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Communication for the Man-Made Crisis

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Introduction

“School attendance can expose students to threats to their physical safety that they would not otherwise face. Outside of school, parents can attempt to protect their children in many ways ... Similarly, students, when not in school, may be able to avoid threatening individuals and situations. During school hours, however, parents are not present to provide protection and guidance, and students’ movements and their ability to choose the persons with whom they spend time are severely restricted. Students may be compelled on a daily basis to spend time at close quarters with other students who may do them harm. Experience shows that schools can be places of special danger.” Morse v. Frederick, 551 U.S. 393 (2007) (Alito, J., concurring)

Families trust schools to keep their children safe during the day and, thanks to the efforts of countless teachers, administrators, and staff, most schools are safe places on a day-to-day basis. However, the unfortunate reality is that school districts may experience a crisis of some kind at any time.

A school crisis is any traumatic event that seriously disrupts coping and problem-solving abilities of students and school staff.ⁱ It is typically sudden, unexpected, dramatic, and forceful and may even threaten survival.ⁱⁱ School crises can be on a large scale, such as severe violence, hostage situations, and natural disasters that require an emergency response from the community.ⁱⁱⁱ Crises can happen before, during, or after school and on or off campus.^{iv} In a crisis, school leaders could be faced with inadequate information, not enough time, insufficient resources, and the need to make one or many quick, crucial decisions.^v

In this paper, we will address how to communicate about and respond to man-made crises, such as:

- School shootings
- Bomb threats
- Student or staff deaths
- Bus crashes
- Outbreaks of disease or infections

The framework used throughout this paper follows the cycle of crisis planning proscribed by both the State of Texas and the U.S. Department of Education: Mitigation/Prevention, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery.^{vi}

Before the Crisis – Mitigation and Prevention

“Knowing how to respond quickly and efficiently in a crisis is critical to ensuring the safety of our schools and students. The midst of a crisis is not the time to start figuring out who ought to do what. At that moment, everyone involved—from top to bottom—should know the drill and know each other.” – Margaret Spellings, Former U.S. Secretary of Education

In an emergency situation or time of crisis, it benefits school districts, their students, and the greater community to plan ahead. Taking action now can save lives, prevent injury, and minimize property damage in the moments of a crisis.

Mitigation and Prevention

Although schools cannot always control fights, bomb threats, or school shootings, they can take actions to reduce the likelihood of such events or lessen their impact. Mitigation is any sustained action taken to reduce or eliminate long-term risk to life and property from a hazard event,^{vii} whereas prevention refers to actions aimed at stopping incidents from occurring.^{viii}

Mitigation is important for both safety and legal reasons.^{ix} In Texas, each school district is required to adopt and implement a multihazard emergency operations plan for use in the district’s facilities.^x The plan must address mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery as defined by the Commissioner of Education in conjunction with the governor’s office of homeland security.^{xi} Appropriate measures include a district-wide assessment of all potential hazards, whether natural or man-made, consideration of the locations of special student or staff populations—such as those with disabilities—to ensure that they are not near inaccessible areas, and involving the school custodian or maintenance director in planning efforts.

Mitigating and preventative measures school districts should take include assessing and addressing the safety and integrity of facilities, security, and the culture and climate of schools through policy and curricula.^{xii} Creating and maintaining safe and orderly campuses is a routine task for any school and district, but more comprehensive and in-depth resources and information on cultivating a positive school climate include:

- U.S. Department of Education’s Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities:
<https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/crisisplanning.pdf>
- National Education Association’s School Crisis Guide:
<http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA%20School%20Crisis%20Guide%202018.pdf>

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