



## Schools must lead crisis response through planning, preparation, and communication

BY RICK J. KAUFMAN

Providing a safe and secure environment for students to learn and staff to work is critical to the success of any school. But creating such an environment while balancing the equally important need for a welcoming atmosphere can be a challenge.

As the pandemic spread across the country, students rode a merry-go-round of in-school and at-home isolation due to hybrid learning models and COVID outbreaks. This yearlong instability led to widespread learning losses and overwhelming emotional health issues. It also resulted in more than a year without a mass shooting incident at a school.

As the pandemic subsides in many areas and schools support students returning to classrooms, the increase in the frequency and degree of school violence is cause for alarm. School safety is once again a concern among parents, students, educators, and communities, and school leaders are expected to respond.

### CRISES AND CONSEQUENCES

School emergencies evoke thoughts of high-profile incidents such as Columbine, Sandy Hook, or Parkland, but these events remain rare. Schools are more likely to experience untimely accidental deaths or nonlethal incidents. These incidents and other disruptions might trigger emotional and psychological responses that have short- and long-term consequences.

Schools are an integral part of their neighborhoods—a microcosm of the environment in which they exist. Therefore, they are vulnerable to the issues present in the larger community. School safety, therefore, should reflect the community, its values, and the unique needs of its students.

There is a clear expectation that schools must be a safe place for learning and growth for all children, all of the time. How do schools meet those expectations? Seek first to understand what parents, staff, and stakeholders expect, and ask for their input in determining what's best for their schools.



## LEADERSHIP IN A CRISIS

An unprecedented crisis demands unprecedented actions. Leaders serve their organizations best by sharing authority and decision-making, and welcoming broader perspectives from stakeholders.

Leaders aren't born; they are made. They set the emotional tone and example in any crisis response. Hours after the Columbine attack, Jefferson County (Colorado) Public Schools Superintendent Jane Hammond was approached at a hastily called press conference by a community member who told her, "We need your strength." She never forgot this and used it as motivation to model a commitment to that responsibility.

The same can be said of former Columbine High School Principal Frank DeAngelis, who led his school and community through unimaginable heartache. Hammond and DeAngelis were leaders with visionary guidance and fortitude. Here are four directives that made them stand out:

1. **Be present.** Lead, don't manage. Effective leaders create a safe environment for the response team to make decisions and take risks.
2. **Be visible.** Show support for those affected, and inspire confidence that the school family, the district, and the community will get through the crisis.
3. **Be personal.** Speak from the heart throughout the crisis, and demand transparency.
4. **Be connected.** We're in this together, we'll get through it together, and each of us will need others to get through it. A true leader is one who forges a path together with his or her team.

## CLIMATE AND CULTURE

The most important steps a school can take to prevent violence don't necessarily involve its physical environment, though physical aspects of safety and security should be incorporated into a comprehensive security plan. They include promoting a positive school climate and culture, teaching and modeling prosocial behaviors, and providing effective intervention when antisocial behaviors occur.

There are plenty of evidence-based violence prevention strategies to address many of the current issues, including conflict resolution programs and restorative practices. But the lack of funding and time devoted to training teachers and school staff to implement these strategies is a concern among school leaders.

Even schools that are well-suited to provide support and assistance during a crisis and in its aftermath must be equally adept at providing systems for mitigating or preventing incidents through early identification and intervention. Of critical importance are procedures for detecting the early warning signs of violence, schoolwide screening procedures, mentoring or counseling programs, and threat assessments that help school staff identify and provide support to alienated or at-risk youths.

## PLANNING AHEAD

Knowing what to do in a crisis can be the difference between chaos and calm—or life and death. As a result, knowing what to do should be part of a well-defined crisis response plan that includes clear procedures to guide staff in resolving the crisis, minimizing its negative impacts, restoring the teaching and learning environment, and intentionally addressing the social-emotional well-being of students and staff post-incident.

Crisis planning should not compete with the district's educational mission, but support it. And effective crisis response builds on prevention and engagement. "Overcoming such impediments requires school leaders to recognize that crisis preparedness is not an option, but an imperative," the National Association of School Psychologists says.

While most schools have well-intentioned crisis response plans, too many are incomplete, overly burdensome, or cut-and-paste documents that do little beyond collect dust on an office shelf. Many lack the best practices of the local agencies that must collaborate and cooperate in an emerging situation.

Worse, school officials might believe staff are prepared to act when a real-world incident occurs. Leaders who believe that common sense will prevail and staff will rise to the occasion are often misguided; the reality is that in high-stress, high-anxiety, high-fear events, cognitive function and manual dexterity are impacted as our brains search for the "triggers" that tell us how to react. As humans, we default to what we know and are trained to do in these incidents. If a crisis plan is

a necessity, putting it into practice is an imperative. Preparation is mission-critical. When we train and practice state-required drills with fidelity, we create the cultural conditions necessary to know what to do in a real-world crisis. This is what saves lives.

### **CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

If the priority in a crisis is public safety, then the top objective for crisis communication should be to prevent harm. The throes of a crisis is not the time to tell students, families, and staff what to do and how to react.

School leaders should be prepared to offer parents assurances that their child's school is safe and that measures are in place to respond to any incident or emergency. Communication to parents and caregivers is critical to developing an understanding about what happens in school when an incident occurs: What is a lockdown? Where will students go if they need to evacuate? How do I know my child is safe?

When schools can build rapport and understanding with parents, they build credibility. Not communicating or keeping parents in the dark is a tenuous response when disaster strikes, and school leaders must be first with credible communication. To achieve this requires a robust strategy and plan that focuses on traditional communication practices and social media.

Balance is the key. School and community stakeholders receive their information from a variety of sources, so school systems should not attempt to rely on a single communications channel. The more schools engage in the use of traditional and social media at the onset of a crisis, the better positioned they are to anticipate, communicate, and regain trust during the management and recovery phases.

Crises often create information voids. Poor communication or undue delays have consequences: Stakeholders are motivated to amp up their information-seeking in order to address their own uncertainties, and the information they find might come from the ill-informed, misinformed, or persons with less-than-desirable goals. Residents expect public organizations, including school districts, to adhere to the principles of accountability by providing a thorough, transparent explanation of crisis events and response, as well as assurances that whatever caused the crisis won't lead to more like it. Any other strategy risks long-term impacts and might delay recovery or return to normalcy.

As important as timely communication is, managing a crisis successfully is less about saying the right things and more about doing the right things. People will remember how a crisis was handled longer than the details of the incident.

## **Core Concepts: Crisis Response**

- **With in-person classes back in session, parents, students, educators, and communities are again emphasizing school safety as a priority.**
- **Some of the best guarantors of school safety are a positive school climate and culture, the modeling of prosocial behaviors, and effective interventions for antisocial behaviors.**
- **School leaders must establish clear procedures to guide staff in resolving a crisis, minimizing its impacts, and restoring the learning environment after an incident.**
- **Administrators must be first with credible communication, using a variety of platforms to provide a thorough, transparent explanation of crisis events, response, and recovery.**

The truth is, today's schools and campuses are better prepared to prevent violence and respond to emergencies. But here's the reality: Bad stuff happens. There is no guarantee that all schools will be violence-free, and while there are no easy solutions, there are intelligent alternatives that can reduce the risks to life and property. The one constant must be a commitment to improve and strengthen all aspects of crisis prevention, preparedness, and response and recovery planning. ●

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**Rick J. Kaufman** is executive director of community relations and emergency management for Bloomington (Minnesota) Public Schools.