

School Safety, Part 2: The Crisis Response

By Howard Johnston and Ronald Williamson

Almost every day, somewhere in the United States, there is a story about a violent event in school. Occasionally, we learn about natural calamities that require school leaders to respond quickly. Among school leaders' most difficult tasks is to acknowledge the possibility of a crisis in our schools and to prepare for that crisis – at the same time we work diligently to prevent it and minimize the effects on students.

In short, it requires that principals plan for the best scenario, which is to prevent a crisis from occurring, but prepare for the worst case as well. The first article in this series focused on prevention; this one addresses the crisis response.

Social media is a tool that can help leaders communicate effectively and respond more quickly during a crisis. It can also help leaders monitor their schools so that they can anticipate developing crises.

A school crisis can come from almost anywhere and can be caused by nature or by people. Because a crisis can originate from sources that are well beyond the control of school leaders, some experts say that it is not a matter of “if but when” a principal will confront a crisis of some type in his or her school. The Assistant Superintendent for General Administration of the Olathe (Kansas) School District stated, “The question is not if an emergency happens, but when it happens, how prepared are we to handle a situation.”

School Crises

The US Department of Education provides a comprehensive guide for school administrators for crisis planning. It includes four critical functions: mitigation and planning, preparedness, response, and recovery. The guide, *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* (<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/crisisplanning.pdf>), is available online.

According to the Department of Education, a crisis is the time to follow your crisis plan and make use of your preparations. This stage assumes that a comprehensive plan has been developed, reviewed and rehearsed with all school staff and, as appropriate, the student body. It includes these components:

- Determine if a crisis is occurring.
- Identify the type of crisis and determine the appropriate response.
- Activate the incident management system. Ascertain whether an evacuation, reverse evacuation, lockdown, or shelter-in-place needs to be implemented.
- Maintain communication among all relevant staff at officially designated locations.
- Establish what information needs to be communicated to staff, students, families, and the community and how you will use tools like social media as well as traditional media to communicate.
- Monitor how emergency first aid is being administered to the injured.
- Decide if more equipment and supplies are needed.

First and foremost, it is the responsibility of the school leadership to ensure the safety of students and staff and to muster assistance as necessary from local law enforcement and emergency response personnel. Everything else is subordinate to assuring the safety of the people in the building.



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Principles for Crisis Response

Practical Information on Crisis Planning, a Guide for Schools and Communities from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools (January, 2007) details certain decisions and actions should form the core of every crisis response.

- **Expect to be surprised.** Regardless of how much time and effort was spent on crisis planning, the members of the crisis team should know that there will always be an element of surprise and accompanying confusion when a school is confronted with a crisis.
- **Assess the situation and choose the appropriate response.** Following the plan requires a very quick but careful assessment of the situation. Determine whether a crisis exists and if so, the type of crisis, the location, and the magnitude. Because the team has practiced the plan, leaders are ready to make these decisions. After basic protective steps are in place, more information can be gathered to adjust later responses.
- **Respond within seconds.** When a crisis actually happens, make the basic decisions about what type of action is needed and respond within seconds. An immediate, appropriate response depends on a plan with clearly articulated roles and responsibilities, as well as training and practice. With proper training, district and school staff and students will respond appropriately within seconds.
- **Notify appropriate emergency responders and the school crisis response team.** One common mistake is to delay calling emergency responders, such as the police or fire departments. In the midst of a crisis, people often believe that the situation can be handled in-house. It is better to have emergency responders on the scene as soon as possible, even if the incident has been resolved by the time they arrive, than to delay calling and risk further injury and damage. For instance, it is better to have emergency responders arrive at a school to find a fire put out than to arrive too late to prevent loss of life or serious property damage. Notifying a district's or school's crisis team allows them to begin the necessary measures to protect the safety of all persons involved. Unless informed otherwise by the incident commander, school crisis team members should proceed with their responsibilities.
- **Evacuate or lock down the school as appropriate.** This step is crucial and should be one of the first decisions made, regardless of the order in which initial decisions are implemented.
- **Triage injuries and provide emergency first aid to those who need it.** The plan should assign emergency medical services personnel and school staff with relevant qualifications to determine who needs emergency first aid. Designate a location for EMS to treat the seriously injured on the scene.
- **Keep supplies nearby and organized at all times.** If you move to another location, remember to take your supplies with you. Monitor the amount of supplies and replace them as needed.
- **Trust leadership.** Trust the internal crisis team members and external emergency responders who have been trained to deal with crises. Trust will help calm the situation and minimize the chaos that may occur during a crisis. During a crisis, leaders need to project a calm, confident, and serious attitude to assure people of the seriousness of the situation and the wisdom of the directions being given. This leadership style will help all involved to respond in a similarly calm and confident manner, as well as helping to mitigate the reactions of anyone who might deny that a crisis has occurred. In certain situations it may be necessary to yield leadership to others in the plan's designated command structure.



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- **Communicate accurate and appropriate information.** During a crisis, districts and schools will communicate with the school community as well as the community at large. Use the channels of communication identified in the plan. For instance, all information released to the media and public should be funneled through a single public information officer or appointed spokesperson. This will maximize the likelihood of presenting consistent and accurate information to the public. The crisis team should communicate regularly with staff who are managing students. A school's most important responsibility, the safety of the students entrusted to the school by their families, cannot be fulfilled during a crisis without timely and accurate information to those caring for students. At a minimum, families need to know that a crisis has occurred and that all possible steps are being taken to see to the safety of their children. Additional details about assembly and shelter procedures may also be provided, as determined by the plan or those managing the crisis. At some point, families will also need to know when and where their children will be released.
- **Activate the student release system.** Always keep in mind that the earliest possible safe release of students is a desired goal. Often student release will be accomplished before complete resolution of a crisis.
- **Allow for flexibility in implementing the crisis plan.** It is impossible for any crisis plan, no matter how complete, to address every situation that may arise during a crisis. With proper training and practice, emergency responders and staff will be able to respond appropriately and to adapt the school crisis plans to the situation.
- **Document events.** Write down every action taken during the response. This will provide a record of appropriate implementation of the crisis plan. Also necessary is recording damage for insurance purposes and tracking financial expenditures related to the incident. Keep all original notes and records. These are legal documents.

Communicating During a Crisis

Social media like Facebook and Twitter have become sources of quick information for families and community. Until devastating tornadoes struck Joplin, Missouri and Tuscaloosa, Alabama in early 2011, both districts restricted the use of social media. The tornadoes did major damage to the schools in both districts. Only a few "key" staff were authorized to post content online and those posts were limited to school events.

After the tornadoes both districts recognized that social media had become a primary means of communicating with families. In some cases, it was the only way. The districts found that their online presence helped them locate students and families, share information about re-opening of school, communicate with staff, and get information to the community about bus routes and re-located classrooms.

As a result of this experience both districts fully committed to the use of social media and having a presence in Facebook, Twitter and other sites like Pinterest.

Social media have become sources of quick information. Both expectations about its use and challenges have emerged (Howard & Metzner, 2011).

- **Increased speed** – Facebook and Twitter are more likely to provide the first information about a crisis to the community than traditional media. Students and staff, using social media, may communicate with families far more quickly than schools can use traditional media. In Newtown, CT families descended on the school when messages were sent from people who witnessed first responders descending on Sandy Hook Elementary School. Families and community expect early, up-to-date information as well as frequent updates. You will want to plan for quick, concise responses.
- **Pervasive inaccuracies** – Because of the speed of social media and the access by so many people, it is hard to monitor the accuracy of information. During the crisis at Newtown, CT the assailant was initially misidentified as his brother. Misinformation and inaccuracies creates another crisis, one of confidence in your own response. Besides managing the crisis, schools must now manage the response to false rumors or false facts shared via social media. Correct known mistakes quickly.
- **Demand for hyper-transparency** – Perhaps the biggest impact of social media on your crisis response is that those who use social media expect to know anything and everything about the crisis. Hesitating to update the public or appearing to withhold information can be seen as a cover-up.

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Tips for Using Social Media During a Crisis

- Make social media efforts message-driven
- Tap into all available resources by having a cadre of volunteers who are comfortable with social media.
- Keep messages brief and pertinent. People are not reading; they are scanning.
- Make sure you listen as well as respond. Remember that with social media, people can comment and ask questions. Have a plan for responding.
- Have a backup plan. What will you do if computers aren't working or you lose Internet access?
- Avoid elitism or the belief that those in charge know more than the general public.
- Social media is a new technology and requires thinking about how it can be used to communicate. Old strategies don't work.

From: American Public Health Association, 2011

While most schools work closely with local law enforcement during a crisis, they will focus first on dealing with the crisis, not communicating with students, staff and families. Many schools are investing in technology that allows them to send text alerts to participating families and staff. Or the school may use a cell phone messaging system or e-mail notification. Messages distributed in these systems are often short, direct, and provide explicit direction.

Controlling the Message

A major concern in a crisis is to provide accurate information and not inflame the crisis by sharing details that might be inaccurate or be misconstrued. The use of social media means that you can't control the message any longer. When a crisis occurs, images can be posted quickly on Flickr or Instagram, words sent by Twitter or Facebook, and pictures shared via smartphones.

People use social media especially during a crisis. They find it an efficient way to connect with others, to gather and share information and to stay in touch with those who may be impacted by the events. It is important for school leaders to recognize how social media has transformed the response when a crisis occurs.

Dealing with Rumors

One of the challenges associated with social media is the ability to spawn rumors. They can quickly spread via texts, Twitter or Facebook and can overwhelm a school's ability to respond. They often take on a life of their own and, accurate or not, require a response. The National School Public Relations Association (2010) identified some approaches that school leaders should consider.

- It is important to get timely and accurate information to key audiences quickly. Make a cognitive rather than an emotional response to rumors. Just the facts.
- Assure students, families and community that administrators are aware of the rumor, are investigating, and will deal with it so that you maintain a safe school environment.
- Ask for specific details about any rumors people have heard. This information can be used to help with your assessment and response.

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- Communicate quickly when a situation happens at your school. Implement a notification system rapidly. Don't let the message be conveyed by children or neighbors to the school.
- Create a "Fact Check" site on your school's website and let people know that is where they go to either post a rumor, or to get an answer.
- Recognize the importance of redundant dissemination of information. Everyone doesn't get their information from the same source.

Crisis Resources

The State of California recommends that all schools maintain a *Crisis Response Box*, "a guide to help every school assemble the tools and resources needed for a critical incident response." (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/cp/documents/crisisrespbox.pdf>). This box contains the school's crisis plan and all of the information and resources necessary for school personnel and outside agencies (e.g., police, fire, rescue) to assist with a critical incident at a school. While described as a "box" in order to emphasize the necessity for keeping all of the information in a centralized, easily accessible place, it is actually a very comprehensive and frequently updated response resource for everyone involved in crisis management.

The central message in this publication is that schools are generally large, complex facilities that are not familiar to the individuals who may respond in a crisis. The contents were developed through extensive study of school crises and interviews with school administrators and community safety officials who have had to confront a serious crisis in their schools. In essence, it answers the questions:

- "Knowing what you know today, what information would you have liked to have had to help you better manage the crisis?"
- "From your experience, what information should school administrators and police officials have at their finger tips in a crisis?"

Some of the resources are assembled and reviewed regularly – every quarter, semester or year. Others must be updated every day such as student attendance rosters, staff attendance information, or special events that bring large groups of students together or take students off of their normal schedules.

In order for this crisis resource to be most useful, all school staff should know of its whereabouts and contents, and should be prepared to assist crisis responders as directed. In many schools, the staff is divided into specific groups, each with an assigned function for which they have been trained and rehearsed.

The Oregon Department of Education has a website (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=2581>) that provides links to emergency resources for schools, students and families. They include crisis management resources and resources for supporting students, families and staff following a crisis.

You may want to visit the state of Virginia's School Emergency and Crisis Management Site (<http://tinyurl.com/3lcsxcv>) and look at their "Model School Crisis Management Plan."

The Final Word

No one likes to imagine a crisis in a school that might jeopardize the safety and well-being of our young people and the adults who work with them. And, fortunately, despite the horrible images that play across our TV screens, schools are remarkably safe places. However, it is just that history of tranquility that may thwart serious and systematic planning by school leaders. "It can't happen here" is still alive and well in many schools and communities, and it often takes courageous leadership to launch planning and mitigation efforts in schools that appear to be calm and peaceful. Only through such planning can the myth of "it" can't happen here" be properly dispelled so that our children are safe in fact as well as in our cherished imaginations.

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Crisis Management Resources

Practical Information on Crisis Planning

<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/crisisplanning.html>

This brochure is designed to assist schools and communities as they prepare a crisis plan or review their existing plans. Although every school's needs and circumstances are different, these checklists provide general guidance that can be adapted as appropriate to each district or school's circumstances. For the complete guide, download <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/crisisplanning.pdf>.

Center Quick Training Aid: School Based Crisis Intervention. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/quicktraining/schoolbasedcrisisinterv.pdf>

A comprehensive guide for supportive intervention following a school crisis from the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools.

Teacher Guidelines for Crisis Response

<http://www.schoolcrisisresponse.com/teacherguidelines.pdf>

Reprinted from *A Practical Guide to Crisis Response in Our Schools*, this chapter offers detailed information about how children and adolescents are likely to respond to a crisis and what teachers can do to mitigate the effects of a school crisis on young people in their care. This chapter can be reproduced for dissemination to professional staff.

Parent Guidelines for Crisis Response

<http://www.schoolcrisisresponse.com/parentguidelines.pdf>

Reprinted from *A Practical Guide to Crisis Response in Our Schools*, this section provides parents with information on what to expect from their child during and immediately following a school crisis and gives practical guidance for how to help children adjust to and recover from crisis events in their schools. This document may be reproduced for dissemination to parents.

School Crisis Response Initiative

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/publications/bulletins/schoolcrisis/ncj197832.pdf>

This bulletin describes an organizational model for school preparedness and effective responses to crises. Developed by the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at the Yale Child Study Center, the School Crisis Response Initiative promotes specific training for school personnel as well as interested community members so they may respond more effectively to the needs of our children in the aftermath of a crisis.

Crisis Response Box

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/cp/documents/crisisrespbox.pdf>

The Crisis Response Box is a guide to assist schools in crisis planning and management. "The Box" is a unique product of the California Attorney General and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction's Safe Schools Task Force developed to help schools, local law enforcement, and emergency service personnel prepare for a school emergency. It is an excellent way to organize thinking and planning for school crises.

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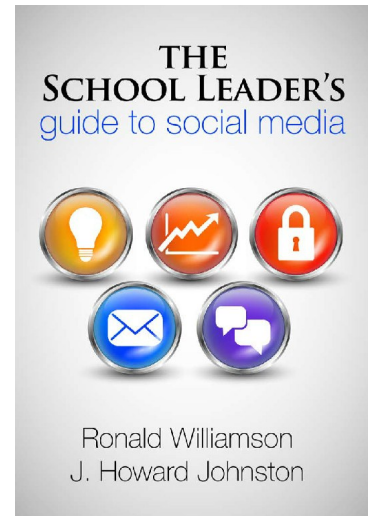
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This article is one in a series on school safety presented by *Practical Leadership* (www.mypracticalleadership.com). Others focus on planning and preparation, creating a climate and culture of safety in your school, and dealing with the aftermath of a crisis.

Some material adapted from: Williamson, R. & Johnston, J. H. (2012). *The School Leader's Guide to Social Media*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education. (<http://www.eyeoneducation.com/bookstore/productdetails.cfm?sku=7218-5&title=the-school-leader%27s-guide-to-social-media>)



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