

Managing Your Schools Under Threat of Terrorism

Are you ready?

What will you do if:

- ? current and accurate information about a crisis is not available or there is no official government communication?
- ? direction from the district office is not immediately available?
- ? your school site loses electrical power, water or land-line communication?
- ? the crisis response plans do not meet the reality of the situation?
- ? first responders or designated safety partners are deployed elsewhere and not available?
- ? despite preparation, staff and students are overwhelmed and display strong reactions?
- ? a high degree of panic, reaction, and limited cooperation develops among parents?
- ? An onslaught of media attention interferes with school plans and operations?

The midst of a crisis is not the time to establish critical relationships, assess strengths, or hone crisis response skills. In the event of any of the above scenarios, it is likely that you will depend heavily upon the relationships, resources, training, and problem-solving abilities that are already in place.

This document is designed to help schools preserve and enhance the educational mission in times of turmoil and prepare to the best of their ability to effectively respond to a crisis.

The document serves in three specific ways:

- 1 It encourages schools with existing plans to focus on critical elements of their plan that must be reassessed or updated in light of new threats and challenges.
- 2 For schools without a plan, the document serves as a springboard for the minimum preparation that must be undertaken now.
- 3 The document focuses on the need for school leaders to recognize and address the anxiety related to prolonged conflict, fear and uncertainty throughout the school community.

Today's mandate for homeland security comes at a time when America's communities are experiencing an unparalleled sense of vulnerability and anxiety. America's communities and schools must prepare for what may lie ahead and learn to deal with prolonged fear and uncertainty. Today's preparations will not only serve school communities during times of war and terrorism but also during times of stability.

Safe school planning — of which crisis response is one element — is not a new process for most school communities. Many have spent months and years forging critical partnerships, collaborating, planning, and problem solving with the goal of providing safe school plans. In light of current events and increased vulnerability, it is imperative for schools without a crisis response plan to create one.

Six Critical Strategies for Prevention, Preparation and Response

1 Revitalize school safety partnerships given new types of threats.

- ❑ Review incident command structures with safety partners.
- ❑ Assess the school community's readiness and acceptance regarding crisis preparedness.
- ❑ Interface your plan with community crisis response plans.
- ❑ Confirm the availability of specialized emergency services, including bomb squads, hazardous materials management, and state and federal emergency management agencies.
- ❑ Reestablish contact and update memorandums of understanding with critical safety partners, including first responders.
- ❑ Renew contact and update procedures for the school crisis response team.
- ❑ Identify contacts in the community who could provide food, water, shelter, medical aid, power sources, and other forms of emergency support.
- ❑ Practice and drill on site with first responders.

2 Assess preparedness.

- ❑ Identify school staff members who possess specialized skills and training (e.g., first aid and CPR training, care giving, or multiple language skills).
- ❑ Develop a school site chain of command that adapts to available personnel and resources during a crisis.
- ❑ Inventory campus and classroom provisions, including food, water, alternative power sources, materials for sealing doors and windows, flashlights, and medical and first aid supplies.
- ❑ Assemble emergency kits and food and water

supplies as appropriate for your school community.

- ❑ Update staff and student rosters and emergency contact information. Make such information portable for use in a crisis.

3 Keep informed and be aware of the potential threats.

- ❑ Use reliable sources for information regarding preparedness and response to biological, chemical, radiological threats:
 - Homeland Security Department: www.ready.gov
 - Federal Emergency Management Agency: www.fema.gov
 - Red Cross: www.redcross.org
- ❑ Participate in national, state and local disaster preparedness and anti-terrorism training,
- ❑ Map your school's proximity to power plants, bridges, airports and other transportation venues, government buildings, military bases, dams and reservoirs, and other potential terrorist targets.
- ❑ Watch for suspicious people or items and changes in typical patterns of activities surrounding your school.
- ❑ Direct threat assessment teams to monitor and track agitated or troubled students, staff, parents and members of the community at large.
- ❑ Screen and badge all visitors, including vendors, delivery/service personnel, and volunteers. Enforce sign-in/sign-out procedures.
- ❑ Confirm the identity of anyone seeking access to operational systems such as heating, ventilation, or air conditioning units. Maintain accurate records of service calls.
- ❑ Reassess the risk related to various school activities, including field trips and athletic events, in

accordance with the color-coded national threat conditions established by the Homeland Security Advisory System.

4 Update, train, cross-train, and practice crisis response procedures.

- ❑ Identify facilities and options for sheltering-in-place or evacuation.
- ❑ Review emergency codes, signals and procedures.
- ❑ Conduct drills for lockdown, shelter-in-place, evacuation, portable record keeping, and transportation procedures.
- ❑ Anticipate and prepare the key messages used in crisis communications, such as announcements, parent letters, school fact sheets, press releases, and factual statements.
- ❑ Update crisis communication methods used with safety partners and the broader community.
- ❑ Identify alternative means of communication other than traditional phone lines, such as cell phones, two-way radios, bull horns or other voice/video data networks.
- ❑ Assess parent and family notification and reunification plans.
- ❑ Share crisis response procedures with school community members as appropriate.
- ❑ Review media contact protocols.
- ❑ Anticipate the need to expand the parameters of a crisis to include systems, organizations, and agencies outside your control.

5 Promote a civil, safe and orderly campus.

- ❑ Maintain a predictable routine for students.
- ❑ Include students, teachers, school staff, and the parent community in crisis response preparation and threat assessment.
- ❑ Increase the presence and visibility of the administrative team by wearing badges, hats or

designated items of clothing.

- ❑ Anticipate the impact of political diversity, social unrest, and protests in the community.
- ❑ Proactively communicate personnel policies that address academic freedom and conduct toward individuals, groups, and controversial subjects.
- ❑ Communicate expectations regarding student conduct, freedom of expression, mutual respect, civil behavior, and dress code issues regarding clothing with political sentiments.
- ❑ Proactively manage student or staff unrest, disruption, protests, or demonstrations.
- ❑ Fairly and consistently enforce policies, rules and sanctions.
- ❑ Identify and respond to hate-motivated behaviors.

6 Manage turbulent times by embracing the time-honored mission of schools

- ❑ Continue to reinforce and promote your school's academic and social mission statement.
- ❑ Continue to build knowledge and understanding of world history and conflict, geography, economics, and current issues.
- ❑ Continue to foster a personal understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- ❑ Identify and explore the challenges of diversity within your school, community, nation and the world.
- ❑ Engage in perspective building that is grounded in civil discourse and mutual respect.
- ❑ Practice critical thinking, analysis and nonviolent problem solving.

Managing Prolonged Fear and Uncertainty

Managing information, resources, strategies, people and partnerships is a significant part of your crisis response plan. Equally important are your preparations to safeguard the emotional well-being of your school community over the long term. The unique challenge facing today's school leaders will be to respond to the on-going emotional effects of terrorism, trauma and war.

When student emotions — such as fear, anger, frustration, suspicion, vengefulness, depression, and anxiety — go unchecked and unresolved, three fundamental elements are compromised: the academic mission, the school's safety, and the emotional well-being of the school community. Often these strong emotions will manifest themselves in the following ways:

- ⇒ School-age children may become withdrawn. Images of bad events or ideas of revenge may consume their thoughts. They may experience disturbances in sleeping and eating habits and could become aggressive at school.
- ⇒ Adolescents may feel frustrated, irritable, helpless, or unsafe. They may imagine themselves as invulnerable and as a way to cope with this loss of control, increase high-risk activities, such as reckless driving, alcohol and other drug use, and sexual experimentation. They may become critical and judgmental of the adults around them and may also become aggressive.

A viable strategy for responding to such strong emotional needs is to expand, enhance, and intensify communication with students. Keep in mind that calm adults help students remain calm. Talk and listen with the following purposes in mind:

- ✓ Helping students explore and manage strong emotions.
- ✓ Taking action against demeaning or aggressive attitudes, words, and behaviors.
- ✓ Debriefing or framing strong media content and images.

- ✓ Monitoring and settling emerging conflicts.
- ✓ Correcting misinformation or debunking myths.
- ✓ Supporting students who have family in the military or emergency services.
- ✓ Inviting students to experience a sense of control by helping prepare themselves, their schools and their communities to respond to crisis.
- ✓ Helping students view crisis preparations and drills as a means of controlling the uncertainty of their environment or events.
- ✓ Creating an opportunity for students to ask for help for self or others.
- ✓ Monitoring students previously identified as high risk or those who have been subjected to prior trauma.
- ✓ Identifying available resources, such as emotional support groups and activities.
- ✓ Connecting students other students and caring adults at school.
- ✓ Connecting students to the care and concern of adults throughout the community.

Threats and acts of terrorism, conflict, and prolonged uncertainty have put American communities on high alert. At the same time, a threat to the educational mission has also been delivered. Ignored or left unaddressed, this threat has the power to keep teachers from teaching and students from learning. During these times, a focus on awareness, preparation and responsive communication at school can strengthen the emotional health and fortitude of your school community and preserve the academic mission of education. Keeping schools and schoolchildren safe is not a new process. It has become an intensified challenge and responsibility during these turbulent and uncertain times.