crisis intervention coordinator (Brock et al., 2001), counseling coordinator, or counseling liaison (Pitcher & Poland, 1992). This coordinator is responsible for ensuring that mental health and/ or supportive services are provided to the affected individuals through triage, direct intervention, and referrals. Most often, this person is a trained mental health provider such as a school psychologist, school social worker, or school counselor. The media liaison, often the school or district public information officer,

works with broadcast and print journalists prior to a crisis to establish good working relationships and during an event to provide concise and accurate information to be shared with the public. The security or law enforcement liaison is typically an administrator, a school resource officer (Brock et al., 2001), or a school security staff member that has ongoing contact with local law enforcement personnel. Because crises often affect the physical health of students, a medical liaison, who may be a nurse or district health administrator, provides training to school personnel in emergency first aid, coordinates communication between the paramedics and school crisis team, and, in some cases, manages medical triage of victims (Brock et al., 2001). Recognizing parents' need for information and assurance about their children's safety, Pitcher and Poland (1992) recommended including a parent liaison as part of the school crisis team. This person is responsible for establishing a system to respond to phone calls and to reunite parents with students.

It is essential that comprehensive school crisis teams be prepared to work with emergency response personnel (e.g., fire, police, public health) as a part of their response to school crises. Research has indicated that a common crisis response challenge is generated when multiple agencies, unfamiliar with each other's work, are involved in a crisis response. Lack of familiarity can impede efficient and effective response (Kartez & Kelley, 1988; Raphael & Meldrum, 1993). Given the reality that some school crises necessitate the involvement of multiple agencies, it is important for schools to be prepared to communicate with and integrate other emergency response providers.

Incident Command System

The National Incident Management System (NIMS; U. S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004) provides a common set of concepts, principles, terminology, and organizational processes to allow crises to be managed at all levels in an efficient, effective, and collaborative way. Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD) 5- Management of Domestic Incidents, signed in 2003, communicated the Bush administration's executive decision to require all federal departments and agencies to adopt the NIMS, including the basic tenets of the Incident Command System (ICS) as a condition for federal preparedness assistance through grants, contracts, and other activities (U. S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004). The ICS is to be used for a broad spectrum of emergencies, across all levels of government and nongovernmental agencies, and across disciplines. According to HSPD-5, the ICS should be used in prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation programs and activities. As illustrated in Figure 1, the ICS is organized by five major functions: Command, Intelligence, Operations, Logistics, and Finance.

Command. This includes the incident commander, and if necessary, a crisis management team comprised of a public information officer (PIO), safety officer (SO), mental health officer, and liaison officer. The incident commander is the person who coordinates the response to crises. This person is provided by the agency with the greatest interest in the event at that time, or by the agency charged with legal responsibility (Green, 2002). The incident commander sets the objectives for the group, assigns responsibilities, and coordinates the overall response. When a crisis crosses multiple political boundaries or jurisdictions, with several agencies having the authority and responsibility to deal with the incident (e.g., a school shooting), the ICS makes use of a unified command, which involves using a collective approach with a single set of objectives developed for the entire incident (U. S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004). The composition of the unified command is flexible, based on the location and type of the incident. The unified command ranges from command by a committee to having a single incident commander take everyone's concerns into account (Green, 2002). For school districts that encompass more than one jurisdiction (e.g., multiple police departments), it is important
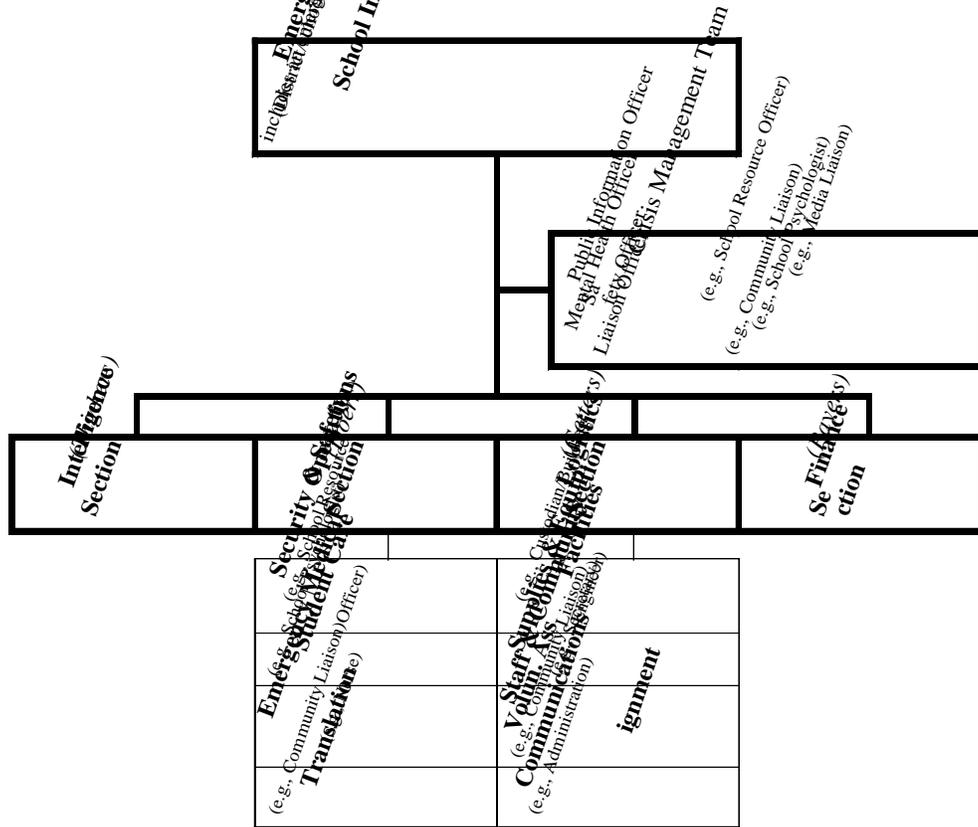
Figure 1. *This flowchart illustrates the elements of the ICS and their hierarchical relationships. It also provides examples of the school crisis team roles and school personnel that might fill these ICS roles.*

for the school crisis team to plan with all of those jurisdictions in advance to understand how this structure would be utilized in an emergency situation.

Within the command staff, the public information officer interfaces with the public, the media, and other agencies with incident-related information requirements. This person needs to gather accurate information about the incident's cause, size, current situation, and resources committed (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004). The safety officer, who is there for the safety of the response personnel, conducts ongoing assessments of hazardous environments, coordinates safety efforts among different agencies, implements measures to promote emergency responder safety, and advises the incident commander on all safety matters. Regardless of the use of a single incident commander or a unified command, there should only be one public information officer and one safety officer (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004). The Los Angeles County Office of Education (n.d.) adds a mental health officer position which may also be a part of the crisis management team and which reports directly to the incident commander. The addition of a mental health officer may be particularly valuable due to the importance of assessing and coordinating mental health services for students, staff, and families. Unlike traditional emergency responders who constantly respond to crises, this is a less frequent role in schools, and being prepared to respond to the mental health issues that may arise is

critical. The liaison officer is the point of contact for representatives of other government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and private entities. All agency representatives given the authority to speak for their parent agencies or organizations coordinate through the liaison officer. In large incidents, each of the aforementioned members of the command staff may need one or more assistants to help with the duties. Additional command staff may be necessary depending on the incident (e.g., legal advisor, medical advisor), which may be referred to as "section chiefs."

Another important concept is the command post. It is critical that all incident command staff operate from a single incident command post to ensure a coordinated response. This post should be located in a safe area outside of the immediate impact area of an ongoing event. Incident command staff, regardless of the agency they represent, should all work from this single location (Green, 2002). Assuming the school office is safe and not impacted by the crisis event, this is the typical location for a school's command post. When the command staff meets at the command post, section chiefs for each function should be assigned. The command post should have the resources needed to organize a response (e.g., phones, fax, confidential meeting space).

Intelligence. This section is comprised of "the thinkers" (California Governor's OES, 1998), who collect, evaluate, and disseminate incident situation information and intelligence to the incident commander or unified command. Intelligence also prepares status reports, maintains status of resources assigned to an incident, and develops/documents the plan, including incident objectives and strategies. This section is constantly asking questions, evaluating new information, planning for future needs, and making use of recorders, logs, radios, campus maps, and buses. It also maintains a status board, which may be a flip chart keeping a summary of what is occurring (Los Angeles County Office of Education, n.d.).

Operations. Referred to as "the doers" by the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES, 1998), Operations is responsible for immediate response needs, including activities focused on reducing immediate hazards, saving lives and property, establishing situational control, and restoring normal operations (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004). The person in charge of Operations directs the strategic response to the incident by organizing the work force, matching supplies with needs, and managing resources. Operations oversees search and rescue, reunion, medical and psychological first aid, security, and fire suppression (Los Angeles Unified School District, n.d.). Activities typically viewed as "crisis intervention" or the immediate response to the psychological challenges generated by a crisis event fall under the control of Operations. Translation and cultural services also fall under this section. Figure 2 illustrates examples of school personnel that may fill the Operations Section roles.

Logistics. This section is responsible for obtaining all resources needed to manage the crisis, thus they are referred to as "the getters" (California Governor's OES, 1998). These resources include personnel, equipment and supplies, and services, including transportation. When Operations needs something, they get it from Logistics and Logistics works with Intelligence to develop resources for future needs.

Finance. This section, consisting of "the payers" (California Governor's OES, 1998), keeps a record of all expenses. Although not all crises require this section, it is established when the agency requires finance and other administrative support services (e.g., payroll, claims and reimbursements). If only one specific aspect is needed (e.g., cost analysis), a technical specialist in Planning can provide this (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004). In the schools, it is often the incident commander or administrator who is directly involved in monetary decisions and approval of these decisions. The records of expense become important if federal or state funds are later allocated to the response.
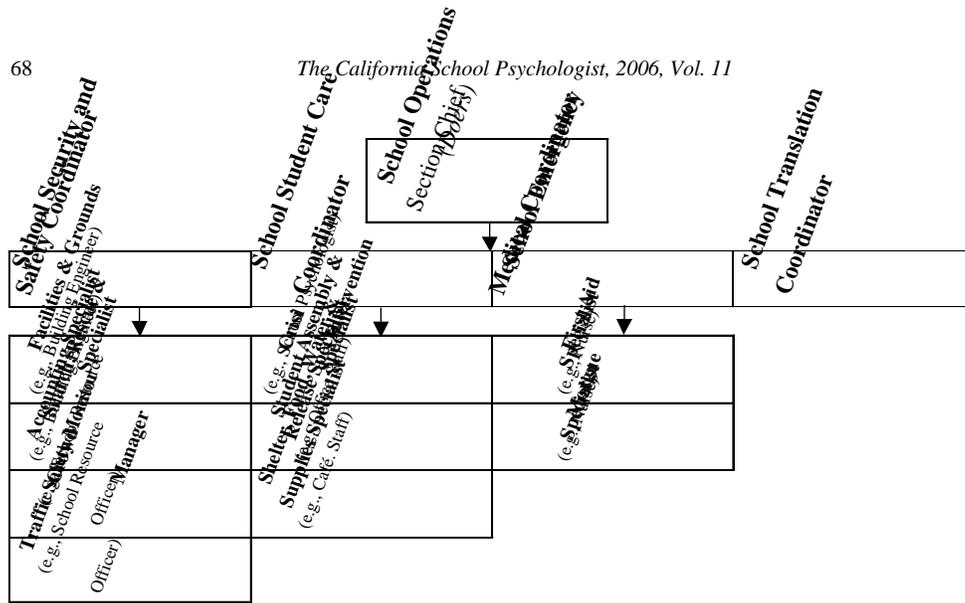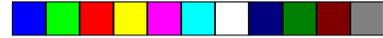
Figure 2. This flowchart illustrates the elements of the ICS's Operations section and their hierarchical relationships. It also provides examples of the school personnel that might fill these Operations Section roles.

Integration of School Crisis Team within ICS

Both the ICS and models for comprehensive school crisis teams recognize the importance of using a coordinated system to respond to crises. Although the terminology differs, there is much overlap (e.g., the public information officer and the media liaison are functional equivalents, as are the safety official and the security/law enforcement liaison). The Incident Command System and traditional school crisis team structures are hierarchical, with a central figure or coordinator (i.e., the incident commander or the crisis team coordinator) who is responsible for the overall management of the situation. In addition, each system includes clearly defined roles and responsibilities of persons involved in crisis response. The ICS and school crisis teams also acknowledge the multiple levels of response that may be needed. That is, both have recognized that most incidents are handled on a daily basis by a single jurisdiction at the local level (such as the school crisis team), but there are other instances that require coordination and involvement of multiple agencies. In both models, the school principal may take primary responsibility for all of the major functions. However, in more severe crises, the ICS utilizes the unified command, whereas the school literature organizes this by the building, district, and regional or community team. ICS and school crisis teams can be integrated and offer useful perspectives to inform the other. The following case scenarios illustrate how the integration of models may work in school crisis events.

Case scenario 1. As students arrive at high school one morning, a teenager who has dropped out of school enters the building unnoticed. He walks down the hall and enters a classroom where 18 students and one teacher are present. As the teacher approaches the teenager to ask for his identification and the purpose of his visit, the teenager approaches a male student, pulls out a handgun, and fires several shots toward the student, saying "That's what you get for cheating me." In addition to killing the intended victim, the shooter wounds two other students who rushed to help the victim.

ICS response to scenario 1. In this situation, the incident commander (most likely the principal) takes immediate control of the situation and implements previously developed emergency response

procedures to ensure the safety of the students and staff. Specifically, 911 would be called to request emergency law enforcement and medical assistance and the school's lockdown procedure (which typically involves signaling all students and staff to report to their assigned location, close, lock, and cover all windows and doors, stay low, and remain silent; Brock et al., 2001) is initiated. As indicated by the school's disaster response protocol, other members of the school's ICS team either assist with the immediate crisis response or report to the command post, which is typically located in the school's office or an identified back-up location.

The Operations section, which includes the school security and safety coordinator (e.g., school resource officer) and medical emergency coordinator (e.g., school nurse), activate lockdown procedures and ensure that emergency medical assistance is provided. Once police and medical emergency response personnel arrive on the scene, a unified ICS command is established; however, it is also common for the incident command function to be transferred to law enforcement. Regardless of the incident command structure, the next steps are to ensure student safety by apprehending the shooter and removing the gun. Because the classroom is a crime scene, the search, rescue, and accounting specialist works with the incident commander to evacuate students without disrupting evidence and accounts for all students by collecting this information from teachers. The student assembly and release specialist activates parent/student reunification procedures specified by the school's disaster response plan. A special issue for this specialist is accounting for the students who left school on their own following the crisis event. The public information officer keeps detailed documentation of events and the school's response to ensure that he or she has the factual information necessary for parent and media communications. Working with the incident commander, the public information officer develops and disseminates parental notifications, as well as press releases. Another likely activity that falls under the Operations Section is managing the large number of people, many of who will be distressed parents, who arrive on the scene after hearing about the event.

The intelligence chief collects, evaluates, and disseminates information to the incident commander and supports the response team by evaluating information and making modifications to the plan as necessary. The logistics chief ensures that all necessary resources, such as water, food, and crowd control equipment, are available to respond to the aftermath of this crisis. The Finance section documents all crisis related expenditures.

In the days and weeks following the incident, the school crisis/ICS team assesses the extent to which students have been affected by the incident, the risk for psychological trauma, and the need for psychological first aid. The mental health officer or the crisis intervention specialist typically directs these efforts. In addition, it is important to determine when school can resume. This may be dictated by the extent of damage to the classroom and the time needed to process and clean up the crime scene, as well as the psychological needs of students to resume routines. The incident commander, with support from the school crisis team, makes this determination. Further, factual and empathic communication with faculty, students, and parents is also essential. A group of ICS team members play important roles. Specifically, the Intelligence Section ensures that accurate information is gathered; the public information and mental health offices help to determine what information should be shared, identify needed support services, and implement a plan to help parents, students, and staff access these support services.

Case scenario 2. A fire begins in a science class of a middle school after an experiment goes horribly wrong and spreads rapidly while school is in session. The clothing of the two students conducting the experiment catches on fire. While most of the class evacuates, the teacher and five students remain to try to help the students who have caught on fire.

ICS response to scenario 2. During this incident, the principal serves as the initial incident commander. Presumably, the fire alarm is activated, which signals staff and students to follow appropriate evacuation procedures and notify the local fire department. The incident commander, working with the safety officer and student care coordinator, ensures that evacuation procedures have been followed. Further, he or she verifies that a 911 call has been placed to report the incident and its exact location. At this time, the school district central office is also notified. When firefighters arrive, all fire suppression acivities are immediately handed over. Throughout the response, the Intelligence Section is collecting, evaluating, and disseminating information to the appropriate response personnel.

Under the Operations Section, the school emergency medical coordinator provides first aid to the burn victims until emergency medical response personnel arrive on the scene. This person also needs to oversee triage of students to determine who need immediate aid due to smoke inhalation. Because the school building is unsafe due to the likelihood of the fire spreading, this situation highlights the need for the school disaster plan to include the location of an alternate incident command post. At this location, ICS team members gather and direct additional actions. Among these additional actions, the student assembly and release specialist directs the transportation of students from the premises to an off-site evacuation area, which is specified by the school's disaster response plan. The crowd manager and traffic safety monitor ensure that there is a clear path for fire and other emergency personnel to suppress the fire and treat victims. Because it is likely that many students will be very upset and that there may be a lot of time spent outside the school, the student care coordinator may direct teachers to organize activities in which the students can engage (e.g., board games). As these events are occurring, the crisis intervention specialist begins the process of psychological triage based on issues such as proximity to the incident, relationship to victims, and prior psychological functioning. The Logistics Section verifies that emergency supplies (e.g., bottled water and blankets) are on hand.

When the fire department arrives, that agency's on-scene commander is likely to assume the role of incident commander and the school principal becomes directly involved as a member of the crisis management team. A representative from the police department is also on the crisis management team. Of paramount importance is evacuating the injured teacher and students and providing appropriate medical care, which likely falls to the fire department and emergency medical staff, though school staff may be assisting. Student assembly and release coordinate efforts to release students in a manner that minimizes chaos and ensures that all students are accounted for. A member of Logistics keeps detailed documentation of the event, which will be needed by Finance for the later filing of any insurance claims.

Many issues are addressed in the days, weeks, and months following the incident. Depending on the extent of the damage, the Intelligence Chief and other members of the team work quickly to identify where to resume school if the school building is not safe to occupy. Solutions may include alternative sites or portable classrooms. Although the logistics of this task are critical, the mental health needs of students and their families are also very important for the student care coordinator and the crisis intervention specialist. For instance, students who were close to the victims and witnessed the students who caught on fire are particularly at-risk for trauma. The staff and volunteer assignment coordinator are responsible for coordinating efforts to deliver services to those in need. The public information officer provides factual information to the media and the communication section of Logistics keeps parents and community members informed. Finally, the Intelligence Section gathers information about the cause (e.g., the results of fire department investigations) and consequences (e.g., when the school facility will re-open) of the fire; and the public information officer and mental health officer or crisis intervention specialist help to determine what information will be shared.

Concluding Comments

This article has provided a description of the integration of school crisis teams within the Incident Command System and proposed a mechanism by which school crisis teams can work within the ICS in two different emergencies affecting schools. The roles and functions required for school crisis teams parallel the roles and functions required by the ICS. Titles used within the ICS may initially be confusing to school personnel, since the ICS focuses on jobs assigned according to duties, whereas school crisis teams often assign roles according to job title. However, the overall structure of the Incident Command System involves the primary leadership role of an incident commander, which is filled most often by an administrator or law enforcement agent, and supporting professionals with pre-assigned roles and responsibilities. When school crisis teams work within this structure, it provides for comprehensive crisis planning and response, and also allows for clear communication with support agencies that are required by the federal government to use this structure. An added benefit of using the ICS to structure a school or district crisis team is the potential it allows for school districts to obtain support, financially and otherwise, when an event occurs. The two examples demonstrate how a comprehensive response can be utilized within the NIMS Incident Command System to ensure that responses are comprehensive, coordinated, and take multiple factors into consideration.

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