

Crisis plans for schools

By Bill Wilcox

Before you begin

Review the written crisis plan for your school. Determine the strengths and weaknesses of your school's safety procedures and your crisis plan. Call a meeting of administrative staff to discuss your school's safety/crisis plan.



Introduction

Webster's Dictionary defines a crisis as "a crucial or decisive point or situation." So, would a school ever find itself in a crisis? The answer is a resounding yes. Because a crisis can happen at any school at any time, you need to examine the plan you have in place to deal with any potential crisis situation. Schools across Ohio are familiar with the concept of a crisis plan. But are you ready to use yours if the need arises?

Discussion

Ohio law says "the board of education of each city, exempted village and local school district shall adopt a comprehensive school safety plan for each building under the board's control." The law also requires any plan to include:

- A protocol for addressing serious threats to the safety of school property, students, employees or administrators, and;
- A protocol for responding to any emergency that compromises the safety of school property, students, employees or administrators.

Each protocol must include appropriate procedures approved by the board for responding to threats and emergency events. This includes notification of appropriate law enforcement personnel, calling specific emergency response personnel for assistance and informing the parents of affected students.

Ohio House Bill 422 (HB 422), commonly known as the "safety drill" bill, took effect two years ago. It requires "school safety plans to be updated every three years or whenever a major modification to the school building necessitates changes in the plan's procedures." Additionally, the legislation requires the principal or director of any school or preschool (both public and private) to conduct a school safety drill once each school year. The drill must instruct students of the procedures they will follow should the school need to secure them in the building rather than evacuate them.

Many schools had crisis plans in place. However, just as many had never used them in an actual crisis and, therefore, could not predict how the plan would work in a real-life emergency. HB 422 requires, at the very least, that schools conduct a crisis plan drill once every school year. Much like a fire or tornado drill, a crisis plan drill helps administrators, teachers and students become familiar with the proper procedures to take in the event of an actual emergency. Ohio's public schools must conduct an annual safety drill by Dec. 1 of each school year.

So, what should you include in your plan? Unfortunately schools must be prepared to take on a host of potential problems, including:

- Medical crises (e.g., food poisoning, drug overdose, homicide, etc.);
- Facilities emergency (e.g., fire, bomb threats, etc.);
- Student crises (unauthorized removal of a student, runaway situation, etc.).

Remember, each of the potential problems mentioned above requires a unique approach and response from the school and its personnel. The first priority of any plan should be to protect the health and well-being of students, faculty and staff. A district-wide crisis plan is vital and necessary. However, each school in the district should have an individualized plan that considers its unique conditions and characteristics.

Any plan should also designate school personnel into various roles in the event of a crisis, including:

- School incident commander;
- Liaison officer;
- Media officer;
- Safety officer;
- Operations officer;
- Logistics officer;
- Scribe team leader;
- Medical disaster response team leader;
- Student care team leader;
- Student accountability coordinator.

The plan should include the correct spelling of each person's name and his or her location in the building. Also, include work and personal phone numbers.

Group activity

Have the group review and discuss the key aspects of your school's safety/crisis plan. Discuss areas of weakness considering potential emergency situations mentioned above. List potential areas for improvement and discuss ways to expand or update your crisis plan.

Conclusion

It is almost impossible for a school's safety/crisis plan to cover every potential crisis. However, periodically assessing your school's changing needs will keep your plan current and relevant. Remember, state law requires schools to update their written crisis plan at least every three years.

Don't delay, because a crisis can happen at any moment. Good intentions won't help you in a real-life emergency. Having a tested safety/crisis plan is the best way to prepare for the worst scenarios.

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