

Post-Tragedy Planning

Michael J. Sedlak

Assistant Principal

Hudson Middle School

## Post-Tragedy Planning

### Overview

As schools plan to keep students safe during natural disasters and school tragedies, many schools lack in preparation in what to do once tragedy strikes. Whether it is a tragic loss of a teacher or student, a natural disaster that devastates a town, or the unthinkable school shooting, schools must have a plan in place as to what the best course of action is for the students, staff, parents, and community.

### Background to the Problem

School districts can do many things to make their schools safer. While they can hire safety consultants to assess their schools, some districts spend millions on physical alterations to the buildings and grounds. They can implement Emergency Plans to minimize the crisis. They can create a Crisis Response Team to manage the situation. But not knowing what to do once something does happen is no longer an option.

Some of the most painful and stressful aspects of crisis management will continue after the initial incident itself has passed. In fact, this postcrisis crisis often seems just short of, if not sometimes worse than, the crisis incident itself in terms of length, intensity, and strain. (Trump, 2011, p. 253)

Once tragedy has struck, getting on the road to recovery is, of course, challenging and difficult. However, the most important prerequisite to recovery is to have a post-tragedy plan. Such a plan must entail the recognition that school tragedies look different in each school or situation.

Natural disasters can strike at any moment, an accidental or sudden death of a student or faculty member can occur, or an act of school violence can quickly turn a community upside down.

School violence is youth violence that occurs on school property, on the way to or from school or school-sponsored events, or during a school-sponsored event. A young person can be a victim, a perpetrator, or a witness of school violence. (NCIPC, 2013, p. 1)

Being prepared to combat the post-tragedy chaos will lessen the duration of the turmoil. The students, staff, parents, and community will still need services, but having contacts and services prearranged will lessen the ensuing stress and chaos.

### **General Preparations**

When planning for a post-tragedy incident, there are many areas to consider. The complexity of planning, and then activating the plan, will be determined by the need and magnitude of the tragedy. Districts need to be proactive and flexible with their plan. The members of the Crisis Response Team (CRT) must understand that any part of the plan may be adapted or modified as needed by the schools and community.

First, the CRT must pre-establish a chain of command. Each member should have a clear role and not deviate from that role. Once there are too many cooks in the kitchen is when communication lines are crossed, important information is lost, and the unified message from the district is unclear. Each building should have a point person that reports to the CRT. Staff within the building can be assigned roles and report to the building point person.

A vital role of the CRT is the person in charge of communications. The person assigned to communications will decide what the district is reporting, and what is confidential; some of the information will be withheld by requests from law enforcement, families of the victim(s), and legal counsel. This information should be given to all secretaries, or anyone that might answer the phone, in each building. Keeping the information concise and consistent will prevent incorrect information from being disseminated throughout the community.

After a tragedy, the security of the building is compromised. Media will try to enter the building to ascertain information, video, and pictures from students and staff. Schools must not also forget the parents, attorneys, and former students that will want to be a part of the action and healing process. Schools can use community resources and volunteers to have security at every exit. It is imperative that all visitors check in through one entry point. Each visitor must be documented and verified that they are there for business purposes only. An indirect benefit to having a local business volunteer to conduct the security at the doors is that they can tell everyone the same message, "Please use the main entrance," without having the pressures of knowing the parents or former students.

The stigma of mental health is one that a district must tackle before a tragedy strikes. Once something happens within the school, or is a result of a school situation, the community, and world, will be judging what has happened within the walls to prevent it. The stigma of mental health will only go away with a proactive district that works to identify and help students with mental health issues. If the first time a community is discussing mental health is after a tragedy strikes, the staff will be playing catch-up to learn how to identify students, and parents will be wondering why nothing has been done before. The National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) has resources for schools on how to start conversations about mental illness and integrate the topic within the curriculum. The U. S. Department of Mental Health & Human Services (2014) suggests, "Efforts to care for the emotional wellbeing of children and youth can extend beyond the classroom and into the entire school. School-based mental health programs can focus on promoting mental wellness, preventing mental health problems, and providing treatment" (p. 1).

Similarly, suicide prevention programs can be applied to classes and curriculum more fluidly if the district eases into the program. Asking a suicide prevention program to educate an entire school, post-tragedy, adds stress to the students, teachers, and parents. Again, the community will want to know why nothing has been done until now.

Trauma education is an area of professional development that teachers usually never receive until after something happens. The key to trauma education is having the professional development taught by trained trauma experts. There are specific qualities to trauma education, and all resources are not created equal.

While schools are creating their emergency plans, they should be working closely with their local safety forces. The first time the police or medics enter a school should not be during a tragedy. Moreover, the students and staff should be comfortable with the safety forces and should come as a relief, not additional stress, when they come to the aide of the school. Whether it is scheduled meetings with school administration and safety forces, or frequent visits to the buildings, the cooperation and collaboration between school and first responders is imperative to recovery and healing of a school.

### **Students**

Students are the reason every school staff member works in a school. It is the school's job to help the students adjust and resume normal activities back to and support them in every way possible.

How the school responds can either help or hinder the healing process, and the principal sets the tone for the level of the assistance provided. The first priority is to ensure the emotional well-being of students and staff by facilitating healthy grieving and coping. (Poland & Poland, 2004)

Districts can have protocol in place to ensure their students an environment that is conducive to learning and healing. Despite what the students may say, and some of the parents for that matter, students need counselors and therapists. The key is finding counselors and therapists that are trauma trained and not just entering the school looking for a possible private client. Trauma therapists should be either psychologists or social workers who are licensed or certified in their field and/or have earned other appropriate credentials (Usadi, 2009). These counselors and therapists should be willing to try different approaches including art therapy, music therapy, group, and private sessions. Different students will react at different time and for different reasons; therefore, the counselors and therapist should be available for as long as needed. The district should be monitoring the use of the counselors and should receive status updates on the students. The counselors and therapist cannot reveal confidential information but can share trends or global concerns they are hearing from the students.

In addition the trauma therapist, the use of therapy dogs should be considered.

Pet therapy is a broad term that includes animal-assisted therapy and other animal-assisted activities. Animal-assisted therapy is a growing field that uses dogs or other animals to help people recover from or better cope with health problems, such as heart disease, cancer and mental health disorders. (Mayo Clinic, 2014)

The purpose of gaining the assistance of trained therapy dogs is the students and staff will create new and pleasant memories where unpleasant memories were once made. Similar to the trauma-trained therapists and counselors, the trauma-trained dogs and handlers have specialized training for tragic situations. Therapy Dogs International (TDI) has specially trained teams of dogs and handlers that are sent directly to disaster sites to help the victims. Not all therapy dog companies or organizations are trained the same, nor are the dog handlers, which can have

adverse effect on the students and staff. Thus, being proactive means that identifying these services ahead of time will save time when time is precious.

Children are creatures of habit and recover better with stability and a minimum of changes. Changing too much of their environment will upset some, while not changing the environment will upset others. The schools need to work with their students to find the happy medium between what changes will help the students heal versus overdoing changes. With the district and school-initiated changes, the students need the ability to express themselves. Major school activities may need to be altered to fit the needs of the students; changes to such activities can be assessed using formal or informal surveys. The school needs to keep in constant communication with its students. The students need to feel as though they have a voice and that they are in the loop. This openness with communication, the ability to allow students to be expressive, and the feeling that the students' input is valued will allow them to heal faster and adjust to life after the traumatic event.

### **Staff**

The needs of the staff are similar, yet vastly different, from the students. Generally, the staff has been through the same trauma as the students, but instead of just focusing on healing, they are still required to teach, answer phones, keep the school clean, and ensure the school is running smoothly.

All staff members need counselors and therapists. However, the staff needs different counselors and therapists than the students and a different place to meet with them. No staff member wants to walk through a room of counselors and therapists to see a crying student that they will be seeing next period. The staff members will want to keep their thoughts, feelings, and tears to themselves and do not want to show weakness in front of their students. Similar to the

students, the counselors and therapists must be trauma experts and be willing to meet with the staff in large groups, small groups, and individually.

When a student breaks down in class, due to an unforeseen trigger, the student can go home or talk to a counselors and therapists. This is not the case for most school staff members. If there is one custodian scheduled, and that custodian needs to be replaced, there will need to be someone on call to fill in at a moment's notice. This is true for secretaries and teachers as well. Having a list of substitutes as well as substitutes on site who are able to fill in at a moment's notice is vital. If the staff feels that they are putting an undue hardship on the school, they will not take care of themselves. They will not leave their students to take care of their needs. The option for them to take care of themselves must be communicated to them repeatedly, and they need to know they have coverage if necessary.

Every school staff is a family, and every family must grow and heal together. The staff will join together to help their students by attending professional developments on the effects of trauma on their students' minds, during staff meetings, and other routine staff activities. The school must deliberately plan activities that bring the staff together for social reasons.

Undoubtedly, surrounding schools districts and companies will donate lunch or breakfast items to the school. This is a wonderful opportunity for the staff to come together in a nonthreatening environment. The district can also plan outside activities to take the staff out of their element and create a team building environment.

For the school staff, their school building is their home away from home. They want a say in what is happening and they want to know what is going on. No staff member wants to find out about a change within the school at the same time the students find out. There are certain things that might need to be changed without gaining the input from staff, but when possible, the

staff would like the opportunity to voice their opinion. Any updates regarding the tragedy should be communicated to the staff as soon as possible. With instant access to information through social media and the internet, the staff will hear about updates through the grapevine, but the information may not be accurate. Keeping the staff updated with timely and accurate information is imperative to the healing process as well as rebuilding the positive school culture.

### **Parents**

All schools have a variety of parents. Some parents will be overly involved, while others are nonexistent. After a tragedy, this is no different. There are strategies a district can have lined up in order to help the parents through the difficult time.

Parents need counselors and training. These can be the same counselors that are in the schools, or they can be different. The parents need a place to vent, a place to get advice, and a place to learn how to cope with their healing child. Raising children is not an easy task in general, so add a tragedy to the situation and all parties are stressed. These counseling sessions can be held at night and during the day. They can take place in the school buildings or community centers. Whenever and wherever they are, they need to be accessible to the parents. The schools should have an idea as to the times and places that are best for the parents. Some may feel uncomfortable coming into a school building where students were injured or killed. These parents may be dealing with a house that was torn down by a tornado and just in need of a place to go and a listening ear. The parent education programs should be relevant to what the students are going through, should inform the parents of resources available to their children within the schools, and where they can seek additional help. The district does not need to provide long-term one-on-one counseling for parents, but rather a place for parents to learn how to best help their children by helping themselves.

Parents, like the students and staff, want to help, want to be heard, and want to be in the know about what is happening. Open communication with parents is crucial to the healing process for all stakeholders. Parents will offer their time, money, and resources to help the school and their students. Keep these numbers and resources on hand and let the parents know that they will be called when they are needed. It may not be until one year later, that the district is in need of parent volunteers. Take the parents' suggestions; listen to their wants and needs, then as always, the district needs to do what is best for the students in each building. It will be impossible to please every parent or groups of parents, but when a district makes a decision the parents can feel as though they were heard. Lastly, take advantage of the various communication devices within a district. Use the automated caller or email system to keep the parents abreast of upcoming counseling sessions, parent support groups, school activities, or updates on the tragedy. If a school is bringing in suicide prevention support, the parents have a right to know that a number of students have attempted suicide and the district is looking to prevent a successful attempt. The parents talk amongst themselves; it is the district's responsibility to let them know the schools are willing to help.

### **Community**

The community supports a school district, so a school district cannot turn a blind eye to the community after a tragedy. Alumni, small businesses, local companies, all support the community and will want to do even more after a tragic event. This is the time a district should embrace the community like never before.

The people and businesses will want to help. They will offer to donate money. They will offer to donate time, resources, meeting space, food, clothing, whatever their niche, they will want to be a part of the healing process. When the calls, checks, and gift cards start pouring in, it

is crucial for the district to have a plan to organize the donations. Having a one or two key people to organize the resources, and a third party vendor collect the money, will keep the district free from controversy. Having a list handy of what is offered by companies will allow the schools to search and find what they need, when they need it.

Any tragic event will hurt a community. That means that the district, in conjunction with the mental health agencies, will need to plan community events where people can come grieve and heal. These community events should be separate from the parent events, as the parents need different services than a local business or community member. The event may be as simple as having an open house for the community to enter the school buildings to see that things are back to a “new normal” and the educational and healing process has begun for the students. The schools need to continue to communicate with the community and, once again, gather input from the community. No community is ever shy to tell a school district what they are doing wrong or right, so the district should listen to the suggestions to the community. In the end, the district will always side on what is best for their students, and no community can argue with that.

### **Leadership**

Educators are selfless by nature. This entire article discusses what administrators and teacher leaders can plan and do to help students, staff, parents, and community members heal from a tragedy, yet fails to mention how the leaders themselves can endure and stay strong for others. That is something that cannot be told to someone; rather, each person is unique and must find an outlet. Leading with confidence and motivation will not be easy if the leader is suffering. True leaders will acknowledge their weaknesses and seek the appropriate help. This does not make a leader weak or feeble, but rather allows the leader to lead by example.

### **Conclusion**

We can benefit and learn important lessons from the experiences of others who have experienced traumatic events (Malchiodi, 2003). No district wants to plan for the worst-case scenario, yet not to plan is to be negligent and short-sighted. By having a framework in place, getting to know a few local companies and safety forces, and solidifying communication protocols, districts will avoid additional stress after a tragedy. When their students are in the worst of circumstances, the pre-planning for after a crisis will allow a school to focus on what is most important: their students.

### References

- Malchiodi, C. A. (2003). Using creative activities as intervention for grieving children. *Trauma and Loss: Research and Interventions*, 3 (1).
- Mayo Clinic. (2014). Pet therapy: Man's best friend as healer. Retrieved December 11, 2014 from <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/consumer-health/in-depth/pet-therapy/art-20046342?pg=1>
- National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2014). Understanding school violence: Fact sheet 2013. Retrieved December 11, 2014 from [http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/school\\_violence\\_fact\\_sheet-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/school_violence_fact_sheet-a.pdf)
- Poland, S. & Poland, D. (n.d.) *Death at school: Tips for school administrators and support personnel*. National Association of School Psychologists.
- Trump, K. (2011). *Proactive school security and emergency preparedness planning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- U. S. Department of Health & Human Services. (n.d). Talk about mental health: For Educators. Retrieved December 12, 2014 from: <http://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/educators/index.html>