

Key Components of Training and Practice Guidelines

Source: Adapted from, “Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities”, U.S. Department of Education.

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

Experts have noted that when a crisis occurs, individuals involved tend to go on autopilot. Therefore, when a crisis occurs staff immediately need to know how to react. They need to know, for example, the signals for crisis, the protocol for lockdown and evacuation, how to dismiss students, and what to do if staff or students need help. They should know these things ahead of time. There will not be a time during the crisis to think about what to do next. Chances of responding appropriately in a crisis will be much greater if all players have practiced the basic steps they will need to take. Training and drills are crucial.

In the San Diego, California, school district staff feels that practice and training should constitute the majority of the crisis planning process. In their “formula for success,” practice accounts for 50 percent of the process, training for 30 percent, and planning 20 percent. While the percentages are flexible, training and drills are essential.

Key components to facilitate training, and thus a successful reaction, are as follows:

Provide regular, comprehensive trainings for teachers and staff.

At least once a year, provide crisis response training for teachers and staff. Also provide make-up trainings for those unable to attend the regular training session. Go through the crisis plan and procedures in order to familiarize all school personnel with it. Periodically remind staff of signals and codes.

Visit evacuation sites with staff and stakeholders.

Show involved parties not only where evacuation sites are but also where specific areas, such as student reunification areas, media areas, and triage areas will be.

Give all staff, stakeholders, and families literature corresponding to the crisis plan.

While all staff should have a copy of the crisis plan, it will also be helpful to provide them with pamphlets reminding them of key principles. Families and community members should also receive literature summarizing crisis procedures and information pertaining to them. Provide each classroom with a copy of the crisis plan and any relevant materials, supplies, and equipment.

Require a specific number of crisis drills every year.

Most states require fire drills; the same should be true of crisis drills. This need not be an extra burden; work with state and district laws for possible options. In Arizona, for example, schools are permitted to use some of the mandated fire drills for crisis drills.

Also, speak with students about the importance of drills and explain that while they are serious, students should not be frightened.

Conduct tabletop exercises and scenario-based drills regularly.

While actual drills and training are essential, it is also helpful to have group brainstorming activities that can be done informally around a table. These can be held with stakeholders, staff, community members, and first responders. Students can be involved as well.

TABLETOP EXERCISES

Tabletop exercises are “informal and stress-free exercises intended to facilitate the testing, evaluation and practicing of a school facility ’s crisis response plan and promote group problem solving.” (Fairfax County, Virginia).

While drills and training are essential, it is also helpful to have group brainstorming activities that can be conducted informally. For this reason, many districts are adopting tabletop exercises. Fairfax County, Virginia, has had great success with these exercises. In Fairfax, the exercises consist of complete written scenarios and “injects ”—additional pieces of information or circumstances that can be injected to alter the scenario. These injects range from “suspicious person with firearm behind school ” to “electrical service to cafeteria interrupted.” Injects include a list of possible responses to assist the facilitator.

The exercise begins with the reading of the scenario; scenarios are often tweaked to fit a particular school. A facilitator then distributes injects to individual participants. Participants may handle the inject and implement an action individually or seek more information and coordination from other group members. Discussion ensues.

In Fairfax, the objectives include the following:

- Test the ability of school personnel to identify, allocate, and utilize resources within their school during a critical incident.
- Assess the ability of school personnel to implement their critical incident plan.

The director of safety and security for Fairfax County Public Schools commented:

“We believe that the best type of training is experience. Fortunately, most of our schools do not have frequent critical events that require these kinds of responses. Therefore, many of our personnel do not have the opportunity to experience the harsh realities of having to manage these issues. The table-top exercise allows us to provide an environment that can reasonably simulate the topics

and some elements of the stress that are inherent in critical events. We have provided tabletop exercises to all 234 of our schools over the past two years. We now have a rotating schedule that provides an exercise facilitated by our office to all high schools and middle schools every other year, and to each elementary school every three years.”