

Emergency Management Concerns for First Responders at Public Schools

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Abstract

Emergency management professionals at the local, state, and federal levels of government have been augmented through the use of nonprofit organizations, private organizations, and organized and unorganized volunteers to assist with planning, response, and recovery efforts in preparation for resolving school violence and related emergencies. The first responder, which includes police, fire, EMS, and public health professionals is America's first line of defense during emergency events, and have become a critical component when responding to school emergency situations. Over the years, many emergency preparedness plans have been developed in response to cold war issues, however, over time have evolved to include responding to school emergencies. Emergency planners must address preparedness, collaboration, information sharing, response, and recovery issues that satisfy the safety and security of our communities and nation. However, it is vital to remember that even well designed emergency plans will not always encompass everything that might be required during an emergency. Officials must embrace the inherent challenges through continual preparedness and preparation through remaining adaptable, innovative, and, when necessary, improvisational (Waugh, 2004, p. 4).

Introduction

The beginning of the 21st. Century has been plagued with many disasters and emergencies which has had devastating and horrific effects not only on the world, but the United States, it's citizenry, communities, and also those that respond to these dangerous events. These events have also demonstrated the critical need for recognizing that all jurisdictions must prepare and coordinate for emergency situations within our local schools. Through effective coordination efforts, local responders can achieve success in their emergency operations. Today, local police, firefighters, and emergency medical service technicians have become heavily relied upon to combat school tragedies. In addition, nurses, physicians, private and public institutions, and individual citizens alike also have a great responsibility to provide and assist with supporting in the first line of defense of our local schools. There are many coordination challenges that affect the readiness level of our communities which include preparedness, collaboration, information sharing, response, and recovery from an event. Some of the major events that our communities must plan and be prepared for are natural disasters, local and wide spread emergencies, civil disturbances, and of course against terrorist attacks involving biological, chemical, radiological weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and school emergencies (Dudley, 2003, p.244).

These events are ever evolving and rapidly changing, and it is therefore vital that all sectors and levels of the government accept responsibility and participate in developing realistic plans to assist when disastrous events and emergencies occur.

Today, many of the activities and objectives of local, state, and federal emergency management agencies in the United States are based upon a "comprehensive emergency management model". This model divides the emergency management function into four distinct phases (DeLisi, 2002, p. 10).

1. Mitigation – Assesses the risk posed by a hazard or potential disaster and attempts to reduce the risk.
2. Preparedness - Develops a response plan based upon risk assessment, training response, personnel, arranging for necessary resources, making arrangements with other jurisdictions for sharing of resources, and clarifying jurisdictional responsibilities.
3. Response - Implement plans, reduce the potential for secondary damage, and preparing for a recovery phase.
4. Recovery - Reestablishing life support systems, such as repairing electrical power networks and providing temporary housing, food, and clothing.

This four-phase model was designed by The National Governors' Association study in the late 1970's (DeLisi, 2002, p. 11) and provides much of the current conceptual language in the emergency management field, and can be used as a comprehensive framework to prepare for, respond to, and recover from violent situations at schools.

History

Violence in the United States has reached epidemic proportions, which has unfortunately spilled over into the schools. Nationally, violence in the schools is a major safety issue that must be approached from both a short-term and a long-term perspective, which incorporates prevention as well as intervention strategies (Vail, 1998, p. 23). These concerns for school safety has led to the development of new laws governing safety and security in the schools, better policies and procedures for recognizing potential violence, and response efforts to protect against violent activities. Many school districts have also included the adoption of zero-tolerance approaches, conducting targeted and random searches of students and their property, utilization of metal detectors, and preventing violence through education, in addition to the implementation of critical incident management strategies.

According to The Department of Education, violence in and around schools have become more common and more serious. About three million crimes are committed each year in public schools. Also, from the years 1992 - 1994, 105 students and 12 teachers died violently at schools or during school related activities. In addition, eighty percent of these deaths were homicides; guns were used in 77% of the cases. The remaining deaths were suicides. Furthermore, school violence, which is often associated with impoverished inner-city schools, has moved to suburban and rural schools (Trump, 2006).

According to a national survey by the Department of Education, 12% of public school students reported carrying weapons to school, 28% indicated that they don't feel safe while at school, and 11% reported that they stayed home from school or cut classes because of the fear of violence (Department of Education, 1996).

In addition, the survey also revealed that 82% of the school districts reported an increase in violence over the past 5 years, 60% reported weapons incidents, and 75% reported having to deal with violent student-on-student attacks. In 1997, A Gallup Poll conducted a survey of the attitudes toward public schools revealed that fights, violence, and gangs ranked with lack of discipline as the most significant problems facing America's schools (Gallup, 1998). The same poll revealed that, nationally, 36% of parents reported concerns about the safety of their children while they were at school.

School violence is conceptualized as a multifaceted construct that involves both criminal acts and aggression in schools, which ultimately inhibits the development and learning process. However, there is growing awareness by school administrators that violence and major emergencies can occur at their school, and nationally, efforts are being made to effectively deal with these situations with assistance from local responders, such as the police. In addition, Bender & McLaughlin (1997) assert that responding to a school violence incident requires a systemic, comprehensive, and collaborative approach that should incorporate prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies. It has been argued that school violence is composed of the perpetration of violence, violence victimization, antisocial behavior, criminal behavior, fear/worry beliefs, and discipline/school climate, among other aspects (Bender & McLaughlin, 1997, p. 67).

Background

Every day in the United States, emergency responders answer calls for assistance that places them in harm's way. Typically, the emergency response community consists of the local law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical services.

In the United States, there are approximately 600,000 law enforcement officers, 1,100,000 firefighters, and 500,000 emergency medical service responders. Properly trained and equipped first responders have the greatest potential to save lives and limit casualties after a terrorist attack (Pelfrey, 2005, p. 23). Currently, capabilities for responding to an act of violence at a school vary widely across the country.

Unfortunately, many jurisdictions still have little or no capability to respond to an act of school violence. According to Rudman, Clarke, and Metzl, even though training and equipment has greatly improved for responders, there are still many challenges. For example, the average fire department in the United States only has enough radios to equip half of the firefighters on an assigned shift, and only ten percent of the fire departments have the personnel and equipment to effectively respond to a building collapse (Rudman, Clarke, and Metzl, 2003, p. 18).

It is apparent that most communities have limited resources and financing to properly and adequately equip their emergency responders. Even the best prepared communities experience difficulties when planning and responding to these events because of inadequate resources when responding to the full range of emergencies. While “emergency management is the quintessential government role” (Waugh, 2000, p. 3), public administrators have been slow to address the organizational and policy issues that define the role and the practice of emergency management.

Today, research is still relatively minimal in comparison to research in other social science disciplines. However, because of the constant threat of violence and school emergencies research and development are gradually improving.

Waugh asserts that the number of public administration researchers involved in disaster policy and emergency management programs have been slow to develop courses and curricula, but that gap is also closing as research funding increases and as colleges and universities develop research programs and centers focused on emergency management, homeland security, and related policy issues (Waugh, 2000, p. 8).

As a first responder and training coordinator in Ohio, the focus of this paper is to examine the current trends and explore new and improved methods of coordination, collaboration, and cooperation when responding to school emergencies. I intend to examine points of interest and school administrator concerns when dealing with responders. It is essential that responders be prepared to plan and handle critical incidents, including those they may have never seen before.

Issues

Emergency response situations result in extensive negative economic and social consequences for the populations they affect. While emergencies vary in scale, they all threaten the general welfare of a given populace. It is therefore necessary that government and private intervention is established in order to minimize the negative consequences of an event. As Schneider asserts, "When a natural disaster occurs, few people stop to ask whether the government should intervene" (Schneider, 1995, p. 9).

Instead, citizens tend to automatically view the situation as a serious public problem requiring immediate governmental action (Schneider, 1995, p. 9). In the United States, government involvement in emergency management has evolved through time into a complex policy subsystem.

Emergency management presents a formidable challenge for all levels of governments because of the extraordinary demands these events impose on the decision-making and service-delivery systems of the communities they affect (Donahue & Joyce, 2001, p. 25). Emergencies and disasters exceed the capacity of the governments whose jurisdiction they adversely affect. For example, prior to the Columbine school shooting incident, many communities were not communicating or preparing for these situations, and were ill-prepared when dealing with a real life situation.

It is important to remember that tragic events show no prejudice and occur in all neighborhoods and communities, and a lack of coordination and communication among entities will likely result in community and organizational disaster (Schneider, 1995, p. 9). Communities where schools have an established emergency management plan when responding to acts of violence and emergencies will generally work cohesively with other jurisdictions and entities, and are found to have a more efficient organizational structure (Sheaffer & Mano, 2003, p. 55).

Plan of Action

Many school administrators are providing local police with floor plans of schools and other important information that would be needed in a crisis situation. With the assistance of the local responders, schools have devised and clarified staff responsibilities during a crisis. Generally, school personnel must be prepared for four groups of people to arrive at the school during and after a school crisis: public safety (police, fire, and medical personnel), additional school personnel, parents, and the media.

Planning and preparation is essential in order to effectively manage these groups of people, and to attend to the emotional and physical needs of the staff and students.

School administrators and local police should devise, implement, and regularly review a strategic operating plan which effectively addresses critical incidents at schools.

Bender, Mclauchlin, and Shubert (2002) assert that officials must focus on decreasing school violence and emergencies through both qualitative and quantitative research measures. They identified several factors that are key research strategies to reduce violent acts: (a) the many complex precursors of violent-aggressive behavior occurring at school, (b) how to prevent it, and (c) how to reduce its impact when it does occur. Please find listed below a possible operating plan that can be developed by the school and first responder which addresses how the school can be prepared to handle acts of violence and major emergency situations. This plan encompasses how a well prepared school can operate and share plans and procedures with first responders. A school administrator and selected staff should coordinate and work collaboratively with command staff from their jurisdictions public safety forces to organize strategies for a successful resolution: An emergency bag should be kept in the main office containing the following items to be used in a crisis situation/evacuation.

- Orange vests / Orange badges
- Student emergency cards
- Class lists
- Emergency parent phone chain
- Bus assignments
- Yearbook
- Staff emergency cards
- County emergency management plan
- Detailed map of school (must note the locations of all phones, mechanical systems, and numbered exits)
- List of school / district phone numbers
- Flashlights with batteries
- Note pads, pens, etc.
- First aid kits and student medication (inhalers, epi pens, seizure meds)
- Bloodborne pathogens kit

- Bullhorn
- List of students requiring special assistance
- Walkie talkie / cell phones / charges

Adults must remember to:

- Remain calm, especially in front of children
- Take and re-take attendance often
- Keep students as quiet as possible at all times
- Always wait for directions from a crisis management team member or police / fire department member
- Do not give out any information unless directed by a principal
- Use common sense

Assigned Roles

Student Accountant

A student accountant is needed to coordinate efforts to account for students as they are released to their parent / guardian or placed on buses. They also account for missing or extra students, and work with the transportation department to develop a system for the release and recording of students. The student accountant should also communicate with the faculty on the importance of current rosters and of keep rosters with them during a crisis.

Transportation Coordinator

In the event of a bus evacuation, a transportation coordinator must plan for, and coordinate for the arrival of buses and the loading and unloading of students should be the responsibility of the transportation coordinator.

The coordinator must make sure that students are placed onto the proper bus, establish a secondary bus staging area if the first is not workable in a crisis, keep updated bus rosters and work with the transportation department to plan bus routes to the staging area.

The coordinator should take into consideration the students that walk to / from school and staff transportation. In the event of a student is released to a parent / guardian, they must work with the student accountant to plan for student pick up and release.

Evacuation Coordinator

The evacuation coordinator should work with the county emergency management services department in order to plan an on site evacuation site and an off site evacuation location, plan and monitor the movement of the students to the locations and also assist with accounting of students during an incident, plan for evacuation routes, and to safely move special needs students.

Police and Fire Liaison

A police and fire liaison must provide information about what happened, the plans the school has implemented, and continues contact throughout the incident.

Information Coordinator

An information coordinator should draft written parent information, make sure the media does not gain access to the students or faculty during the incident, provides information to staff during a crisis, reports to the command post for updates and / or assignments.

Incident Recorder

The incident recorder should update school offices about the event, needed resources, confirms that 911 or emergency services have been called, keeps a detailed record of events during the crisis, decisions, and actions, including time annotation, insures critical tasks have taken place and helps incident supervisor to track all activities.

School Site Security

Should create a check system to make sure that the school is secure.

Personnel Coordinator

Should keep a roster of assignments and manpower needs.

Counseling Coordinator

Should organize counseling to help students, staff, and parents to deal with the incident, and also identify available resources within the school system to help with this task.

Special Needs Coordinator

Should be responsible to find out and must be aware of the students / staff who may need special assistance during an evacuation, etc. of students / staff with special needs.

Medical Needs Coordinator

Should find out what medications that students or staff may need in a crisis situation, lockdown, etc. Must also develop a plan to get the medications available from the clinic, and track administration of medications.

Emergency Procedures if National Terror Alert is Escalated to Red

In the event that a school is already in session when a “RED ALERT” has been issued, school will stay in session until 3:25. Because of the uncertainty of the “RED ALERT”, we are permitting parents / guardians to come to school and get their child(ren) throughout the day. The following are the procedures for signing a student out during a “RED ALERT” day:

- Enter only through the main school entrance by the office
- You must show a photo ID before entering the building
- Sign child(ren) out in the school office
- Students will be called to the office and released directly to parent / guardian
- Leave immediately through the main entrance
- No one will be permitted past the office

Evacuation On Site

Announcement must be made: “Staff, evacuate building immediately to the far soccer field”.

- If classes are on the playground / campus, walkie talkies should be used as well as bullhorns to communicate the need for on-site evacuation. Those classroom teachers must join their classes as quickly as possible
- If classes are in the lunch room, the secretary must notify lunch aides to proceed with the students to the far soccer fields as their teachers join them quickly
- All classes must exit the building immediately. Teachers must take class list, emergency cards, and note any students out of the class at that time (i.e. with special teacher, absent, etc.)

- All staff members with a designated role (or an alternate for a role) report to the main office for materials and direction
- All classroom teachers must convene their classes at the far soccer field, take attendance and remain with their students until further directions are given from a crisis team member
- Crisis team members assemble in office for directions, materials, and to assume role responsibilities

Evacuation for Off Site / In District

Announcement must be made: “We are evacuating the building, teachers bring your classes down through the bus dismissal procedure”.

- All classroom teachers must bring their classes to the gym doors and board buses
- The secretary must check off each class as they board a bus, so that it is noted when all classes have left the building
- If students are at recess, classroom teachers will meet students on the playground and students will be directed by use of the bullhorn to locate their classroom teacher and form a line by him /her. Teachers will then lead their classes to the bus lane to board buses

- If students are at lunch, classroom teachers will meet students in the cafeteria and students will be directed by use of the bullhorn to locate their classroom teacher and form a line by him / her. Teachers will then lead their classes to the bus lane to board buses
- Teachers, if in their classrooms are to take a class list and emergency medical cards with them. If they are not in their classroom, they are NOT to return to get these materials. They will be provided an extra copy that is kept in the office emergency medical kit
- Crisis team members must assemble in the office to review plans briefly

Evacuation Off Site / Out off District

Announcement must be made: “We are evacuating the building, teachers bring your classes down through the bus dismissal procedure”.

- All classroom teachers must bring their classes to the gym doors and board buses
- The secretary must check off each class as they board a bus, so that it is noted when all classes have left the building

- If students are at recess, classroom teachers will meet students on the playground and students will be directed by use of the bullhorn to locate their classroom teacher and form a line by him /her. Teachers will then lead their classes to the bus lane to board buses
- If students are at lunch, classroom teachers will meet students in the cafeteria and students will be directed by use of the bullhorn to locate their classroom teacher and form a line by him / her. Teachers will then lead their classes to the bus lane to board buses
- Teachers, if in their classrooms are to take a class list and emergency medical cards with them. If they are not in their classroom, they are NOT to return to get these materials. They will be provided an extra copy that is kept in the office emergency medical kit
- Crisis team members must assemble in the office to review plans briefly. A designated crisis team member is to take the emergency kit on the bus to a pre-determined area
- Arriving at the pre-determined area, teachers are to take their classes to the main office area. Teachers are to have all students seated and teachers are to remain standing for visibility and to hear / see further directions
- Crisis team members are to assemble at the pre-determined area in the main office for further directions, materials and to assume role responsibilities

Lockdown

Announcement is made: “Move to lockdown positions”

- All classroom doors are shut and locked. NO EXCEPTIONS. Lights must remain on in the rooms so that police outside of the building are able to see in the windows and identify where students are located
- If able, teacher should post “Call 911” sign window
- If able, teacher should call 911
- All students should move to a pre-designated area in the classroom. Students and teacher should remain low to the ground, away from doors but in view of windows to signal police of your location
- Second floor classes should hang some sort of flag or signal item out of a window to let police know where students are
- Any student located in the hallway at the time of the lockdown should proceed directly to the nearest classroom
- Students in the lunchroom should immediately go under a cafeteria table, seated on the floor and remain silent until teacher directions are given. Lunch aides shut-lock doors to cafeteria
- Playground aides will be notified via walkie talkie and / or bullhorn to move immediately into building for lockdown procedures.

- If on the back playground, students should move into the gymnasium for lockdown. If on front playground, students should move into library for lockdown
- All students and staff must remain in lockdown position until the principal announces over the P.A. system or bullhorn that the lockdown is over and gives directions to resume class or move to dismissal procedures

Emergency Dismissal From School: by bus

- If it is determined that we need to dismiss due to emergency and we are only dismissing to cars (no buses), the announcement will be made “We are dismissing all students to buses, please bring your class to the gym doors when your grade level is called”
- The list of bus assignments for all students will be pulled from the emergency kit and used to determine bus assignments for those students that usually get picked up or have after school activities
- Each grade level will bring their classes to the gym doors when called. Teachers will assist with loading buses

The Role of the Parent

- Keep updated emergency information cards at the school
- Be sure to have listed family, neighbors, friends, etc. with whom your child(ren) may go home with
- Send in extra medicine that is vital for your child's health (inhalers, epi pen, seizure meds, etc.) to be kept in the emergency kit in the office used when evacuating the building
- Be sure that your name and phone number(s) are on your child's class emergency phone chain
- Wait to receive information from the phone chain so you know exactly what the school is doing

Emergency Procedures if National Terror Alert is Escalated to "RED"

In the event that school is already in session when a "RED ALERT" has been issued, school will stay in session until 3:15. Because of the uncertainty of the "RED ALERT", we are permitting parents / guardian to get their child(ren) throughout the day. The following are procedures for signing a student out during a "RED ALERT" day.

- Enter only through the main entrance by the office
- You must show photo ID before entering the building
- Sign your child(ren) out in the school office

- Students will be called to the office and released to you
- Leave through the main entrance
- No one will be permitted past the office

In the event of a lockdown **Do not come to school.** The police will have blocked off all entrances to the school until the situation is under control. When the lockdown is over, you will be notified by the phone chain and directed to either come pick up your child(ren) or wait for them to be delivered to you by bus.

In the event of an evacuation on site **Do not come to school.** The police will have blocked off all entrances to the school until the situation is under control. When the lockdown is over, you will be notified by the phone chain and directed to either come pick up your child(ren) or wait for them to be delivered to you by bus. However, if you are able to come get your child, follow the emergency dismissal procedure described herein.

In the event of an evacuation off site the Family Life Center **At all times we will do everything possible to return all students to their homes (or designated place) by bus.** Wait for the message from the phone chain and directed to either come pick up your child(ren). Staff members and police officers will be guiding the flow of traffic, please be respectful and calm.

General Safety Plan

1. Safety Drills (fire, tornado, lockdown, etc) will be implemented on a regular basis and coordinated with the school, police and fire departments.
 - Procedures should be reviewed annually
 - Informational signs should be posted in each classroom and public area of the facility
 - Safety drills will be scheduled for the entire school year and unannounced
2. Code and procedure to be established for immediate evacuation of building (Bomb Threat).
 - In the event of a bomb threat to the building, the following announcement will be made over the Public Address system: “At this time we are having a major fire drill. Please proceed to your designated areas”
 - The homeside of the football stadium is the designated area for students
 - The transportation department will be notified and put on alert for possible transportation of students
3. Procedure to be established for staff members and students to remain in classes (dangerous situation, hostage gunman, etc).

- In the event of a dangerous situation requiring students and staff to seek immediate safe shelter, the following announcement will be made over the Public Address system: “All staff members should proceed with lockdown procedures at this time – please wait for further instruction” (Announcement should be repeated)
- Staff members are to quickly get students to the nearest safe location and lock all doors. They are to stay away from large areas such as the gym or cafeteria and also stay away from doors and windows
- Students and staff must remain absolutely quiet and out of sight
- Students and staff must remain in the safe location until notice is given via the Public Address system or authorized personnel locate them

4. Each outside exit should be numbered

- Each entrance/ exit will be numbered on a map
- Exterior signs of numbers will be posted at each entrance / exit coinciding with the map

5. Exterior keys / Coded system

- Issuing of exterior keys will be limited and only upon approval from the building principal
- Documentation of all issued keys will be kept by the head custodian
- Once the coded system is complete, the building principal will issue the codes (rather than exterior keys) to personnel on a temporary basis upon request
- Documentation will be maintained

6. All doors to remain locked throughout the student day, with exception of the main office door (others on an as-needed basis)

- The doors at the main entrance (west side) will remain open throughout the school day

7. Visitor required to sign in, and obtain visitor badges

- All exterior doors are to have a welcome sign and notice requiring visitors to report directly to the main office
- Visitors must sign in and obtain a visitors badge

8. Communication

- Two – way radios will be utilized by the building principal, custodians, secretaries, and aides
- The two – way radios will be utilized during bus times, sporting events, field trips, etc. for supervision and security reasons

9. Security cameras

- Security cameras should be installed on all four corners of the building and parking lot

Conclusion

A major crisis significantly impacts communities, businesses, and certainly our school systems. In order to reduce the loss of life and property, school systems must strive to protect the children and staff while school is in session from crisis, violence, and emergencies. While the emergency management function has been typically performed by governmental entities, school administrators now have to engage broader ideas about managing emergencies with their schools.

It is imperative to understand that crisis and emergency management is constantly evolving, and incorporating lessons learned from past experiences, and working collaboratively and collectively with various entities will provide for a rational and logical approach to successfully resolving school crisis and emergencies. Emergency managers and school administrators must continue to develop organizational performance by challenging policy assumptions, developing good performance measures, and evaluating results in an unbiased manner (Pelfrey, 2005, p. 55). Even though school safety challenges still exist within the emergency management field, there has been great progress in developing new and forward thinking that will allow our schools to thrive.

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