



CREDIT: NEWTOWN BEE, SHANNON HICKS

School Crisis

Reasonable preparation for the worst
day in a school administrator's life



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Introduction

As a school administrator, you are responsible for a complex gathering of people, including vulnerable students, in surroundings that can quickly become destabilized and dangerous. Whether it involves violence, weather, a fire, or some other crisis, you are the person relied upon to lead.

Your best chance of handling a crisis well is to prevent what you can and prepare for what you cannot prevent.

This booklet is designed to help you develop a comprehensive crisis management policy and plan.

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The Role of the School Administrator in a Crisis

School administrators have two primary responsibilities: the safety of all school building occupants and the quality education of its students. A crisis can seriously undermine both. Prevention is key, but disaster can strike even a school that has taken comprehensive prevention measures. That is why it is imperative for school district officials to craft crisis management policies, develop a customized crisis management plan, conduct drills, and review and refine the plan regularly.

POLICY IS THE FOUNDATION

Each school board devises core policies for the district it governs, and a crisis management policy should be chief among them. However, it is important to remember that the policy is not the plan. A crisis management policy provides guidelines for school administrators when developing detailed plans, delineating procedures and addressing the unique social and physical characteristics of each school.

Policy development is both an opportunity and a responsibility, because district policies can effectively become law. There was a landmark ruling in 2000, in which a federal judge issued a decision upholding the expulsion of six students for violating the Decatur (Ill.) School District's zero-tolerance policy on violence. The expulsions had been challenged in part on the basis that the school policy was not codified law. However, U.S. Judge Michael McCuskey upheld the district's policy; it was binding and, essentially, "the law."

A FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING THE PLAN

It is important that a district crisis management plan incorporates best practices, is compatible with the unique needs and characteristics of your district, and blends as seamlessly as possible into district operations. Some other considerations in developing a plan are:

- **Basic Training in Crisis Response.** Such training can help assure that the basics are covered and that no relevant statutes or regulations are missed.
- **Relationships with Local Law Enforcement.** The relationship with local law enforcement and other helping resources can vary considerably from school district to school district. For example, many districts are involved with overlapping jurisdictions of law enforcement, while others have organized working relationships with only one county and one municipal law enforcement group.
- **Distribution Channels.** How a school district distributes its crisis plans also varies widely. Some districts have plans that are described in some detail in board minutes and publicly distributed. Others have systems that are understood but not formally archived or widely distributed. Still others have no established rules or patterns of distributing policy information.

The Greatest Engineer and the Crisis

Shortly before dawn on a cold spring morning in 1979, Unit 2 of a nuclear power plant on Three Mile Island near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, essentially melted down. It was unthinkable!

Because of the gas crisis and trouble in the Middle East, the United States began relying heavily on nuclear energy; a huge public relations campaign told Americans that nuclear power was perfectly safe. Suddenly, thousands of people were at risk and nearly one million Americans were preparing to be evacuated.

The individual who handled the crisis and took "full responsibility" in front of a record television audience was President Jimmy Carter, a former nuclear engineer. Slowly, the crisis was put into perspective, engineering controls were carefully implemented, and America's nuclear nightmare was temporarily under control. The crisis had seriously hurt the United States, and if this sort of crisis reoccurred, a significant loss of human life was inevitable, along with decimation of America's power grid.

Pres. Carter called upon the man whom he identified as the greatest engineer in American history to study what happened and format a path for preventing crisis of this nature in the future. This man, Admiral Hyman Rickover, (Ret.), father of the nuclear submarine, was asked to create a crisis prevention and response approach.

In addition to his profound technical talents, Adm. Rickover was known for taking the strengths and weaknesses of people and bureaucracies into consideration, along with engineering approaches to find solutions.

DISTRICT CORE RESPONSIBILITIES

A school district is charged with safeguarding its students, staff and property. To meet this responsibility, a district has the following six basic crisis management tasks:

1. **Develop or Review Crisis Management Policy.** Draft a clear and concise policy that works with existing district systems to prevent crisis and enhance crisis responses.
2. **Review Existing Crisis Procedures.** Review, codify, and improve the district's existing plan for handling crises. The plan must relate to, and must be compatible with, local, state and federal codes, regulations, and statutes.
3. **Develop or Review a Premeditated Violence Component.** There have been approximately 50 acts of extreme violence committed by students in schools nationally over the past decade, attracting great media attention and public concern. Such violence is rare but must be addressed in crisis management plans. Districts should develop a system to identify signs of potential premeditated violence, as well as outline basic response procedures. Identifying potentially violent students is not a predictable science. It involves recognizing signs of possible at-risk individuals and situations, evaluating rumors, and responding quickly but cautiously.
4. **Conduct Emergency Response Drills.** Develop a system for conducting emergency response drills, including evacuation, and review and update the emergency action plan annually or biennially.
5. **Preserve the District's Mission.** In constructing a crisis management plan, make certain that new systems do not undermine the mission and culture of the district. "Doing no harm" is fundamental to successfully addressing this unique administrative challenge.
6. **Establish Command and Control.** Decide who will be in charge under what conditions.



Rickover studied what happened and wrote a brief but powerful letter to Pres. Carter, which served as the crisis prevention policy safeguarding nuclear power plants, and still serves as the classic benchmark for leaders in preventing and responding to crisis. He made four simple points:

1. Crises are exacerbated by preventable human errors in both anticipation and response.
2. Crises can be eliminated or rendered less significant by timely recognition of risk and prepared responses.
3. The possibility of a crisis was, and typically can be, anticipated by observing what has happened in the past to similar institutions.
4. Rules and plans (technical standards) must be established and enforced with consistent and serious training and retraining of personnel.

The Admiral argued against a sort of "cops and robbers" game of increased regulation and pseudo-technical compliance, but advocated for fundamental change from the heart of the institution. Shortly thereafter, nuclear utilities formed The Institute for Nuclear Power Operations, and clear standards, supported through rigorous training of staff, were institutionalized. Nuclear power continues to provide 20% of American electricity, and there has been no major nuclear accident in America since the institutionalization of the technical standards and mandatory training of nuclear energy employees for crisis prevention and response.

A Crisis Management Policy

Each district has its own style and pattern for developing and working with school policies. Sometimes the policies are brief and succinct; sometimes they are detailed and highly proscriptive.

A crisis management policy needs to work with the style of the district as it covers the four basic topics displayed in Table 1.

Table I. Crisis Management Quadrant

| Behavior Risks | Building/Property Risks |
|--|--|
| Identify and respond to potential at-risk situations and individuals | Create a safe physical environment in terms codes and common sense |
| Create a peaceful atmosphere | Assure there are systems in place for crisis response |
| Develop command-and-control protocol and lockdown, evacuation, and communication plans | Identify safety procedures and evacuation options |
| Prepare post-crisis support systems | Establish re-occupancy guidelines |

The first step in devising a crisis management policy begins with establishing two teams: a district-wide team and a per-building team. Table II outlines potential team members and suggested responsibilities.

1. District Team. The team leader will likely be a district employee with an administrative background, and members would represent administration, teachers, employees, parents/guardians, and possibly students. The district team will likely seek input from community members, community emergency response agencies (law enforcement, emergency medical, and fire officials), county attorney staff, social service agencies, and/or any other relevant individuals or organizations. The makeup of the team will vary by district, but involvement by certain community organizations may be required by state regulations (e.g. fire marshal).

The team will potentially meet seven to ten times during policy development, then annually to review and possibly revise the policy after it is enacted, or regarding aspects of the district and building plans. The three primary responsibilities of the team are: To write a template for response for each building, ensure compatibility with state and local regulations and institutions, and describe the fundamentals of the plan to school professionals and possibly the community.

2. Building Team. This team may involve administrators, educators, facilities personnel and, in some cases, a community representative. It is important that the team include individuals familiar with the physical characteristics of district buildings and those who understand the district's system for dealing with students, employees, and other relevant individuals and institutions.

Violence

Administrators should AVOID the following three elements in developing a crisis management policy directed toward premeditated violence:

- **Do not deny the possibility of violence.** Administrators must not view premeditated violence as so rare that it cannot occur. Reasoned preparation to prevent, limit, and respond wisely to premeditated violence belongs in the district's plan.
- **Do not overreact.** It is understandable that there are often over-reactions following a highly publicized act of school violence. Examples include drafting a 70-page document on crisis protocols ranging from how to open a letter in case it contains a toxin, to providing SWAT team-type training for educators, or equipping a school with equipment more typical of a prison than a school. The plan should not undermine the district's educational mission, especially through projecting an "armed camp" culture.
- **Do not assume a policy or plan will become imbedded in the district's institutional memory.** Policies involving premeditated violence relate to situations that may occur once in 20 years, if at all. Policies and protocols can become outdated and forgotten. Any crisis management program requires reality testing and periodic review to remain viable.

The building team would meet five to seven times for development of a building plan and an annual meeting to review the adequacy of the plan.

Table II. Crisis Management Teams

| Team | Members | Responsibilities | Meeting times |
|----------|---|--|---|
| District | Administrators, educators, employees, parents/guardians, representatives from other key institutions, and possibly students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a template for response for each building • Assure compatibility with state and local regulations and institutions • Describe the policy and plan to school professionals and the community | 7-10 times during policy development and an annual review after the policy and plan are enacted |
| Building | Administrators, educators, facilities personnel, and possibly community representatives | Create a specific building plan | 5-7 times during development and an annual review |

A draft crisis management policy that has been reviewed by an attorney familiar with school law, school administrators, and state education agency staff is included as Attachment A.

After a district adopts a crisis management policy, the district and each school creates a detailed plan that closely follows the district’s policy and customizes its responses toward addressing the unique needs and characteristics of each school and its students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders.

ACTION STEP: Review of Existing Crisis Management Systems

Review of the district’s existing crisis management systems is necessary to ensure compatibility with external statutes and regulations and internal district plans.

The following are crisis categories:

- Fire safety
- Severe weather
- Assault/violence
- Premeditated threats
- Demonstrations & disturbances
- Hazardous materials
- Intruder/hostage situations
- Shootings
- Radiological incidents*
- Serious injury/death
- Suicide
- Weapons onsite
- Other occurrences that may compromise the health and safety of students and others
- Structural integrity of property
- Terrorism

*This applies to districts located near nuclear energy/storage facilities. The district plan must be compatible with U.S. Department of Energy building occupant plans and evacuation protocols.

Restorative Measures

We recommend that districts consider incorporating restorative measures into crisis management policies and plans as they may relate to intentional harm. Restorative measures help undo damage, in part by working with victims and violators. Such measures can be valuable in achieving a return to normalcy.

The Minnesota Department of Education has published, “Respecting Everyone’s Ability to Solve Problems: Restorative Measures,” which outlines potential school district options for both responding to and preventing violence.

Standard operating procedures and post-crisis response systems should be reviewed on a building-by-building basis. Special emphasis should be given to evacuation, lockdown, and sheltering issues that are unique to each building.

Discussion

It is likely that your district has some formal or informal protocol, developed in cooperation with local crisis response providers involving the traditional crisis management issues listed above. There may be variations related to local fire marshals or medical emergency providers so the plan must compile response options for most emergencies and crisis situations in schools in ways compatible with local providers.

There are two important questions relating to command-and-control and recovery that should be given special consideration:

- 1. Who is in charge under what conditions?** A clear command-and-control structure needs to be quickly established as a crisis unfolds. This may involve other institutions (law enforcement, health departments, emergency services, etc.), with school administration influencing and supporting the crisis response infrastructure.
- 2. What happens after a crisis?** Administration should focus on restoring educational and general operations, as well as promoting healing for students, faculty, staff, and the community after a crisis. A transition plan from the crisis response to post-crisis helping services, including communication outreach, should be included in the plan.

There are a number of areas where the district will typically benefit from third-party input, including:

- Establishment of rules, guidelines, and controls for counseling and other post-crisis helping agencies
- Legal liability and insurance issues and options
- Media outreach, including technical assistance from communication professionals who are experienced in crisis situations

ACTION STEP: Survey Buildings

The building survey process should include development of easy-to-read, standardized, color-coded, computer-accessible floor plans, including crisis-specific information unique to each school building. It is likely that formatted CAD schematics exist, as well as templates for updating. Certain portions of this material should be posted at various points in the school and the plans should

Command-and-Control Issues with Local Emergency Response Groups and the County Attorney

The relationship to local law enforcement, fire, and other emergency responders is different for each district. In some districts, a number of chartered helping organizations have overlapping jurisdiction, leading to possible jurisdictional confusion during a crisis. The county attorney's office, which works through law enforcement jurisdictional issues as part of its mandate, is typically the best interagency resource to help organize a coordinated system for emergency command and control. Some county attorney offices are more interested than others in providing coordination support. In addition, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) guidelines represent a responsible starting point for local governance of an emergency response, including law enforcement and other emergency services.

Outreach through the county attorney's office to all local law enforcement agencies typically makes sense, unless some other agency has taken a lead role in this matter. If no system is in place, FEMA model command-and-control and communications guidelines should be reviewed. The objective is to help assure clarity regarding crisis situation control.



be distributed to—or access provided to—local law enforcement and other crisis response organizations. Hard copies of the floor plans should always be located at a central point in the school and key administrators should be able to access them remotely. An organized external review of these plans on either an annual or biennial basis is suggested; third-party review may be especially helpful.

Discussion

Any existing electronic floor plans should be updated with the following information:

- Phone numbers and e-mail addresses of key building contacts
- Diagrams showing the location of primary and secondary fire exits, hoses and fire alarms
- Instructions on how to de-energize alarm systems and shut off utilities (water/electricity/gas)
- Location of chemical storage areas, especially in building maintenance, laboratory science, fine arts and industrial arts areas
- Information on entering and exiting each building, as well as control information on locking systems
- Locations of pressurized tanks (320 psi+), which should probably include triggers for a prevention hydrostatic testing protocol
- Storage areas for flammables and other hazardous materials and rules on the use of fire cabinets
- Characteristics of the terrain, such as shrubbery, lighting, access points and fencing
- Review of structural integrity issues and areas where large amounts of glass could shatter in a natural disaster. A third party structural/mechanical engineering assessment focusing on safe/at-risk structural areas, and consequently safe/unsafe gathering points, may be of value.
- An extremely clear, easy to interpret review of ventilation systems (third party commissioned)
- Primary and secondary outdoor gathering points

Once the floor plan and building site diagrams are recast, they can easily be made electronically available to authorized emergency response organizations on a 24-hour basis through a non-electronic telephone call and confirmation code or a call-back verification procedure. Naturally, security control of this information is a consideration.

Controls and Techniques for Post-Traumatic Human Service Support

Many crisis situations involving such issues as suicides or accidents can often be addressed using district counseling staff and resources. Since the passage of federal mental health parity coverage guidelines, health insurance policies for families can be an important mental health resource in helping families work with this potential, and it may be a valuable district service. In a serious crisis, however, hundreds of counseling visits may be helpful within a short period of time. Basic guidelines for counseling services and patterns for recruiting helping professionals should be a plan consideration.

Professional counselors should inform district administration of significant attitudes, sentiments, and trends that emerge in their counseling interactions. This information gathering process must occur without unique identifiers that would violate traditional client/counselor privilege, but it is valuable for district administration in obtaining insight into the general state of mind of students and others following a crisis.

Supportive written materials regarding potentially traumatized students need to be prepared for quick and systematic dissemination to parents and guardians. A system for mental health assessment and monitoring regarding impact, and follow-up interaction with insurance providers, should be in place.

In the end, both the formal assessment and ongoing counseling support will likely be the responsibility of the family's health insurer. If the family is not insured, county human services support systems would likely be available. Managing a timely and smooth transition from emergency counseling services to ongoing mental health care is important.

ACTION STEP: Review Security Controls

Each building and its site should be reviewed from a security perspective. Each school should have a building team that provides recommendations regarding, for instance, egress (what doors should be locked or unlocked and under what conditions), whether police tours of the building should be held during school hours (would it destabilize or be helpful), how reporting of local violence-oriented websites or Internet postings should be considered, what the expectations and policies are regarding locker searches, whether there is appropriate lighting in parking lots, whether evacuation routes are posted per fire marshal code, etc.

Discussion

The reduction in property crime in the United States has been influenced by new generations of security systems. Video surveillance microchips for branding equipment, motion sensitive lighting systems, and other new technologies provide options for an elevated level of security for buildings and their occupants. Often, these new technologies operate in the background and are non-disruptive.

School buildings are open institutions, especially middle and high schools where there is a constant flow of individuals through different portions of the school building from pre-dawn into the night. This can represent inherent and unavoidable security problems. There should be a review of evolving technologies that can provide greater security while minimizing disruption.

Color-coded locking systems, thoughtful entrance and exit guidelines, and passive barriers should be considered, particularly as part of any new construction or renovation/remodeling. Use of security cameras or rotating phantom security cameras (empty black boxes that may or may not contain cameras) should be considered. The price of such systems has dropped significantly in the past decade. Property management measures as simple as security lighting assessment and security-sensitive landscaping of terrain elevations and plantings surrounding the buildings can have a significant impact on security. Thoughtful indoor barriers containing artwork or plants can influence, or even control, indoor traffic.

Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) has emerged worldwide as a promising, cost-effective pattern for reducing crime and disruption through certain orientations in building design, furnishings, passive barriers, and maintenance. The CPTED process may be reviewed as part of planning for major renovation, remodeling, and new school construction. The process includes, among other things, natural access control, natural surveillance systems, and "territorial reinforcement," or vulnerable space reduction. It involves studying building occupant flow based on need, nonthreatening boundaries for definition of controlled space, and clearly marked traffic zones.



ACTION STEP: Preparing for Emergency Response

- 1. Coordinate with local emergency response institutions.** Law enforcement and other local emergency services should be contacted as part of plan development. They should be given access to relevant area maps and coded building floor plans, a list of contact information for key personnel, and descriptions of utility, alarm, and electronic de-energizing systems. Characteristics of terrain and other exterior elements—lighting, fencing, access points, etc.—should be identified, as well as location of storage areas containing high risk compounds such as flammables. General guidelines for lockdown, sheltering, and evacuation procedures, including gathering points, should be briefly described. Some basic information on structural integrity also should be included.
- 2. Determine command-and-control structure.** Identify the probable point person or institution and chain of command for each type of crisis event. The school will likely have more than one law enforcement organization with jurisdiction.
- 3. Clearly designate gathering points.** Identify safe gathering points outside the building for evacuation. This should be considered a natural add-on to fire marshal-approved evacuation routes. Alternative assembly points for inclement weather or other unanticipated situations should also be identified.
- 4. Draft a crisis communications plan.** The plan should identify decision makers and spokespeople, outline a clear and streamlined process for key message development, and identify communication tools for distribution (e.g., up-to-date media contact list, websites, multiple phone hotline points), and delineate guidelines for working with the media (see detail in Section III). Targeted outreach to parents and guardians and other key community stakeholders may become especially important.
- 5. Provide crisis counseling.** An on-call or pre-approved crisis counseling support system should be considered. Having a pre-arranged list, or at least a pre-qualifying process for counseling support, in place may be helpful. Guidelines for parents and guardians regarding financial support from private insurance providers or publicly supported human services may be of special value.
- 6. Post emergency and evacuation procedures in school.** Posting emergency procedures, including information about lockdown, sheltering, and evacuation should be considered. Design and placement should be building-specific, reviewed periodically, and compatible with local fire marshal guidelines and postings.



7. Outline tentative re-entry inspection procedures. Rules regarding re-entry inspection following a crisis should be flexible. The district should coordinate such an inspection following a building crisis and guidelines should be published. A building's structural integrity, degraded asbestos, volatile organic gas (which could ignite with the flip of a light switch), shattered glass, and property security are all considerations to be addressed prior to resuming business as usual. It should be made clear that the district controls re-entry.

8. Keep plan relevant and up to date. A process should be in place to review key aspects of the plan on a periodic basis. The plans and policy should be formally reviewed and the results of the review submitted to the board or superintendent annually or at least every two years.

Considerations for Interacting with the Media During and Following a Crisis

This section describes strategies for working with the news media during a crisis. At times, it makes sense to enlist the help of consultants and legal counsel, but it is imperative never to “turn over the keys” of media communication to another person or institution. District leadership must demonstrate that the process inherent within the school district charter is intact and can be relied upon by the community.

Local media typically have institutionalized their coverage of school district events because everyone in the community cares about children. The connection between the district and the media is well established, but that relationship can quickly change in a crisis (see Attachment B for a quick list of considerations for media contact in a time-sensitive crisis).

Learning to work with the media is like navigating a river. The river is moving in the same general direction as you, and it can significantly help you get where you're going, but you have to respect and work with it on its own terms or you may be taken on an uncomfortable ride. You also are powerless to make it flow in a different direction. In other words, you can influence but not control the media.

There are two styles of media reporting with which school administrators are likely to interact and which they must learn to recognize as fundamentally different. The most common could be termed “chronicle” reporting. This involves stories about the school play, school lunch lists, awards, retirements, sporting events etc.—the generally positive information about daily activities within the district. Chronicle reporting arises out of, and is dependent upon, a mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship between local media and the school district.

Chronicle vs. event reporting

School administrators are likely accustomed to the friendly and symbiotic nature of chronicle reporting.

However, the reporting style of the media shifts when a crisis event occurs. A more assertive or seemingly adversarial dynamic may be introduced. The fundamental mistake school administrators often make during such a crisis event is to assume that reporters are operating within the same paradigm they use to report on everyday school events.

For example, a soldier who was a graduate of a Metropolitan Area school died in the Middle East. The tragedy had a great effect on the school. Elementary school students from his former school collected money to plant and care for a tree in his honor. The tree planting ceremony was emotional and deeply moving for both students and faculty, and the local reporter artfully captured the human emotion of the event. She wrote a beautiful story and was extremely complimentary of school administrators who had invested substantial time in talking with the children, trying to describe the nature of sacrifice and war. The school administrators and faculty came to feel a special bond with the reporter.

Later, district staff contracted to remove non-asbestos-bearing insulation using hazardous waste protocols, a procedure that required unnecessarily expensive engineering controls. Administrators were relieved when the same reporter who had covered their tree planting ceremony was assigned to cover this event. The superintendent opened the meeting with “Well, we certainly have a mess.” The relief was short-lived, because the reporter began to ask a battery of hard-nosed questions.

The reporting style of the media shifts into something less congenial when a crisis occurs, i.e. “event” reporting. A whole new environment may dominate the interaction when, for instance, someone is endangered or harmed, or a malfeasance or tragedy occurs. The mistake school administrators often make during such an “event” is to assume the media are operating within the same paradigm they use to report on everyday school matters. For an event or crisis report, timelines change, the focus is different, and competition among various media organizations heats up. The reporter’s style can and must shift.

The Administrator and the Media Following Crisis

The fundamental responsibility of a school administrator in relating to the media when a crisis hits is to clearly outline the district’s response to help bring semblance, order, and direction to an event that could otherwise degenerate into chaos. To accomplish this, it is important to implement a thoughtful crisis communication plan, including a normal path for internal communication (employees, board, students, neighbors, website), and external communication, typically meaning working through the professional media.

In 30 years of working with school districts on controversial issues, we have made several observations regarding event reporting.

The following are important rules to remember when dealing with the media after a crisis hits:

- 1. Be clear and factual.** Reporters want to know the basics—who, what, when, where and why—and it is important to provide as many facts as you know. Try not to guess, speculate, or inject your opinion even if asked to do so. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say that you don’t know the answer but will get the information, if possible. Then follow up with the reporter. Proving you are a reliable source of information engenders trust. Statements such as, “We’re not certain...,” “We believe what occurred was...,” “The best information we have at this time is...,” are acceptable as long as what is stated as fact can stand scrutiny. Damage can be diminished if something is inaccurate, but is quickly corrected.
- 2. Be timely.** Inquire about reporters’ deadlines and try to help honor the deadlines by providing as much solid information as quickly as possible.
- 3. Be a good resource.** Provide the names and contact information for other reliable, potential sources that can provide additional information or insights or explain technical information. Other sources might be emergency responders, board members, teachers or union representatives, and contractors.

“What responsibility does the district have over money committed to handling contamination?”

“Did you check with the State Health Department to see if you’re working to proper standards now?”

“How will the employees responsible for this expensive mistake be held accountable?”

Then, the toughest questions of all—
“Could the problem have been reversed? That is, could you have inadvertently endangered the health and safety of building occupants by not understanding how to recognize asbestos?”

Board members were also contacted and asked to comment before district administrators had had a chance to brief them.

The change in reporting style was a shock to the administrators and seemed incongruous. The reporter, of course, felt that the dichotomy in her approaches was reasonable and professional.

4. Demonstrate that district administration is in control. Ross Bishop, former public information director for Xcel Energy, had a rule: The only person who publicly leads discussion about a crisis is an Xcel Energy executive—even if that executive does not have strong communications skills or technical background in the specific area of concern. What is said is important, but who says it is also important. As Bishop says, “No intelligent person would rely on Alan Alda’s medical advice.” The executive spokesperson will convene news conferences and will be the primary contact person for the media. The spokesperson can call on other representatives to speak, but district administration is in charge and that message should be reinforced. This strategy communicates that there is structure and control and the system is functional.

A senior school administrator should call any meetings involving the media, perhaps even hosting a special board meeting in which the ceremonial board meeting format would include a report on the crisis. Reporters would understand that they will learn what is important within the school district’s established process. At the board meeting, the administrative spokesperson could call on other administrators or technical consultants, but should remain in obvious control. The sense of chaos should recede as style and message come together to demonstrate that the crisis response is under control by a trusted and responsive institution.

Establish the Defining Moment

School administrators are typically experienced at recasting ambiguous situations into clear patterns of action. They are used to describing complex situations in understandable ways to parents, students and the public. A good administrator can typically organize information in ways that will assure the best response. Following a crisis, they need to set the stage to do just that and use their communication talent to define the situation in responsible terms. The district typically should select a place and time to explain to the community, through the news media, what has occurred and how they are responding. This can take the form of a news release, a news conference, or a special board meeting. Selecting one place and one time to communicate a consistent and clear message to all media sources often becomes the defining moment of the crisis.

There are several considerations in coordinating the defining moment:

- **Determine timing of the “defining moment.”** The defining moment should take place as soon as key facts are understood and some basic decisions regarding response are made. Try to accommodate news media deadlines in terms of the time of day for the formal statement. If you wait too long, journalists may speak to others and you may lose some level of control in handling the crisis and you may have to respond to misinformation. Staff, students, consultants, contractors, and

Beware of Losing Control of the Message

Over-the-counter, caffeine-based stimulants were being used by a number of high school students in a rural school district. There was little health risk, but public concern regarding student “drug use” led reporters to use an event reporting approach to cover the use of such stimulants.

The reporter discovered that these caffeine products were being used on school grounds. There had been some reported incidents of acting out that were attributed to caffeine highs. The district contracted with a speaker to make a presentation about the situation and invited journalists to the presentation. There was no special outreach to the local media. The speaker was a school psychologist with a background in substance abuse. A local television news crew filmed part of the presentation and interviewed several students who made provocative comments. “These people [school administrators and the speaker] don’t know what’s really going on. It’s really big, it’s serious, and it’s blowing a lot of people’s minds.” “It’s all over the place; people call the 3rd floor lavatory, “druggie central.”

The news segment was followed by an interview with an expert, who stated that such presentations don’t work and that counseling or treatment was needed. The expert was a substance abuse counselor.

The district could have tried to line up a more responsible set of interviewees for the reporter. However, in this case, the district did set up a website and published an open letter to the community, thereby helping the issue be seen in realistic terms. The public trust in the district was such that the issue diminished with time.

experts—all may have outlined the problem, listed solutions, and even critiqued your performance before you've created a controlled defining moment. On the other hand, you might also lose credibility if you choose to hold the defining moment before you have key information in hand.

- **Select the right venue to release information.** Select a formal, accessible setting and be sure everything—sound systems, overheads or PowerPoint presentations, chairs, lighting, etc.— is in good working condition. Also, consider providing beverages and snacks. In and of themselves, these are small acts, but they project a sort of civility and thoughtfulness toward the audience.
- **Provide an honest description of health or safety situations and possibly comment (with legal counsel) on malfeasance issues.** Describe exactly WHAT happened, WHEN it happened, WHO was placed at risk or harmed by whom or what, WHAT occurred that represented danger or damage, WHERE it happened and whether or not it can spread or harm others, WHAT the remedy or response will likely involve, and the timeline for response. Acknowledge what is not known and commit to keeping the public informed.
- **Communicate with people and groups in the right sequence.** Think about whether or not the information you release can inadvertently escalate the problem or be considered insensitive. If someone has been harmed, could there be further harm? Has the family and/or significant others of those placed at risk or harmed been taken into consideration? Should special information go out to certain parents, board members, or faculty via phone calls, e-mails, or other rapid communication prior to the media? Rely on common sense.
- **Hold a question and answer session.** A Q&A session may seem destabilizing because you can't predict the questions, but this is an important way to gain, as well as provide, information. The types of questions posed can help ascertain the reporters' approach to the story, where concerns exist, and where stereotypes and predispositions come into play. Journalists may have a clearer view than you do of what the public wants to know. Journalists are always professionally focused on community interests. Understanding the drift of the reporting enables you to better respond to potential misunderstandings. Q&A sessions also demonstrate your self-confidence in your understanding of, and response to, the situation. Responding to reporter questions is important, even if your answer is that you "cannot answer at this time" or "are not certain."

The defining moment, whether a special board meeting or news release, can sometimes have significance as a point of closure. The event reporter typically looks for closure, or a clear point where authorities "rule on" or "issue a final report



on” what occurred and define what will happen in the future (e.g. a verdict in a trial, a formal ruling by a board, etc.). The media may perceive the issue transcending from chaos to responsible management or possibly even closure.

Legal Counsel Should Establish Communication Guidelines

Legal risks are often lurking in the shadows of a crisis event. Most school attorneys are strong in contract law, but they may not be versed in specific technical areas. It may make sense to allow the district’s legal counsel to retain supporting legal counsel in special technical areas, i.e. an “attorney-of-counsel.” This may be especially true in environmental, medical, construction, civil rights, employment, or criminal justice areas.

It is a best practice to have legal counsel establish guidelines regarding who should share what information under what conditions. This especially would apply to anyone who represents the administration (someone with an “agency” relationship who can automatically create liability for the district). Anyone who can create liability for the district, including a contractor or consultant, needs to be provided with guidelines for sharing information, and the district should maintain records regarding its efforts to provide those guidelines.

It may make sense to have legal counsel present during any organized communication to the public, and legal counsel should generally have the authority to comment, amend, or clarify statements.

Utilize Special Mediums for Outreach

It may make sense to produce an issue-specific website to provide rapid updates and a consistent and constant flow of information about the district’s response to a crisis situation. This site may likely become a media resource.

A contact individual or team should be available to speak or respond to public and media questions in as timely a way as possible. The team could be made up of staff or volunteers who take calls, provide information, and record questions and concerns. The administrator should select trusted people who are insightful, exhibit common sense, and have good interpersonal communication skills. This person or team would have three functions:

- To screen and separate incoming messages (e.g. curiosity or crank calls, emotionally distraught people, people who need direction or support, those who have issues that need to be pushed through to a higher level of administration)
- To provide consistent information and limit misinformation
- To organize input that reflects the attitudes and concerns of callers in a pattern that will be of value to the district.

Enlisting the Right Legal Counsel Protects the District

Seeking advice from legal counsel in formulating messages during a crisis is critical to protecting the legal and financial interests of the school district.

A large school district had stored much of the district’s food in a central refrigerated supply room. A custodian noticed a leak from the roof into the room. He repaired the ceiling with fiberglass patching. He and others moved the stored food to the opposite end of the cooling room and began to apply fiberglass. Toluene, which is a constituent of fiberglass, volatilized and the gas penetrated into the butter and chicken. The fiberglass never dried in the cool temperatures, so the toluene continued to slowly contaminate the food products that were served to students and faculty.

Toluene is a teratogen, which has been associated with certain birth defects when ingested in substantial doses by pregnant women. A pregnant teacher explained to her obstetrician that the taste of the food in the cafeteria was odd and asked if it could threaten her pregnancy. The physician, through testing and questions, determined that she had, in fact, been exposed to low doses of toluene. The district had inadvertently exposed hundreds of women of child-bearing age to an agent that could cause birth defects. Teachers and parents demanded information.

The district contracted with a consultant to determine who had received what amount (dosage) of contaminated food and calculate the actual risk. The consultant worked with the state health department and sought input from the head of preventive medicine at Yale University in documenting the low level of risk due to the low dosage of exposure. The district

A phone or e-mail contact point can also be of special value to the media. Allowing somewhat personalized discussion is typically appreciated. Remember, the event media are trying to organize information that responds to community concerns so they can aid the district's crisis response. For instance, the fact that 100 people asked what will happen to the school play helps the news media determine what kind of information to publish or air. Such information can also help the district create a response that is in touch with community concerns.

Francis Bacon said that truth can be likened to a chest of gems; some, like rubies, are better appreciated by dim candlelight, others, like diamonds, in clear daylight. Communicating the truth ethically can be approached in different ways.

The **chronicle** media typically works by candlelight. A badly produced play becomes "interesting," a pathetic sports team is "hard working." The leathery tuna casserole for lunch is "hearty." Chronicle media do not publish falsehoods, but typically put a helpful and gentle spin on the day-to-day activities that occur within the school. They develop a friendly, symbiotic relationship with the district. Tact and taste are prioritized and what filters through is calm, steady, generally pleasant information.

The **event** media focus on absolute accuracy and stark daylight. Everything said may be scrutinized, reviewed, studied and validated. Many administrators find this destabilizing because they're used to being trusted and to having what they say simply and tactfully repeated by media sources. Truth is a constant, but styles of communicating should change with a crisis event.

Hang in There – All Crises End!

Time even heals the nightmare of crisis. Although it might seem impossible, the fear and hurt will fade and normalcy will return, and the district will be left wiser and stronger. Civil litigation, if any, may linger on, regulatory concerns may become an issue, special budget problems may remain, but slowly things are fixed, typically out of the line of vision of the event media. Scars may remain, but wounds heal and a well-managed district is left stronger.

also established procedures to assure that such exposures would not reoccur.

Some important legal issues were raised during the outreach effort. The product manufacturer had not included information about the risks of using the product near food, or the problem with using the product in cool, high humidity areas. The district was not provided appropriate Material Safety Data Sheets for the product, which is required by statute. There was also a question about whether the maintenance person could read or interpret the warnings on the fiberglass package. It became clear that there might be civil litigation, and the district needed to bring the product manufacturer into the legal paradigm to minimize potential district damages.

District administrators needed to communicate reassuring information to the community, especially those who had been exposed, but they also needed to be careful not to open the district to lawsuits or undermine its ability, if sued, to potentially recover financial damages through the manufacturer. Communications to the community were necessary, but had to carefully accommodate legal positioning.

The approach the district took was successful. It had legal counsel with a background in product liability and toxicology review all communications. The attorneys worked closely with staff and consultants. This approach permitted dissemination of information describing the unlikely possibility of human risk based on limited exposures and described the district's new preventive controls. Administration established the district's credibility, first with the media and then with the community. Having a leading physician from Yale University supporting the district's efforts was extremely significant. It also carefully preserved the district's legal position to eventual financial advantage.

ATTACHMENT A

Model Crisis Management

Following is a template for a general crisis management policy. It should be tailored to each district and reviewed by the district's legal counsel. More detailed procedures would be outlined in the district and building plans.

- DRAFT -

Policy for Enhancing District Crisis Management

WHEREAS, _____ is committed to providing an educational and work environment that promotes the safety and well-being of its students, employees, and all building occupants, and

WHEREAS, adoption of a Crisis Management Policy will help assure safety and well-being, and

WHEREAS, the District has systems presently in place in the interests of general safety;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the _____ District will:

- Periodically review all existing systems to ensure compatibility with state statute and state agency guidelines and best practices to help assure health and safety in the areas of:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| • Fire safety | • Radiological incidents* |
| • Severe weather | • Serious injury/death |
| • Assault/violence | • Suicide |
| • Premeditated threats | • Weapons onsite |
| • Demonstrations and disturbances | • Other occurrences that may compromise |
| • Hazardous materials | the health and safety of students and others |
| • Intruder/hostage situations | • Structural integrity of property |
| • Shootings | • Terrorism |

**This applies to districts located near nuclear energy/storage facilities. The district plan must be compatible with U.S. Department of Energy building occupant plans and evacuation protocols.*

- Establish a district-wide plan encompassing the above.
- Establish crisis management plans for each building, with appropriate postings and on-hand or electronically available material, including individual building guidelines relative to:
 - Evacuation procedures
 - Lockdown procedures
 - Sheltering procedures
- Assure responsible coordination and communication with other community helping organizations that can assist the district in prevention of potential at-risk situations, emergency response, and post-emergency response.
- Establish an ongoing process for reviewing aspects of emergency response and submit a summary report to the (board/superintendent) every **(1 or 2)** years.

ATTACHMENT B

A Short List of Communication Considerations in Preparing a Media Information Release

1. Pre-Notification

Does it make sense to inform any particular group or individual(s) before communicating with the news media?

- Individuals (family or colleagues of individuals who could be at risk or to whom a special obligation is owed)
- Law enforcement who will have their own public information officer
- Other emergency responders (i.e. paramedics, fire department, etc.)
- Board members
- Faculty
- Students
- Medical/public health providers

2. Notification List

Is there a comprehensive, up-to-date contact list of media sources?

- District website managers
- Major newspapers
- Local radio stations
- Television stations
- Think-piece radio, newspapers and television (by special invitation)

3. Targeted Notification

Does it make sense to contact secondary communications sources?

- Faith community (via their bulletins or other publications)
- Student or district electronic newspaper
- Special weekly or biweekly district bulletin for interested parties

4. General Notification

- Special publication on the district website
- Municipal groups that control a bulletin board that shares important community information

5. Location

Identify a location that permits adequate attendance, has technical support for power points, video connections, etc., and has an adjacent room or place where individual interviews can be conducted subsequent to the announcement, if that's desired. Check and double check the audio system and any presentation such as overheads or PowerPoints. Consider providing beverages and snacks.

6. Coordinating Information Within the Organization

Is there general consensus about what is to be conveyed by board members and key administrators? Have you established guidelines relating to who is authorized to represent the district? Have you considered special information distribution for employees and students?

7. Coordinating Information Among Other Groups

Have you coordinated your general information release with law enforcement and/or other response or helping agencies that have provided or intend to provide statements (i.e. health care institutions, state regulatory agencies, etc.)? Have you made certain that information from all organizations that may issue announcements or statements through the district will provide complementary information?

8. Legal Review

Has legal counsel reviewed what you intend to say? Have attorneys identified points where there should be special caution or focus and have you communicated that information to others who may provide information?

9. Basic Outline

Have you prepared handouts or web postings for news media to support the information release?

10. Public Responsiveness

Can you provide the news media with a list of major concerns relayed by the public, so news outlets can respond to those concerns in their reports?

11. Expert Contact

Have you identified qualified experts whom journalists can interview?

12. Timing

Can you help accommodate media deadlines?

ATTACHMENT C

Sample News Releases

A news release is an effective tool for communicating consistent information about a crisis to the public. The news release should be concise, establish a point of contact for further information, and designate a specific date and time for release of information, particularly if there is an embargo relating to release of information. Typically, the announcement will provide information about release of updates and pattern for release of additional information.

Following are two sample news advisories:

- SAMPLE -

NEWS ADVISORY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: [Include time]

CONTACT: [Name, title, phone number(s) and e-mail address]

CITY, STATE—Kennedy High School was evacuated and one cafeteria worker is being treated at an area hospital today after a blaze broke out in the cafeteria kitchen. School administrators called 911 after fire alarms sounded at about 12:45 p.m., and fire trucks, police and ambulances were at the scene within minutes.

“Our primary concern is the safety of all students and staff,” said Principal Mary Nichols. “We are checking and cross-checking to make certain we can account for the whereabouts and well-being of every student and staff member in attendance today.”

One cafeteria worker was taken to Regents Hospital, where she was being treated. Her identity and the extent and exact nature of her injuries were being withheld until her family is notified.

School will be closed for the rest of the week while investigators try to determine what caused the fire and building officials determine the extent of the damage. Cleanup will begin once investigators have gathered all the information they need. School officials said they are searching for an alternative site to hold classes in case the cleanup is not completed by Monday.

District officials are issuing updates on its website at [WEBSITE ADDRESS]. A news conference will be held at the District Office at 4:30 p.m. tomorrow, Wednesday, October 3, 2012, to provide further details and updates.

###

- SAMPLE -

NEWS ADVISORY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: [Include time]

CONTACT: [Name, title, phone number(s) and e-mail address]

CITY, STATE—A lockdown was issued at 1:32 p.m. today at Nixon High School after reports of gunshots and sightings of an armed man on school grounds. **No injuries have been reported.**

School administrators contacted Springfield police immediately, and police are securing the campus and investigating the reports. The lockdown will stay in effect until police assure administrators that the school grounds and surrounding areas are safe.

Police have asked parents and concerned citizens to stay at least one block from school grounds while they secure the area and search for the suspect. All students and other building occupants are accounted for and safe.

An e-mail has been sent to parents and guardians advising them of the situation, continuous updates are being published online at [web address], and a hotline [phone number] has been set up to field questions and concerns. Updates will be provided at a news conference scheduled for 4:00 p.m. today at the Springfield Police Department, [street address].

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