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Crisis Planning For Schools: Five critical questions you should ask.

Crisis is an indefinable something that could imply eminent disaster. It could be a school shooter, a riot, a gang action, a natural or unnatural disaster etc. To believe one will never happen in your school is like playing Russian roulette. The truth is, when facing a crisis; you can never be over prepared.

Based on the way most schools prepare and train for a crisis, the sad reality is we can never be really ready for the next event. However, we have a moral responsibility to our students and staff to do our best and we can improve our response if we plan and train for them. Here are **5 critical questions** that must be considered.

1. Do you have an existing plan on how to respond to a bomb, shooting or other destructive event?

A plan should be developed with the input from all the departments and agencies that are going to be involved and responding i.e. police, emergency services, fire department and educators. Educators should draw upon the assistance of experts in the area of crisis planning to help them establish a workable plan. However, we have seen these experts at work during Hurricane Katrina and their performance was somewhat less than desired. Therefore, it is incumbent upon administrators/educators to educate themselves as much as possible about what needs to be done. Because these experts might not be aware of how our children will react and respond during a crisis, educator's input is critical. I hope this article will be helpful.

2. How have the people within your building(s) been trained to respond?

All staff i.e. administrators, teachers, custodians, office workers and our students etc. should be part of the training. They must know what is expected of them. They must also know the various procedures they might be asked to follow. Students must also get some training in crisis preparation. However, there are often concerns about frightening children that often supercedes everything else including training. A minimal amount of training in lockdowns and evacuation procedures should be presented and discussed with students.

Training must occur on a continuing basis. It should not be a one shot deal. Fire drills are conducted 8-12 times a year as required by state law. A variety of crisis drills must also be conducted with some regularity. Frequent faculty meetings should discuss various aspects of crisis planning. In addition, staff development programs should be provided educators and administrators during the course of the year.

3. Do you have the appropriate equipment to contain or mitigate the incident?

Intra-school communication must be an essential part of any plan. You must be able to communicate with your staff during a crisis whether they are in their classrooms or moving around the building or grounds.

Cameras in the building could help identify the problem and its location allowing a plan of action to be set in motion. Cameras will also provide up-to-the-minute threat status. Modern camera systems are computer accessible and will allow local law enforcement to tap into and identify problems in the building as they arrive i.e. shooter, riot etc. These same systems could allow teachers in a locked down classroom to view cameras around the building so they would know what is going on and possibly offer an escape strategy.

Some schools have installed security gates that drop from the ceiling to seal off corridors and isolate a problem. These can be controlled from the general office.

4. Do you have enough personal protective equipment & training to ensure life safety until professionals arrive?

Is your building equipped with defibrillators? Are people trained to use them? Is their training current? Do you have an available list of all personnel in the building who are trained in CPR and first aide? Do you mandate first aide training or offer your staff an incentive to get this training?

Has your staff been through a program that discusses weapons of mass destruction? Chemical agents are the most likely danger schools might encounter and they could occur during any fire. There are numerous shop, science or custodial chemicals and building materials that produce dangerous gases when burned. There are tips available to deal with them should they be encountered. Does your building contain any gas masks? It might be necessary to make a search of an area that is smoke filled to find missing students. Are there people assigned to these search roles around the building should a search be needed? Have they been trained? Do you have high intensity flashlights on hand in the event lights go out or smoke fills the halls?

5. Does everyone know what specific jobs or tasks they are responsible to perform?

Let's hope that local police and fire departments know their roles, and their training and equipment to handle school problems is up to date. However, until the professionals arrive, we are responsible for doing **the best we can** to ensure everyone's safety within our buildings. Therefore, we must be prepared to take action in the event something happens and professional help is not as quick as would hope.

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Within the building their must also be assigned roles as well. Sector captains should be assigned to take charge of regions of the building in the event of any crisis. These people should be trained in the event they must make decisions for those in their care. There should be a chain of command in place in the event anyone is absent or out of the building.

Some people should be assigned to take charge of moving handicapped students. Physical strength is important in this selection because it might be necessary to physically carry these people out of the building. Others should be responsible for locating students that are out of classrooms. This would include checking restrooms, locker rooms, corridors etc. where some students might be traveling or hanging out during class time. These assignments should be given to staff in various locations within the building. Once again, there should be backup support in the event anyone is absent or out of the building.

Hopefully, we will never experience a real crisis, however, if we must, it is far better that we be prepared. Stay Safe!