

SDFS NOTES

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SAFE SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY SERVICES SECTION

Crisis Management

Crises occur regardless of whether schools and districts have prepared for them. They take the form of natural (hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and chemical spills.) and human-made disasters (shootings, stabbings, sexual battery, hostage taking, gang fights, arson, bomb threats, drug overdoses, and accidental natural death). In the event that a crisis occurs, a prompt and effective response from school personnel can reduce trauma, bring order to chaos, and can even be the determining factor between life and death.¹

This edition of *SDFS Notes* examines the basic components of a crisis response plan and the makeup and roles and responsibilities of effective crisis response teams. Information is presented regarding both the district-level and school-level responsibilities.

For any Crisis Management Plan to be successful, it must be thorough and comprehensive, and staff and students must undergo initial training and regular practice. Although recent shootings at schools across the nation have received national attention, smaller scale crises are more the norm. Schools and districts that are prepared to deal with crises at a variety of levels have a better chance of keeping their campuses safe and reducing the level of trauma experienced by students and staff.²

A comprehensive strategy for effective crisis management requires schools and districts to have:

- ◆ **A Crisis Management Plan:** a written document that contains clear, consistent, policy as well as instructions for handling various kinds of crisis situations
- ◆ **Crisis Response Teams:** an organized group of individuals responsible for dealing with a diversity of crises
- ◆ **Comprehensive communication:** a system of equipment, policies, and procedures for contacting emergency services, staff, parents, and students in emergency situations, and responding to media inquiries
- ◆ **Training and routine drilling in emergency procedures**³

Crisis Management Plans

A comprehensive crisis management strategy includes a district-level Crisis Management Plan (CMP) and a CMP for each school within the district. These documents are blueprints for managing crises. They cover training requirements, responses, and follow-up activities. The purpose of the CMP is to reinforce safety and reduce confusion and panic.⁴

Effective CMPs, at both the district and school levels:

- ◆ provide written step-by-step instructions for handling various crises
- ◆ assign specific responsibilities to staff in emergency situations
- ◆ select members of a Crisis Response Team
- ◆ establish a blueprint for communication systems, including “telephone trees”
- ◆ identify training needs and determine dates and types of training to be offered
- ◆ establish relationships with community agencies, law enforcement and the media
- ◆ establish a special word code to be used to alert staff of a crisis
- ◆ provide written plans for post-crisis activities such as staff debriefing, student counseling, and classroom activities designed to help students deal with grief, fear, confusion, anger, and other feelings that arise from trauma
- ◆ provide a written plan for emergency coverage of classes⁵

School-level Crisis Response Teams (SCRTs)

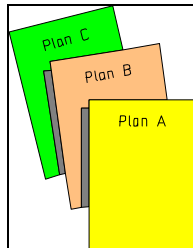
SCRTs can be made up of:

- ◆ guidance counselors
- ◆ psychologists
- ◆ principals
- ◆ assistant principals or deans
- ◆ teachers
- ◆ security personnel
- ◆ school nurses
- ◆ social workers
- ◆ custodians⁶

When choosing SCRT members, select individuals with a variety of skills to fulfill such roles as negotiator, communicator, media contact, first aid or cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) provider, and parent liaison. The SCRT will always be mobilized first to deal with a crisis on its campus.⁷

Before a crisis occurs, the SCRT:

- ◆ establishes a written protocol for dealing with crisis
- ◆ establishes written roles and responsibilities for principal, office staff, CRT members, teachers, and other school staff during crises
- ◆ trains staff to fulfill designated roles by conducting drills, and orienting staff to crisis management procedures
- ◆ provides a blueprint of school grounds and the surrounding neighborhood to law enforcement
- ◆ meets with local emergency agencies to review emergency procedures
- ◆ assures that the appropriate emergency equipment, such as bullhorns, school ground blueprints, two-way radios, and cellular phones are easily accessible
- ◆ identifies and refers for assistance, students identified as at-risk for suicide or other destructive behavior⁸



In the event of a crisis, the SCRT:

- ◆ initiates emergency notification and warning
- ◆ directs emergency operations
- ◆ attends to injured students or staff
- ◆ maintains order in pre-designated safe areas, if necessary
- ◆ evacuates students and staff and controls access to affected areas, if necessary
- ◆ searches affected school grounds for injured or confined students or staff, if necessary
- ◆ keeps district officials informed and updated
- ◆ initiates and maintains incident logs
- ◆ distributes needed supplies
- ◆ provides for long- and short-term follow-up⁹

District-level Crisis Response Teams (DCRT)

DCRTs can be made up of:

- ◆ superintendent or assistant superintendent(s)
- ◆ program supervisors
- ◆ security directors
- ◆ student assistance program "SAP" coordinators
- ◆ nurses, counselors, social-workers
- ◆ support staff
- ◆ school principals and other school-level crisis team members¹⁰

Because of the different developmental needs of students, it may be appropriate to establish separate DCRTs for each of the three school levels - elementary, middle and high. The DCRT serves as a back-up to the SCRT and is mobilized when the school team is unable to handle the situation according to their site CMP.¹¹

Before a crisis, the DCRT is responsible for:

- ◆ establishing written district guidelines for crisis management
- ◆ establishing a district-wide system of codes to communicate to staff, the nature of the crisis
- ◆ establishing a written district-wide communications network plan
- ◆ providing contact names and phone numbers of hospital personnel, fire departments, law enforcement, media, counseling and referral agencies, etc.
- ◆ maintaining a list of books pertinent to working with students' emotional health in the aftermath of a crisis
- ◆ maintaining other resource materials to assist teachers and counselors in working with students in the aftermath of a disaster
- ◆ establishing a formal agreement with the county's disaster response office
- ◆ disseminating a uniform emergency code system¹²

In the event of a crisis that a SCRT cannot handle on its own, the DCRT is responsible for:

- ◆ maintaining contact and providing support to the SCRT
- ◆ directing emergency operations at the school level, if necessary
- ◆ assessing the situation and assigning tasks based on emergency needs
- ◆ staying in contact with leaders of emergency agencies and others working with the emergency
- ◆ verifying factual information about the current or ongoing crisis and dispelling rumors surrounding the event
- ◆ authorizing the release of information to the public
- ◆ reporting immediately to local hospitals if school members are being sent there
- ◆ meeting and talking with parents of students and spouses of school staff
- ◆ authorizing the purchase of outside services and materials needed for post-intervention activities
- ◆ communicating with the public, the media, and other city or state officials¹³

Communication

Good and clear communication is fundamental to effective crisis management. When a crisis occurs, the SCRT must keep staff and students aware of what is happening and what to do. Parents and families of staff members must be informed and updated about the situation, and accurate information must be disseminated. The CRP must provide for the maintenance of timely contact with law enforcement and other emergency services, and the district office must be regularly updated on the status of the situation at the school.¹⁴



An effective SCRP provides a systematic approach for handling anticipated communication needs before an emergency occurs. Communication strategies can include “phone trees,” a list of emergency phone numbers, and readily available student/parent phone numbers. Age-appropriate guidelines for communicating with students in crisis are also instrumental to management of a crisis.¹⁵

Using Codes

Special codes for announcing crisis situations over the intercom will signal that teachers should take particular emergency precautions and avoid unnecessarily alarming students. Codes can be developed at the district level. “Code Red,” for example may order teachers to lock down their classroom, and “Code Blue” may mean evacuation of the building. The number and meanings of code names are determined by the district CRT and indicated in the CMP. Principals need to determine how much information should be given to students and when it is appropriate to give it.¹⁶

Communications to Students

- ◆ Share facts and updates with students. Factual information helps to dispel rumors and calms students.
- ◆ Give clear instructions on what to do until the crisis is over.
- ◆ Give students permission to express their feelings at designated times after the crisis is over. Students may experience a range of feelings including, fear, anger, grief, guilt, and confusion. Teachers need to assure them that these are all natural feelings and provide opportunities for them to express these feelings. Those experiencing more severe reactions should be referred for counseling.¹⁷

Communications with Faculty and Staff

- ◆ Conduct early morning and/or late afternoon faculty meetings in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and continue as appropriate.
- ◆ Meetings should include:
 - accurate information on what is known
 - a description of what’s been done so far
 - plans for the future
 - the current or next day’s events
 - reinforcement for emotional healing including
 - counseling and support groups
 - designated times to talk about feelings
 - referrals to counseling services as indicated
- ◆ If information is to be shared during the school day, a CRT member should be sent to each classroom rather than having teachers pulled away from students during the day.¹⁸

Communications with Parents

- ◆ CMPs should establish procedures for communicating with parents during and after a crisis.
- ◆ The nature of the crisis will determine the type and extent of parent-school communication necessary to be effective.
- ◆ If necessary, have students picked up, dismissed early, and/or sent home with a written statement which explains the events that took place at school(s) and the actions taken
- ◆ Designate school personnel to handle phone calls from parents. The designated person must have accurate, updated information and must be trained in handling calls of this nature.¹⁹

Communications with Outside Resources and the Media

- ◆ Establish communication with law enforcement, hospitals, mental health and social services, as indicated by the kind of crisis.
- ◆ Contact intervention, medical, and counseling service agencies to inform them of the crisis and determine a contact protocol. Post a list of these agencies and the contact protocol.
- ◆ Assign one staff person to work with media. The principal or a district-level administrator can be the official spokesperson, but another staff member can assume responsibility for organizing the details. Make sure this person is trained in working with the media.²⁰

Florida District Crisis Management Plans

A number of districts in Florida have excellent crisis management plans. All of them contain action plans, procedures, and policies for dealing with an immediate crisis, but many of them contain other extremely helpful information. Samples of materials from various Florida school district CMPs or contact information are available from the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Technical Assistance Project. For more information call 850/414-9976 or Suncom 994-9976.

End Notes

¹ Virginia Department of Education, Office of Compensatory Programs. "Resource Guide for Crisis Management in Schools." 1996.

² Ibid.

³ Association of California School Administrators. "Preventing Chaos in Times of Crisis." 1995.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Virginia Department of Education, Office of Compensatory Programs. "Resource Guide for Crisis Management in Schools." 1996.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Southeastern Regional Safe Schools Institute.

"Comprehensive Crisis Management Planning Manual, A Systems Approach for Reducing School Violence." 1995.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.



This is one of many publications available through the Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services, Florida Department of Education, designed to assist school districts, state agencies which support educational programs, and parents in the provision of special programs. For additional information on this publication, or for a list of available publications, contact the Clearinghouse Information Center, Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services, Division of Public Schools and Community Education, Florida Department of Education, Room 622, Turlington Building, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400.

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The Department of Education, through the Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services, funds the Florida Institute of Education's (FIE's) Safe and Drug-Free Schools Project. FIE is an institute of the University of North Florida. The Safe and Drug-Free Schools Project offers technical assistance and support in the development and implementation of drug use and violence prevention strategies, including crisis management plans. For information about assessing crisis management needs, refining an existing crisis management plan, or developing a new crisis management plan, contact the FIE/SDFS Project as indicated below.

Florida Safe and Drug-Free Schools Project

Phone: (850) 414-9976 Suncom: 944-9976 FAX: (850) 414-9979 FAX Suncom: 944-9979

E-mail: boyer_j@popmail.firn.edu

Web Site: <http://www.unf.edu/dept/fie/sdfs>

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