

# School Emergency Planning: Back to the Basics

*“Nuts-and-bolts” details make or break schools in a crisis*

By Kenneth S. Trump, MPA

*T*en years after the attack at Columbine High School, school officials continue working on refining school emergency plans for responding to and managing unavoidable crisis situations.

*The bad news is that funding for school safety programs has been cut dramatically over the past decade. Given the pressures upon educators to improve academic achievement, time is an even more precious commodity than money. Add apathy and denial to the shortage of time and money, and the picture can be less-than-encouraging for those struggling to keep proactive, preventative school safety and emergency planning efforts on the front burner in their districts.*

*The good news is that there are many best practices and practical things school leaders can do to improve their security and emergency plans. Many of the things school officials need to do to improve school emergency preparedness require more time than money. And while many product vendors and opportunists continue to seek a quick-fix solution to school violence, lessons and observations from the front lines instead suggest a need exists to go “back to the basics” and focus on the fundamentals of school emergency planning.*

## Why Plan?

A principal of a large high school that experienced two bomb threats within one week was recently asked why the two very similar threat situations were handled in two very different ways. On the first threat, school leaders evacuated the building and sent students to several district middle schools. Upon receiving a similar threat within a week, school officials took additional threat assessment steps and decided not to evacuate the school.

"Cognitively I knew what I should do, but emotionally..." the principal said in explaining why the school was evacuated on the first threat but not upon the second threat.

Educators are very caring people who typically put the best interests of their students ahead of everything else, including their own personal safety. Given their responsibility for the safety of hundreds and even thousands of students, school leaders can easily allow their emotions to override their cognitive, analytical decision-making processes. Unfortunately, emotional decisions are not always the best types of decisions for managing life threatening emergencies.

A solid school emergency plan provides a good vehicle for cognitive, not emotional, responses to school emergencies. Well developed and exercised emergency plans in the hands of a well-trained school staff can help school administrators and their crisis teams avoid making emotional decisions. A cognitive-based decision-making process, rather than an emotionally driven process, can mean the difference between life and death.

## Distinguishing "Emergency" from "Crisis"

The words "emergency" and "crisis" are often used interchangeably in schools. Chuck Hibbert, a retired Indiana school district security administrator and national consultant on school emergency planning, recommends distinguishing an emergency from a crisis for the purpose of developing written guidelines:

*Emergency Guidelines* - Actions taken **immediately** to manage an event which may threaten the safety of all parties. The goal is to stop or minimize the event.

*Crisis Guidelines* - Actions taken **after** an emergency situation is under control to deal with the emotional needs of all parties impacted by the event.

Too often, school emergency plans are grossly oversized documents that many frontline school staff have never read and/or could not possibly remember in an emergency situation. One reason for such

voluminous plans is that post-incident mental health and related healing guidelines are lumped into the same document with immediate actions to be taken to stop or minimize the event as it unfolds.

By separating emergency guidelines from post-incident crisis guidelines, school staff have access to more manageable, user-friendly guidelines to reference while under pressure in a real emergency situation. The less convoluted the document, the greater the chance of it being reviewed, understood, and used by school staff in an emergency.

## Plan Development and Content

School districts should have two levels of emergency plans: district emergency plans and building level emergency plans.

District emergency plans should provide an overarching direction for managing emergency events. The district plan should provide guidance to central office staff on their roles and specific actions in responding to an emergency. The district plan may also be used in the tailoring of individual school plans to each site.

School site emergency plans should be tailored specifically to each building and support facility. The district plan should not be used in the place of having a unique building site plan. School site plans should include specific actions and roles for specific individuals/positions in managing an event at their unique site.

Plans should reflect an "all hazards" approach to school emergency planning. Potential events should include situations such as weather, natural disasters, hazardous material spills, and power outages, as well as man-made acts of crime and violence such as suicides, stabbings, hostage situations, shootings, and other worse case scenarios. Roles of administrators, teachers, support staff, and others should be clearly delineated in the plans.

District and building plans must be developed by school officials in cooperation with first responders and other community partners such as local and city government agencies, mental health support services, and other key groups. Fill-in-the-blank templates or plans from other districts with name changes offer increased risks to safety and potential increased liability. Expert consultants can provide training, facilitate plan development groups, conduct tabletop exercises to help test written plans, and provide commentary on existing

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plans, but the plans themselves should not be written for the district by consultants.

Schools should work with their county emergency management agency and/or local fire department to make their plans compliant with the concepts of the National Incident Management System (NIMS). Key components include a focus on use of “plain language,” not codes, and developing incident command structures for managing emergency situations.

All plans should be reviewed and updated at least annually. The date of the review and update should be recorded on the plan itself.

### **Crisis Teams**

Most schools have “crisis teams,” as they are typically called, on paper. Yet school safety consultants often find that these teams hold limited (and sometimes no) meetings, are undertrained, fail to formally debrief from incidents, and typically have not reasonably exercised their written plans to see if what is in writing would work in a real emergency.

Who should be on the team? At the district level, key support services must be a part of the team. This includes security and/or school police, transportation, food services, student services (psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, etc.), facilities/operations, media and public information, and other key district support staff. While we typically do not find superintendents and assistant superintendents serving as formal crisis team members, their participation is encouraged as their leadership and decision-making will play a big role (for better or worse, depending upon their training and familiarity with the plan) in an actual emergency.

Building level teams generally consist of administrators and staff who do not have a role in the direct supervision of students during an emergency. Team members should also represent diverse perspectives in order to bring depth and different considerations into the planning process. Such individuals may include the principal, assistant principals, deans, mental health staff (psychologists, counselors, social workers, etc.), nurses, school security and/or police, custodians, food services, secretaries, parents, and others.

Teams should meet at least several times over a school year to review school safety, security, and emergency preparedness issues, and to update their building plans at least annually. Minutes of each meeting should be kept to document the process and actions taken.

### **Emergency Preparedness Training**

Too often, we see school officials define school emergency “training” as solely being a review of portions of the emergency plan at the first faculty meeting at the opening of each school year. Such a review is a good step, but not the only step, in the training process.

In addition to the yearly opening faculty meeting review of plans, principals should take at least five minutes in every faculty meeting to review one component of the school’s emergency plan and/or at least one issue related to school safety. Five minutes of each monthly faculty meeting would provide roughly 50 more minutes of attention to school safety and emergency planning. Including at least an hour, and as much as a half day or periodically a full day, of school safety and emergency planning training to professional development days would further advance staff training.

School safety consultant, Chuck Hibbert, also implemented a process in his prior school district where this “five minute rule” was recommended as a part of department, grade, and/or team level meetings. This rule asked teachers and staff to add school safety as the last agenda item to each of their meetings for a five minute review of one component of the school’s emergency plan and/or other school safety issue of concern. The reason for the item being at the end of the agenda is that when placed at the beginning of the agenda, safety discussions often consume the entire meeting and other planned instructional issues are not covered.

District and building level crisis team members along with cabinet level administrators and board members should receive advanced training on best practices in school emergency preparedness. Locally, outside experts from the community such as law enforcement, fire department, emergency medical services, county emergency management agency, mental health professionals, and others could provide training. Periodic training by national experts and specialists on best practices and latest developments in school safety, security, and emergency planning should also be made available to district and school crisis team members to build upon their in-house reviews and training by local community resources.

School support staff sorely need security and emergency preparedness training. School secretaries, custodians (day and evening), food services staff, and transportation personnel are grossly undertrained, frequently forgotten in planning, and often absent from

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school crisis teams. Yet these staff members are on the frontlines in our schools and provide critical services in emergency situations, in addition to their day-to-day role with children and teachers.

Funding outside training providers has become more difficult due to cuts in school safety budgets and grants. But it is not impossible. Federal funding sources potentially include Title 1, Safe and Drug Free Schools, Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS), Safe Schools/Healthy Students, and similar programs. Joining with other area local school districts and county/regional offices of education to share the costs of expert training workshops is another frequently untapped option.

School districts must also establish line items in their operating budget for school security and emergency preparedness issues. School safety should not be viewed as a grant-funded luxury. Having a tight budget is not an acceptable excuse for neglecting safety needs in the eyes of parents, the media, judges and juries when an

incident occurs that could have been prevented by reasonable risk reduction and preparedness measures.

### Emergency Drills and Debriefing

In a post-Columbine and post-911 world, new drills have been added to traditional school fire, tornado, and related drills. Lockdowns, evacuations, shelter-in-place, and other exercises are now part of the routine for many schools. Some states have actually legislated requirements for local schools to now conduct non-traditional drills, such as lockdowns.

Unfortunately, too often we see schools conducting drills when they are most convenient, rather than to reflect reality. For example, lockdown drills are typically conducted during regular class periods, not during lunch periods. Yet it is during lunchtime that schools are often at higher-risk of an incident occurring.

Schools should start off with simple, straightforward drills and increasingly diversify their drills to be more challenging and complicated. An administrator or school resource officer (SRO), for example, could block exits, unannounced to students and staff, during a fire

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drill. Lockdowns could be conducted during a lunch period, upon student arrival in the morning, during class change, just prior to school dismissal, and at other “challenging” times of the school day.

Unannounced checks of building security also provide another method for testing a school’s security. Unfortunately for many schools, local media investigations around the country have recorded how far a stranger can walk through a school unchallenged. Several school districts have engaged outside individuals to test themselves in such a manner, being proactive by getting documented examples of weaknesses in access control, failure of staff to challenge and/or report strangers, and related security gaps.

Drills should receive detailed evaluations and critiques by school administrators and their school safety, police, and related partners. One high school principal recently provided a detailed, room-by-room, and name-by-name critique of his staff’s response to an unannounced lockdown. The principal demonstrated true leadership and commitment to school safety by calling out by-name specific staff members who failed to follow lockdown procedures and safeguard themselves and their children.

While such an action may be “politically incorrect” in the eyes of some administrators and staff, it is such by-name accountability that parents, the media, and parents will pursue if adults responsible for children drop the ball in a real crisis. If schools are to be serious about drills, this includes identifying what worked well and which adults failed to follow procedures.

Debriefing sessions should share lessons learned from drills and exercises with building crisis teams and staff, district crisis teams, and administrators from other district buildings.

### **Tabletop Exercises**

While full-scale drills are very educational, they are also time and labor intensive to plan and conduct. Many schools, faced with the challenges of instructional demands and staff limitations, are not yet ready or able to plan and carry out a full-scale exercise. This leaves many schools doing the bare minimum drilling required, and emergency plans are often left sitting on a shelf collecting dust without being exercised at all.

One of the most meaningful, practical methods for filling this gap is the tabletop exercise. Tabletops bring district and school crisis teams, along with first responders and other community partners, to the table

to learn whether written plans on paper may actually work in a real emergency. In as little as a half-day in a professional development setting, a hypothetical scenario can be unveiled via PowerPoint and group discussions facilitated to discuss how school and community partners might respond to the situation.

Tabletop debriefings and evaluations have been very revealing. School safety experts often find, contrary to the expectations of many, that school crisis teams overreact rather than under-react in many scenarios. Situations warranting an analytical, methodical approach often unfold with school teams hastily calling for evacuations, going unnecessarily into lockdowns, and wrongly anticipating that first responders will handle parents and other aspects of the emergency that they, as school officials, would actually be expected to handle.

Parent and media communications, parent-student reunification, and numerous other elements of effective school emergency plans are often discovered during tabletops to be sorely lacking in realistic planning and expectations.

The results of tabletop exercises often include significant revision of written emergency plans. Tabletops produce meaningful results in a relatively informal setting during reasonable blocks of professional development time. Tabletops provide a happy medium for districts unable to do full scale exercises but unwilling to do nothing.

### **The Future**

A great deal of progress has been made in school safety and school emergency preparedness in the ten years following the Columbine High School attack. Yet many gaps remain. A wave of new administrators, teachers, and support staff warrants revisiting the fundamentals of school emergency planning and refocusing our efforts back on the “nuts-and-bolts” of school security and emergency planning.

### **About the author:**

*Kenneth S. Trump, MPA, is president of National School Safety and Security Services ([www.schoolsecurity.org](http://www.schoolsecurity.org)), a Cleveland-based school security and emergency preparedness consulting firm. The company provides school security assessments, emergency planning evaluations, training, facilitated tabletop exercises, and related services for K-12 schools.*

