

# School Safety Update

The Newsletter of the National School Safety Center

May 1999

## Director 's Update: Top 10 strategies for schools to consider in the wake of the Colorado shootings

**Take threats seriously and deal with them as acts of violence.** Establish clear sanctions for handling threats or intimidating behavior. Often, a threat precedes a crime. Just prior to a drive-by shooting, there is often a "show-by," where weapons are flashed. Next, the weapons are actually used. The same principle applies when it comes to dealing with threats or rumors. They are first articulated and then implemented.

A threat is nothing less than an assault. An assault is a willful attempt (or threat) to inflict injury upon another, when coupled with the apparent present ability to do so. Assault includes any intentional display of force that would give the victim reason to fear or expect immediate bodily harm. An assault may be committed without actually touching or doing bodily harm. Specific sanctions and procedures should be implemented for handling such behavior.

**Use professional judgement and discretion.** React without over-reacting. When you hear a rumor or threat, investigate it. If you are uncertain or cannot ascertain if the threat is legitimate or not, get a second opinion. This may involve consulting with another administrator, teacher, counselor, or mental health professional. Report all legitimate threats immediately to law enforcement.

**Create a threat assessment protocol.** Such procedures should identify the responsibilities of students, teachers, parents and administrators for handling threats. When it is determined that the threat may be serious, law enforcement and mental health professionals should be involved. In Rapid City, SD, school officials, local law enforcement and county prosecutors have teamed up to develop such a protocol (see page 2) that establishes action steps for all school

constituents.

**Increase adult visibility.** Despite all the high-tech strategies, including metal scanners, motion detectors and closed circuit television surveillance, the single most effective strategy for keeping schools safe is the physical presence of responsible adults. This may include teachers, teacher aids, counselors, coaches, law enforcement, probation officers, parents and other responsible adult mentors or volunteers. Schools need more caring adults on the campus to provide support, protection and mentoring to young people.

**Establish a local tipline, which can facilitate anonymous reporting and a prompt response to potential trouble.** Involve students in the crime prevention process. Let them know it is in their self-interest to report crime or potential harm.

At North Pole Middle School in North Pole, Alaska the school has added a student tipline to the school's activities/parent information/ homework helpline. Students who have any particular concern may report the incident by contacting the tipline via campus phones or off-campus lines. When a tip is received, the principal is paged within 60 seconds. If the principal does not respond within five minutes, the tip is forwarded to the vice principal. If she is unavailable, the message is sent to a third back-up location. Good tiplines offer anonymity, a prompt response, support and help for victims and immediate action.

**Develop a close working partnership with law enforcement.** Create the partnership with law enforcement before the trouble begins. Invite law enforcement officials onto the campus. Provide an opportunity for them, at the beginning of each year, to provide an in-service training session on tactical strategies they will employ in the event of a crisis and have

them identify the ways that you can work most effectively with them.

**Establish an effective two-way communication system on the campus.** There must be appropriate two-way communication between every classroom and the front office. Supervisory, security and maintenance personnel must be in two-way communication. Every school principal should have one or more cell phones available for emergency use.

**Establish a comprehensive crisis containment and management plan.** The crisis plan should include lock-down procedures, evacuation plans, command post location, assignment of roles, media and communication responsibilities, among other issues pertaining to crisis prevention and ultimately crisis resolution.

**Recruit the presiding juvenile judge as a partner on your crisis management and safe school planning team.** The judge can be the school and community's best friend when it comes to keeping schools safe. Judges can mandate training, counseling and support programs for misbehaving juveniles and their families who disrupt the educational process.

**Support the role of parents in school crime and violence prevention.** Encourage parents to talk with their children about their children's perceptions of safety at school. Parents should ask their children: Do you ever stay away from school because you are afraid to go? Are there areas of the campus you avoid? Are there classmates who intimidate you and make you feel unsafe?

Parents should visit their children's school. They should ask the principal about the school's safe school plan. Is there a written partnership with local law enforcement for handling crises? How many students are on probation at this school? These are all important questions.

Every school should provide a parent center on the campus. Parents should be encouraged to visit classrooms, help supervise areas of the campus where students congregate.

## School Threat Assessment Response Protocol

*The following is an interagency agreement adopted by the Rapid City Area (South Dakota) Schools, Rapid City Police Department, Pennington County Sheriff's Department, Pennington County State's Attorney's Office.*

*The purpose of the agreement is to provide for a mechanism to assure that threats of violence in a school environment are addressed, whenever possible, before they occur.*

*STAR team members, responsible for first response and threat assessment, include all Rapid City Police Department and Pennington County Sheriff's Office School Liaison Officers. Additionally, the STAR team consists of three designated prosecutors from the Pennington County State's Attorney's Office. The coordinators of the STAR Team, responsible for oversight of this protocol, include the Pennington County State's Attorney, the Rapid City Police Department Chief of Police, and the Pennington County Sheriff or their designees.*

### Mission Statement

The purpose behind this protocol is to provide for a mechanism to assure that threats of violence in a school environment are addressed, whenever possible, before they occur. The process necessarily involves a variety of elements, ranging from students, parent, teacher, staff member and administration involvement to law enforcement and other criminal justice component participation. The protocol is designed specifically for those violence issues that affect schools and the students who attend those schools. It is intended to identify credible threats of violence and address those threats and the individual making the threat before the threat is carried out. *NOTE: This protocol is applicable during any school-sponsored event or function, whether the event or function be on school property or not.*

### Procedures

The following procedure is separated into several sections in order to reflect those instances where a threatened act

of violence may be received by specific individuals.

#### ***I. Any student, upon receiving information that a person is threatening to commit an act of violence, shall:***

- Assume threat is serious;
- Immediately report the threat to a parent, guardian, school staff, administrator or law enforcement officer;
- Be available and cooperative in providing a statement of information, with the understanding that the information source (student) will remain anonymous to the greatest extent possible.

#### ***II. Any parent or guardian, upon receiving information that a person is threatening to commit an act of violence, shall:***

- Assume threat is serious;
- Immediately report the threat to a school staff member, school administrator or law enforcement officer
- Be available and cooperative in providing a statement of information, with the understanding that the information source (parent or guardian) will remain anonymous to the greatest extent possible.

#### ***III. Any school staff member, upon receiving information that a person is threatening to commit an act of violence, shall:***

- Assume threat is serious;
- Immediately report the threat to a school administrator their designee;
- Be available and cooperative in providing a statement of information, with the understanding that the information source (the staff member) will remain anonymous to the greatest extent possible.

#### ***IV. Any school administrator, upon receiving information that a person is threatening to commit an act of violence, shall:***

- Assume threat is serious;
- Cause the student making the threat, if said student is on campus, to be immediately removed from the classroom and segregated into a secured area pending

further investigation;

- Immediately notify the STAR Team Officer assigned to the school and provide the team member with complete information regarding the information received;
- Require the school staff member, if this is the source of the information, to provide immediate written statements regarding the information received.

#### ***V. The STAR Team Officer, upon notification that a threat to commit an act of violence has occurred, shall:***

- Assume the threat is serious
- Immediately conduct an assessment interview of the subject making the threat. The assessment interview will include at least one STAR Team Officer and the administrator or his designee.

*NOTE: The primary purpose of the interview is to engage in an assessment of the available information, in an attempt to determine the veracity of the threat, in order to decide what level of follow-up action is needed and appropriate.*

#### ***VI. Once the assessment is complete, the STAR Team Officer and administrator shall convene privately to discuss the threat and consider options for follow-up action:***

A. If it is agreed the threat is credible, the STAR Team Officer shall immediately contact a STAR Team Prosecutor to discuss possible options for the subject making the threat. These options may include, but are not necessarily limited to:

1. Contacting subject's parent(s) or guardian for input and assistance, including potential voluntary committal of the subject making the threat or voluntary placement in a juvenile diversion program through the State Attorney's Office;
2. Application of the Child in Need of Supervision (CHINS) process through parental or guardian assistance, or through the State Attorney's Office Arrest and incarceration of the subject for Disturbance of School;
3. Communication between the STAR Team Prosecutor and the school administrator regarding school sanctions;
4. Arrest and incarceration of the sub-

- ject for Disturbance of School;
5. Arrest and incarceration of the subject for Disorderly Conduct;
  6. Arrest and incarceration of the subject for simple or aggravated assault;
  7. Arrest and incarceration of the subject for probation violation, if the student is a court ordered probationer;
  8. Placement of the subject at the psychiatric unit on an involuntary mental hold.

B. If it agreed that the threat is not credible, or does not require application of the options listed in section "A", the school administrator shall assume responsibility to institute any further action deemed necessary.

***VII. Once an option is chosen and initiated, the STAR team Members involved in the process shall engage if fulfilling the reporting requirements associated with the action taken:***

- The STAR Team Member, upon exercising any of the aforementioned options, shall immediately complete reports relevant to the event and the action taken and assure that copies of these documents are provided to:
  1. The State's Attorney's Office
  2. The school administrator involved
  3. The STAR Team Coordinators
- Original reports are to be routed through the law enforcement records management system per usual procedure.

**After-Action Considerations**

Periodically, as deemed necessary by the STAR Team Coordinators, a meeting will be held to discuss recent STAR cases, in order to determine the effectiveness of this protocol. Meeting attendees should include:

- The Pennington County State's Attorney or his designee;
- The Rapid City Police Department Chief of Police or his designee;
- The Rapid City Area School District superintendent or his designee;
- The Chief Court Services Officer or his designee;
- The Pennington County Sheriff or his designee;
- Designated STAR Officers.

## Breaking the code of silence: Empathy training for students

Across the country, silence is killing kids! The "code of silence," a very strong charter among teenagers, is the unwritten rules that states "no one should tell on their friends" even if they have or are going to do something illegal. Some of the recent school shootings could have been prevented had the students who knew beforehand told a responsible adult.

Discussions about the code of silence first took place last school year with sixth graders in the Fairbanks, AK, during classroom "Violence Prevention Through Empathy Training." When students were asked what they would do if their friend threatened to kill someone at school the next day, initially no one suggested telling an adult. The typical response was to try to figure out if the friend was serious about the threat or to try to talk the friend out of it. Students were afraid that if they reported a troubled friend, then their friend would get in trouble. New lessons needed to be developed to persuade students to break the code of silence.

This year, the lesson was designed to maximize the likelihood that students would share information with adults. During the classroom discussions about school shootings in Jonesboro, AR, Edinboro, PA, and Bethel, AK, the point was made that each of the killings were preventable because other kids knew what was going to happen. In Bethel, two students who knew about the planned shooting before it occurred have been charged as accessories to murder and will be going to trial soon.

When asked how these students might feel knowing that they allowed their friend to kill two people, the students responded, "sad, guilty, depressed, bad, grieving, scared, responsible for their deaths." The next logical question in the discussion was, "Why should we break the code of silence?" Students made the following list:

- We stay out of trouble.
- We won't grieve.
- We won't feel guilty.
- Others won't grieve.
- To do the right thing.

- No one dies.
- It may get your friend in trouble, most mostly it will get him/her help.

It is true that initially their friend may get into trouble, but compared to a murder charge, the trouble is minor. The experience of students being turned in for threatening to kill someone shows that the students are evaluated to determine how serious they are and what type of help the students need. In the long run, such students get more help than they get trouble, and no one has to live with the aftermath of people dying. Once presented this way, the students are much more open to telling on their friends and breaking the code of silence.

Since the 15 deaths at school in Littleton, CO, one fifth-grade and three sixth-grade classes that previously were involved in the Empathy Training were debriefed about the school crisis. After a discussion of the facts, students began to explore how many people were affected by this tragedy. Not only have the families, friends and the entire student body at Columbine High School been affected by the loss, but the entire country has been as well. Students also made the point that in the places where other school shootings have occurred, the people affected by the deaths in those communities were probably re-living their own pain over again.

Students were asked how they feel about the Littleton deaths. One girl reported having cried; others said they were shocked, saddened, horrified; many were afraid that it could happen in their schools. After discussing once again the concept of breaking the code of silence, a show of hands indicated that nearly every student had been convinced that sharing information about a friend who is planning to do himself or others harm at school would be the appropriate and caring thing to do.

***Submitted by Dave Hamilton, school psychologist, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District.***

## Tragedy Response and Healing: Springfield Unites

Thursday, May 21, 1998: The day began like any other at Thurston High School with students chatting noisily in the cafeteria, eating breakfast and trading the tales of youthful innocence.

That innocence was brutally shattered at 7:55 a.m. when a student walked calmly into the cafeteria and sprayed 50 rounds of ammunition into the crowd. What was first thought to be a school prank turned into a nightmare in which two students were killed and 22 others wounded.

As a school district crisis response team leader, I received the emergency call just minutes after the shooting and my immediate reaction was one of strong disbelief. Approaching the school, I found the street to be strangely deserted; all traffic was stopped as one ambulance after another raced by with their innocent victims. Throngs of frightened parents and neighbors filled the sidewalks and pressed past the gathering media to reach the school.

A somewhat dazed teacher stood in the middle of the street, directing traffic. At first he was puzzled by the horrified looks he received from those passing by him — then he looked down and realized he still had blood on his hands from administering first aid just moments before. When the principal read the names of the wounded, he saw shock, disbelief and tears on the faces before him. Parents who had never before met one another literally helped hold each other up.

Images are indelibly etched in my mind: sirens, ambulances, stretchers, reporters, police cars, yellow tape, flashing lights, frantic faces, sobbing voices, crowds pressing, a list of names being read.

An eerie quiet prevailed inside the school. Teachers and students had provided immediate first aid to the wounded and most other students were in their classrooms in a lock down. The shooting had ended when several students tackled the gunman as he paused to reload. Three hundred students who had witnessed the shooting, and survived, gathered in the library where caring adults calmed them while they waited for police questioning. Frantic parents searched for

sons and daughters, some who would never come home. Images I still carry: policemen, counselors, blood stains, darkened rooms, students huddled, phones ringing, backpacks strewn, quiet sobs, parents searching, anguished looks.

The nightmare intensified as we learned that the parents of the 15 year-old suspect had been found dead in their home, apparently shot by their son. Bill and Faith, both teachers, were long time residents of Springfield. Bill, though retired, still trained district teachers and taught at the local community college. Faith, a popular Springfield High School teacher, had just learned she had been named an "Outstanding Educator of the Year," but would not live to receive her award.

When the President of the United States phoned, we realized that this tragedy would affect not only the 11,300 students and 1,200 employees of the Springfield School District, but the entire Eugene-Springfield community, the state of Oregon and the entire nation. Our sense of safety and security was shattered along with our innocence, and no longer could we say, "It can't happen here."

### **Crisis response: Key concepts**

Nothing in our previous experiences with individual student and teacher deaths prepared us for the magnitude of this horrifying event. My colleague and I quickly organized a "core team" of school psychologists, administrators and mental health workers, and together we designed the school district response. That response was an on-the-spot modification of procedures we had used in two dozen "smaller" crisis interventions over the previous seven years.

School safety experts and crisis response specialists have said, "There are two types of schools: those that have had a major crisis, and those that are about to." It is my hope this information will assist other schools plan for and cope with a crisis should it occur.

Here are the key concepts I believe contributed to the effectiveness of this response:

**1) Building level crisis response teams were in place.** Each school in Springfield has a crisis plan, which specifies the duties of the team members and procedures to follow in emergencies, and is updated each school year. In addition, district counselors and psychologists are trained and (unfortunately) experienced in crisis response.

**2) The response was coordinated at the district and city level.** School administrators and city officials had previously collaborated in drafting the district's Emergency Procedures Manual. They formed a joint "command center" at City Hall, which was a clearinghouse for inquiries from both the press and the public. Additional phone lines set up by 10:00 a.m. the day of the tragedy were staffed 24 hours a day through the four-day holiday weekend by city and school district employees.

**3) A county network of trained crisis personnel was in place.** Counselors and school psychologists in Lane County are trained and available to respond to crises in other districts through an agreement signed annually by the school superintendents. This network allows us immediate access to counselors from many districts as well as from our local mental health agencies. In addition, Lane Education Service District sponsors periodic training in grief and loss and crisis response.

**4) Flexible and continuous planning was essential.** Staff members worked hundreds of hours developing and revising plans for the schools and the community. As in other districts where there have been shootings, the school psychologists played a major role in the intervention.

**5) Post-trauma support was provided.** Support came from many sources including private counseling agencies, Lane County Mental Health, Lane Education Service District, other school districts, the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA), and the National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT). The Red Cross provided meals during the day following the tragedy (a previously scheduled districtwide in-service day) when we gathered students, teachers, parents, counselors, and administrators at a nearby middle school. NOVA volun-

teers, who had arrived the afternoon of the shooting, held community debriefings, news conferences, and training sessions throughout the next seven days. Our district psychologists counseled students and staff, and managed the monumental task of screening, scheduling and monitoring over 200 outside counselors during the next three weeks. We greatly appreciated all of these resources, as the impact of the trauma quickly became pervasive throughout our community.

**6) Handling members of the media, a formidable task, was coordinated by the city and the school district.** Throughout the first day and night the media vans and satellite trucks rolled in from across the nation. Before the first hour had passed, a CNN helicopter hovered overhead, transmitting images of our newfound horrific "fame." Reporters from as far away as Japan, Portugal, England and Australia quickly took on a larger-than-life presence in our normally quiet community. *ABC, NBC, CBS, NPR, Inside Edition, Hard Copy, USA Today, Time, Life, Newsweek, People, Rolling Stone, and Psychology Today* have all made their appearances.

Before long, a surrealistic scene developed as the street in front of the high school was reduced to a one-lane road, with cars forced to crawl between the constantly humming generators and blazing lights of 20 white satellite vans.

Communication was handled through regular press conferences and credibility was established so the hundreds of reporters covering the event could trust getting information from one source. Cell phones and pagers were critical for fast, accurate information.

We were amazed to observe that some reporters tried posing as doctors and counselors in their efforts to access hospitals and schools, and therefore ID badges became essential for all volunteers. Local and national television crews filmed live reports in front of the school, but no media were allowed on the high school campus until after school resumed, and then only briefly, late at night. This was done to minimize the filming of traumatic images and to allow the students' first view of campus to be in person, not on television. As the days passed, many

members of the media themselves became traumatized by the tragic events. Six days following the shooting, the fleet of white vans crept silently away almost as abruptly as they had arrived, leaving the school to stand free of lights, cameras, and sound bites.

**7) The student's reentry to school was carefully planned with counseling support.** Students, their families, and staff were given the opportunity to visit the Thurston campus on Memorial Day, allowing them to enter the campus supported by family, friends, counselors, NOVA volunteers and "Comfort dogs." Although many of the 2,000 visitors sat or stood in the repaired cafeteria, not all were able to do so. There were many tears that day, and one student commented, "It was unlike anything I've ever felt before. I've been around death before in my life but nothing like this. ...nothing that's really just gotten down to the very core of me and made me want to break down and cry right there."

The second step of the students' reentry occurred Tuesday morning, the first day of classes following the shooting. After a free breakfast in the school courtyard and cafeteria, students attended a half-day of classes, and then hundreds attended the funeral of one victim that afternoon. Volunteer counselors were present in every classroom that day and remained available in support rooms through the end of the school year.

**8) Memorials and healing events were important to help the community move forward.** The most impromptu of the memorials became one of the most powerful for a community looking for solace in this tragedy. Within hours of the shooting, community members of all ages placed flowers, posters, balloons, plants, teddy bears, candles, photos, poems, crosses and other mementos on the chain link fence in front of Thurston High. Ultimately, this memorial stretched the entire length of the campus, some 150 yards, and represented the community's outpouring of grief in a sea of flowers. For several days, vehicle and pedestrian traffic was nonstop as thousands passed to pay their respects. In addition, a candlelight vigil was held outside City Hall, a memorial service for Bill and Faith Kinkel

was held at Springfield High School, prayer services were held in many churches, and the firefighters' Blue Ribbon of Promise campaign began. Students, staff, and parents will design a permanent school memorial later this year.

**9) Care of the caregivers was provided.** The two NOVA teams held numerous debriefings, which were essential for the emotional well-being of the service providers. We are extremely grateful for the invaluable advice and assistance we received from the NOVA teams led expertly by John Ganz (NOVA) and Kris Siekert (NOVA/NEAT) in the immediate aftermath of this tragedy. They supported us with wisdom and caring during the most dreadful experience we could imagine.

### **Along the road to healing**

Long-term follow up continues to require time, staff and additional resources. The event was not over on May 22, 1998, the day after the shooting, or on June 12, 1998, the last day of school. Summer was filled with grant writing, summer activities at Thurston High, planning for freshman orientation and the first days of school, and training district staff in the dynamics of post-trauma reactions. The Thurston Assistance Center was established to provide counseling support and information to Springfield students and families affected by the shooting.

The Springfield School District superintendent and the school board members made a commitment to enter this school year with thoughtfulness, planning and training in response to this tragedy. In July, many of us attended a symposium led by Dr. Robert Pynoos, Director of Trauma Psychiatry Services at UCLA. We were privileged to have Dr. Pynoos, who is recognized worldwide as one of the premier experts in the field of trauma, and colleague, Dr. Chris Layne, return to Springfield to work with all district administrators and school board members. Marleen Wong and Roberta Bernstein, of the Los Angeles Unified School District, instructed our teachers and school staffs in post-trauma responses; and Dr. Marlene Young, Executive Director of NOVA, conducted a 3-day crisis response workshop for 50 counselors, psychologists, and mental health workers.

Our approach this year is twofold: we strive to recapture the school's normal activities, and at the same time, we want 100 percent of the students and staff to achieve a healthy recovery. Their re-entry to Thurston High has been carefully planned and supported, beginning with the Memorial Day open house last year. The cafeteria has been painted and brightened in order to minimize the traumatic reminders, yet we know there will be many reminders ahead. We have added counseling services and uniformed police officers to the high school campuses. Plans are being made to assist students and staff during the suspect's trial, which will mark a new and unknown course of events that will challenge us once again. In addition, plans will be made regarding a permanent memorial and the anniversary date of the shooting.

On the first day of school this fall, reporters and media trucks surrounded the school once again as students entered

the campus filled with much excitement and some apprehension. Teachers asked students to be tolerant and patient with one another as they work through a broad range of reactions and reminded them that, while many students are ready to move on, some are not. Twenty of the 22 injured students returned to Thurston High. Some still carry the physical evidence of scars and bullets within them and face lengthy rehabilitation. Some cannot yet return to the cafeteria and fear recurring violence.

The prevailing atmosphere that day, however, was reflected by the words of one senior, "Though we were inevitably affected by tragedy, we are looking forward to what life has to offer us next. We have learned how very precious, yet circumstantial life is. Now, more than ever, our eyes are open wide, our ambitions are high, and we are ready to live."

As a result of this tragedy our community has come together as never be-

fore. We have a long road of healing ahead of us but we are confident that the citizens of Springfield will overcome the events of May 21, 1998.

In her keynote address to over 500 teachers as they returned to school this fall, Marleen Wong, head of District Crisis Teams for the Los Angeles Unified School District noted, "Springfield will never be just any school district. It will be recognized and acknowledged, questioned and criticized, studied and consulted." She challenged us to "work hard to find that balance between mourning the past, treasuring the present, and keeping hope for the future."

That has become our mission.

*Submitted by Cathy Paine, a special services coordinator and crisis response team leader for the Springfield School District, first published in the November 1998 Communique, by the National Association of School Psychologists.*

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## Rising from the ashes: A safety lesson from the past

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The Our Lady of the Angels School fire that occurred in Chicago on December 1, 1958, has been described as an event that had the most significant long-term impact on the enforcement of fire safety codes in schools throughout the United States.

The fire, which claimed the lives of 92 children and 3 nuns, propelled the implementation of fire safety codes, installation of fire sprinklers and a realization that crisis management plans were needed to train school staff and students.

The 1958 fire was the worst school fire in the United States. The fire occurred 18 minutes before the end of the school day. An historical analysis of the fire reveals that many human errors were responsible for the tragedy. It was determined that the fire was set by a student who had been smoking and tossed the burning cigarette into a trash can. An old, two story wooden building, Our Lady of the Angels burned quickly as the fire moved steadily through the corridors of the school. The fire could not be contained; it swept through the building, the full force of it breaking a window, which al-

lowed the flames to spread up through the first floor and eventually to the second, where the most damage to the building and in lives was done.

As the investigation proved, there were many contributors to the spread of the fire. The first major contributor was the inadequacy of fire exits. The National Fire Protection Association found that the exits were inadequate and did not adhere to the 1949 Municipal Code of Chicago. This code stated that all the major features necessary for life safety included enclosures of all stairways in schools. Because the school was built prior to 1949, the codes did not apply to Our Lady of the Angels. The stairways at the school were open and there were also substandard doors present on the second floor, which were blocked during the fire.

The second major contribution to the fire was the interior finish present in the school. The ceilings of the classrooms on the second floor were finished with combustible cellulose fiber acoustical tile. Stairwells, doors and wooden floors were also coated with heavy combustible ma-

terials.

The absence of detection was the third contributor to the fires. Had there been installation of a complete automatic sprinkler system, the fire would have been detected in its conception.

Another factor in the contribution to the fire was the substandard condition of the manual fire alarm system that was present in the school. The alarm sending switches were not readily accessible to most of the students in the building. There were only two alarm switches and these were not distinguishable from the ordinary light switches present.

The last factor was sloppy housekeeping. In the days following the onset of the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School, it was discovered that bundled newspapers and test papers were found among other debris at the base of the stairwell where the fire is believed to have been started. A wooden storage closet containing wooden chairs, screen panels and combustible materials was also located at the base of the stairwell. These items quickly ignited, sending the flames shoot-

ing up towards the second floor where over 365 students were housed in classes.

There were many other contributors to the cause of the fire. Children who attended Our Lady of the Angels School were involved frequent and regular fire drills. The students knew how to line up quickly and quietly when the alarm rang for the drills. But not one child or staff member in the building knew how to exit a burning building.

Students had not been educated as to what to do once they had safely exited the school. For this reason, some of the students who had been rescued went back in the burning building to look for siblings. A few of these children died, never knowing that their siblings were safely exited from the school.

The students on the second floor were told by their teachers to sit in their desks and wait for help. Many of the small students died in their desks, overcome by smoke inhalation. A few dared to try to jump out of the windows. In many of the rooms, the children were too tiny to reach window ledges.

When custodians brought ladders to the second floor to help rescue the children, they found that the ladders were too short. An iron fence in front of the school kept many parents and neighbors from rescuing the children as they dangled from the burning windows. The fire department was given the wrong address, adding to the confusion and chaos that ensued.

In 1958, crisis emergency plans were unheard of. Staff members at the Our Lady of the Angels School were aware of only a few facts of safety. The fire extinguishers were attached to the walls, seven feet off the floor. There was a rule that only the principal of the school could ring the fire alarm and no one in the building had been trained to exit the school by a different route if the one they usually exited was blocked. There was also only one fire escape.

In some of the rooms, quick thinking by the teachers saved many lives. Students were directed to place textbooks and desks by the doors, keeping the smoke back and held off until they were rescued. Two teachers, first discovering the smoke, quickly evacuated their stu-

dents from the building and tried to ring the alarm which they discovered was broken.

A priest and a custodian climbed a ladder and swung children from the window ledge in order to save their lives. Many parents ran through the first floor looking for any stray children. Neighbors took some of the injured and dying children into their homes and administered care to them until they could be taken to the hospital.

When firefighters arrived, there were many scenes of horror awaiting them. Children were hanging from classroom windows, screaming for help. Dense smoke and blackness greeted them as they tried to enter the building. One group of firefighters was able to rescue many boys from the second floor classrooms by grabbing onto their pant belts and swinging them down ladders. Some children had already jumped and some were able to walk away, unharmed, but in shock. Other children lay dying on the cold sidewalk.

The streets were clogged with traffic; some parents had abandoned their cars, running down the city blocks looking for signs of their children. Milk trucks, private cars and newspaper trucks were used to deliver the children to the hospital.

The entire nation responded to this school fire with an urgency that has not been sustained in the response to fires in other types of occupancies. The name of Our Lady of the Angels School became the model for preventive fire programs and instilled the need for emergency crisis teams and plans across the United States. The school fire helped school administrators realize the responsibility they had been entrusted with in seeing that children and staff members were protected from ever being involved in such a disaster again. School leaders were also made aware that when a crisis does occur, their students as well as staff members, need counseling and guidance in order to cope with such a devastating event.

The most important part of any crisis emergency plan is the ownership of the school's staff and students. Each person in the building must be educated to know what his/her own responsibility is in keep-

ing a school safe from disaster. They must also be guided into knowing how to save their own lives.

The following should be included in a crisis management plan concerning training:

- 1) Crisis plans and school safety policies should be consistently revisited with staff members.
- 2) Orientation of new staff members should include a review of the policy.
- 3) Custodians should be trained to consistently enforce safety codes throughout the building.
- 4) PTO (parent-teacher organizations) members, adult volunteers and workmen should be included in training sessions.
- 5) Substitute teachers should be included in the training. Classroom teachers should have safety plans posted for substitute teachers, as well as any visitors to the classroom.
- 6) Parents should be informed about the school's safety policies.

Communication to parents should include the tenets of the emergency plan so that parents can be assured that their students will be provided safety measures and protection should disaster occur in their school. These messages of communication can be given through newsletters, calendars, PTO meetings, school board meetings, parent-teacher conferences and open houses.

Another effective method of communication is the school handbook. Detailing what plans would be made in case of emergency can afford the opportunity for parents to understand the plan and also to communicate to their children what to do in case of disaster.

A vital part of the crisis management plan should be the role of the students in the safety issues. This can be addressed in many different ways. First, students should be educated in the basic components of the safety plans. Training students to react in disaster situations should be an integral part of the school's curriculum. Children need to know how to exit a building in case of disaster and most especially what behavior is expected of them during the evacuation. Children need to be trained to exit a building if their

regular route of exit is blocked or altered in any manner. Students need to be aware of the importance of listening for directions or guidance during a crisis or drill.

Students need to learn to take responsibility for keeping their schools safe. Reporting the presence of a stranger in the building, an open door, or the presence of gas odors or smoke is everyone's responsibility.

In many schools, fire prevention programs such as "Get Fired Up About Fire Safety", "Learn Not To Burn" and "Risk Watch" are implemented into the curriculum. These programs help children understand they can be competent and in control if they are confronted by fires. The goal is that children will learn how to exit a fire safely. The basic fire safety and prevention principles are taught within the curriculum and integrated through language arts, math, science and social studies. The students in lower grades use their skills in counting as they detect fire hazards in a make-believe mansion. Upper grade students are encouraged to create their own safety publication in language arts classes.

In addition, the Illinois Fire Safety Alliance has a program entitled Illinois Juvenile Firesetters Task Force. The Task Force conducts studies and investigations of students who set fire to schools or other buildings. They identify the troubled youngsters and refer them to intervention groups, or to government and local agencies that will help these individuals with their counseling needs.

In a southwestern suburb of Chicago, Homer Junior High School has developed a Crisis Management Plan, which includes curriculum in an extended classroom period, First Class. Themes of responsibility, conflict, safety and other topics are addressed and discussed. The curricu-

lum allows the students a chance to plan and develop their own ideas about issues such as school safety.

Discussions such as learning to behave in nonviolent and nonaggressive ways that will encourage safety in the building are integrated into the lessons. To encourage the theme, students from each homeroom make safety posters for classrooms throughout the building, as well as the cafeteria and gym. Some lessons include a "Bill of Rights for Students" which gives ownership to the seventh and eighth-graders of the responsibility and the right to protect themselves and their peers from danger.

Every emergency plan for schools should include the communication and cooperation of the local authorities, such as police and fire departments. Administrators should regularly communicate with these agencies to afford the best possible solutions to crisis events.

The tragedy of the fire on December 1, 1958, brought devastation and despair to the city of Chicago. But, as with other tragedies, it brought the recognition and the need for schools to develop safety plans and to revisit safety codes so that schoolchildren everywhere will be protected from such disasters.

#### Endnotes

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