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About the cover:

Police and school security officers have become an integral part of many schools. Here Chicago policeman Howard Kilroy is surrounded by children outside Kosciuszko Elementary School. Photo copyright © 1989, the Times Mirror Company.

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BY SCOTT POLAND AND GAYLE PITCHER

One Houston school district has implemented surprise drills to help staff and students cope with a crisis situation on campus.

Expect the unexpected

In rural Cummings, Georgia, located 30 miles northeast of Atlanta, the 1990-91 school year began with a 17-year-old student terrorizing teachers and holding classmates at gunpoint for several hours on September 6. Fortunately, the hostage situation was resolved with no injuries, although shots were fired before the student surrendered to police.

News stories such as this one have become more frequent in recent years as many schools throughout the country have faced a variety of crisis situations. Even if a major crisis never occurs on campus, statistics show that all schools must deal with incidents of crime and violence:

- Nearly 3 million criminal incidents occur each year on our nation's

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school campuses.

- Approximately 282,000 students are attacked in schools each month.
- Attacks on teachers have increased 50 percent during the past two decades.
- Ten children are killed every day by handgun suicides, homicides or accidents.
- Youth homicide has doubled in the last 20 years.
- An estimated 100,000 children carry a gun to school each day.

Preparing for a crisis

Firsthand accounts from school administrators who have dealt with a crisis appear to share several common themes. Emerging from their experiences are statements such as: "We never thought that it would happen to us"; "We were not prepared"; and "No two crisis situations are alike."

Administrators who have experienced a crisis have given the following advice to others:

- Prepare for a crisis ahead of time.
- Form a crisis team.
- Clarify the chain of command.
- Have a good communication system.
- One administrator can't handle the crisis alone.

The conclusions of those who have experienced a serious crisis need to be examined by all school administrators. The crisis intervention model developed

in mental health provides a good theoretical basis for organizing crisis intervention efforts in public schools. Specifically, it outlines three levels of crisis intervention:

- *Primary prevention* activities help prevent a crisis from occurring. An example would be a gun safety program emphasizing the prevention of accidental shootings and the importance of not bringing a gun to school.
- *Secondary intervention* activities provide a quick response to stop a crisis from escalating. An example would be conducting crisis drills that remove students from a potentially dangerous situation.
- *Tertiary prevention* activities give assistance to those who have experienced a crisis to minimize long-term debilitating psychological effects.

Schools need to direct their efforts at all three levels of crisis intervention. In particular, much more emphasis needs to be placed on primary and secondary prevention efforts. This article will emphasize the importance of conducting crisis drills, which are an example of secondary intervention.

Forming crisis teams

As with most educators, our knowledge of crisis intervention was very limited. However, our large Houston school district had experienced a number of

crisis situations, the most severe of which were two separate school shootings. One incident involved a fourth-grade student who was shot while raising the flag in front of an elementary school, and the second situation involved a high school assistant principal who was shot in a crowded cafeteria. Fortunately, both victims recovered.

Following the second incident, our department — the Department of Psychological Services — began working with the deputy superintendent to develop and implement a district crisis intervention program. We interviewed many principals and department heads, then decided to form crisis teams for individual school sites.

Each school system must look at its own resources in deciding how to organize crisis teams. Options include:

- An in-building crisis team, i.e., a crisis team for each school site.
- A team consisting of a combination of in-building and central office or itinerant personnel.
- A team composed of district personnel and non-district personnel, such as police, mental health professionals, etc.

In our program, the principal serves as the crisis coordinator and media spokesperson as well as directing the six members of the crisis team, who are called liaisons. All members of the team are trained by the Department of Psychological Services. The liaisons are selected to handle the following concerns:

- counseling;
- law enforcement;
- students;
- campus site;
- medical; and
- parents.

Each liaison receives six hours of training that emphasize the three levels of crisis intervention. The role of our department is to provide a framework for organizing crisis intervention efforts. Priority is placed on the ideas that the

individual school crisis teams generate. They know their campus, neighborhood, students, etc., and are in the best position to anticipate and plan for a crisis to prevent or minimize its effects.

After all our liaisons were trained and crisis procedures were written, we felt, on paper, that we had an excellent crisis intervention program. However, crisis intervention activities did not seem to have become a regular part of school operations in the district. Meetings of the crisis teams did not seem to be occurring at the individual school sites. Also, no official provisions were outlined for replacing a liaison who left the district, retired or transferred to another school.

Conducting crisis drills

To alleviate some of these fears and to test our theoretical models, we needed a way to make the crisis intervention program come alive. We decided to conduct surprise crisis drills. It was very important that these drills not threaten the rapport we had developed with the principals or interrupt the educational process of the selected schools. The location of the hypothetical crises was by design outside of the classroom to minimize disruption.

The purpose of the drills was to ensure readiness in a crisis and to provide a learning experience for everyone involved. We determined not to "grade" the participants or to make the drills any type of competition between the schools selected. All principals in the district were told the following:

- Two to four surprise crisis drills would be conducted during the next month.
- Central office staff would be on hand to act out the crisis.
- Principals would receive both verbal and written feedback on their team's response, with emphasis on evidence of prior preparation and teamwork.

Writing scenarios for the crisis drills was not difficult. We simply looked through newspaper clippings of crisis

events. The scenarios for the first two crisis drills appear below:

- *Secondary school* — A female student has been shot in the foot when a pistol she was carrying in her purse discharged. The incident occurred in front of the school by the flagpole with other students nearby. Your first notification of the incident is when several hysterical students rush into the office. The student has a younger brother who attends the same school. The superintendent's secretary will role play the victim's mother; please call her
- *Elementary school* — A group of unsupervised boys were playing near a high-voltage tower on the playground. One boy received a severe electrical shock. Your notification of the incident is when several hysterical students rush into the office. It is reported that several students became so frightened that they left the school grounds. The injured boy has younger siblings at the school and an older brother in junior high school. The superintendent's secretary will role play the victim's mother; please notify her.

The elementary and secondary schools were given their respective scenarios with the following identified task: Please respond to this incident following the district crisis intervention procedures. District personnel are on the scene to role play and ask questions. This is a *practice drill* and the appropriate district personnel should be alerted, however, it is *not necessary* to notify agencies outside the district.

A crisis visitation team composed of central office administrators was present to role play the crisis. The involvement of top administrators in this activity gave principals the message that it was important. Crisis visitation team members were assigned these specific roles to play:

- victim;
- bereaved classmate;
- father of the victim;

- law enforcement personnel;
- media representative; and
- angry citizen.

Evaluating the outcome

The crisis visitation team members were told that the purpose of the drill was to assess the ability of the individual school to respond to a simulated crisis and to give each school feedback to enable them to be better prepared in the event of a real crisis. A list of questions was provided for each role played by crisis visitation team members. The questions for the media representative and bereaved classmate appear below:

Media representative

- Who meets you?
- Who are you allowed to talk to?
- Who is the building spokesperson?
- Are you allowed access to the entire campus?
- Are you allowed to photograph or interview students?

Bereaved classmate

- Who is available to comfort you?
- Are you unsure whether to remain at school or go home?
- Will the school be safe and normal tomorrow?
- You have other friends who are upset. Who could talk to your friends or to your class?
- Is your friend going to be all right?
- How can you help your friend?
- How could this have happened?

The deputy superintendent accompanied the crisis visitation team. He delivered the notification of the crisis and documented the overall response through the following questions:

- Who was identified to go to the scene? Was this a reasonable choice of personnel?
- Was the building crisis team called in?
- Were the superintendent and the public information director notified? If so, by whom?
- What plans were stated to restore order and direct students? By whom?

- What plans were stated to contact the parents of the injured? By whom?
- What plans were stated to call the local police? By whom?
- What plans were stated to call the director of security? By whom?
- What plans were stated to notify the victim's sibling(s)? By whom?
- What plans were stated to communicate to the faculty what happened? By whom?
- What plans were made to follow up on the medical condition of the injured student? By whom?
- What plans were made to follow up at school with those most affected? By whom?
- Was the entire crisis team involved in handling the incident?
- Was teamwork emphasized?
- Was it evident that the crisis team had given prior thought to their respective duties?

The first two crisis drills were filmed and the videotape was shown at the next principals' meeting. The response of both the elementary and secondary school were very thorough and demonstrated much prior planning.

Staying prepared

A number of surprise drills were conducted during the next two school years, both at school sites and at the district's central office. Scenarios dealt with incidents such as a teacher having a heart attack, a near drowning and an automobile accident. The crisis visitation team had a sign made up that said, "Crisis Drill in Progress." This helped the public understand what was happening. The crisis drills were publicized in the district newsletter sent to all parents. Additionally, parents were notified each time a crisis drill occurred. The following is an example of a note sent home to parents on the day of one of the crisis drills:

It is our responsibility to have children prepared for any type of emergency. We have two fire drills a month and an occasional weather

drill. Our district recognizes that there are other types of emergencies that can occur in our society today. We must also prepare students for these situations.

Today, we had a drill that simulated an angry stranger entering the building and confronting our school psychologist. The drill gave us the opportunity to practice removing children from a potentially dangerous situation. The students responded very well.

The drill also reinforces the importance of all visitors signing in and obtaining a visitor's pass before proceeding on campus. Please cooperate with us in helping to ensure the safety of our children.

Please call if you have any questions regarding today's drill.

The drills heightened everyone's awareness of crisis intervention. The crisis intervention program came alive and school personnel started thinking and planning. It has been very exciting to see school personnel come up with ideas and share them throughout the district. A few of the ideas that were initiated include:

- Develop guidelines for dealing with the media.
- Create a crisis box with needed supplies if a school has to be evacuated.
- Find shelter in nearby businesses and churches for students and staff who evacuate a school.
- Locate parents who live near the school and who are at home and can assist in a crisis.
- Improve intercom and emergency communication procedures within the school.
- Establish emergency medical teams at every school to assist the team's medical liaison.
- Teach CPR and first aid courses on every campus.
- Use the district computer system to communicate between schools.
- Provide every principal with a phone that ensures an outside line at all times.

- Develop a tip sheet for all employees to assist them in a crisis.
- Provide crisis intervention training to all bus drivers.

The crisis intervention program in the district continues to evolve and, hopefully, will add new components to ensure the safety of our students. Additionally, principals have asked that they be allowed either to conduct their own crisis drill or to write up how they actually handled a crisis. The obvious advantage in this approach is that crisis drills can occur in all 37 schools rather than in the four or five schools that the crisis visitation team selects each year. The principals send a summary of their drill or their actual crisis to the Department of Psychological Services for feedback. The department records all summaries and ensures that every school documents their handling of a drill or an actual crisis each school year. The principals also asked that a crisis checklist be developed to guide their actions. (See checklist on this page.)

This procedure has been followed for two years with 100 percent compliance. Numerous actual crisis events have occurred and have been examined in terms of what could have been done to prevent the crisis or to have managed it better. Hypothetical crisis situations have dealt with natural disasters, sniper attacks, chemical explosions and intruders in the school.

Crisis drills need to become a regular part of school operations. Administrators need not fear that the public will criticize them for conducting drills. We have not had one complaint from anyone — parents, staff or students — about our crisis drills. Having drills can save lives. This point was emphasized by Patricia Busher, principal of Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California, where five children were killed and 29 others were wounded by a sniper on January 17, 1989. Busher stressed that previous drills had improved the children's response to the directives of adults and saved lives.

Crisis intervention checklist

- The crisis coordinator (principal) becomes aware of the crisis and notifies the crisis liaisons.
- The crisis coordinator clarifies the duties of the various liaisons and supervises the crisis intervention activities.
- The crisis coordinator or a designee notifies the superintendent of the crisis.
- The crisis coordinator interacts with media representatives as needed.
- The crisis coordinator or a designee notifies the district public information director of the crisis.
- The law enforcement liaison notifies the district security director and appropriate local law enforcement personnel and coordinates their activities as needed.
- The medical liaison contacts emergency medical personnel and provides medical assistance as needed.
- The student liaison directs activities to ensure the safety and emotional well-being of the student body.
- The campus liaison communicates specifics of the crisis to the faculty and gives the faculty guidance on how they can assist in crisis management.
- The counseling/psychological liaison provides needed emotional support to affected students, family, friends, faculty, etc..
- The parent liaison communicates to concerned parents verbally and/or in writing.
- The crisis coordinator conducts a faculty meeting, after the students have gone home, to discuss the crisis.
- The crisis coordinator conducts a debriefing meeting with the crisis team. This meeting processes the crisis event and clarifies follow-up activities for the team.
- The crisis coordinator updates the superintendent and the public information director on the resolution of the crisis.
- The crisis coordinator discusses with the crisis team ways to prevent further crisis situations of this type.