

# BY THE NUMBERS

Crisis management and response is a huge undertaking. Breaking down the important components into 10 areas can help you manage an otherwise overwhelming process.

BY SCOTT POLAND, ED.D.

In the wake of a crisis in the schools or community, staying calm and working with the issues at hand is vital to a well-run program. Remember these 10 rules, and you'll make your way through a tough time with calm control.

**ONE - VERIFICATION OF THE FACTS IS ESSENTIAL.** Double check the facts with police and those in the know to ensure you have correct information. Example: The secretary reported Ms. Wilson at the local high school was killed, but soon corrected information verified it was Ms. Smith.

**TWO - MAKE DECISIONS AS A GROUP.** Experience has found that the wisest decisions are made in a group. School counselors should be part of the crisis response teams, and teams should make decisions as quickly as possible. School counselors need to ensure the building administrator has all their contact numbers so they can have input early in crisis planning. The role of school counselors may include serving as the architect of crisis plans, key confidant of administration and direct service provider to affected staff and students. After a crisis, administrators need to review cri-

sis plans and assign duties while empowering their staff. One principal told her crisis team that this would be the worst day they ever spent in education, which did not necessarily encourage the team members to do their best. Schools should be kept open if at all possible or reopen quickly. Schools offer support to children, and when they are closed due to a crisis many children are left unsupervised. In other cultures schools have been closed permanently due to violence to honor the dead, but in our western culture this dramatizes and glorifies the actions of the perpetrator.

**THREE - HELP THE FACULTY.** Offer support to faculty most affected by the crisis, and provide faculty direction as to how to best support students. Media coverage and cell phones often result in information being transmitted quickly. The administration or an official spokesperson needs to be seen as the dispenser of accurate information. One quick way to give faculty direction is to send an e-mail and announce that all staff need to check their computers for regular updates. Faculty appreciates when those messages contain a script of what to say to students.

**FOUR - SHARE INFORMATION TRUTHFULLY** with students in a developmentally appropriate manner. Younger children should be protected from explicit details and horrific media coverage, but no student should be lied to or misled about the circumstances. Students need to hear sad or tragic news from trusted adults such as teachers or their school counselor, not from someone on the street. Students need to be given permission for a range of emotions and provided opportunities to ask questions and to express emotions through artwork, music and writing. One New York City teacher reported that even though her classroom looked out on the World Trade Center the principal told her to not talk to students about what had happened. Desks should have been arranged in a circle with students allowed to express thoughts and concerns with the emphasis placed on coping skills and student safety. The majority of students should get the help they need in classrooms with support personnel such as school counselors and psychologists coming to classrooms to assist teachers with group discussion.

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**five - INFORM PARENTS** of what has occurred, and reunite younger children (pre-K to second grade) with parents as soon as possible. Parent communication needs to be consistent through either phone calls or e-mails, and schools need to be prepared with sign-out procedures for when large numbers of parents come to campus to pick up their children. One middle school principal wanted to write a letter to parents informing them a gun had been brought to campus and threatening remarks were made but the suspected perpetrator was in custody and steps were taken to assure students of their safety. However, the superintendent chose to keep the incident from the public. Two days later, it was front-page news in the paper, and the PR damages were extensive.

**SIX - SET MEDIA POLICIES AND PROCEDURES** well in advance of any crisis. Make sure these policies are in place following the crisis and that media is kept away from staff and students. Designate one person to be the media spokesperson. Following one crisis, the media were kept off school grounds across the street, and students and staff were encouraged to decline interviews. Parents have let their children appear on national television after school shootings and we can't stop them, but we can be proactive in recommending that students be shielded from the media.

**SEVEN - LET THE CRISIS BE THE CURRICULUM.** For a few days, or even longer, after a crisis, normal teaching can't be done. The crisis becomes the curriculum, and administrators need to provide guidance as to when to return to the curriculum and when to resume testing. One teacher with students openly weeping after learning of the death of a classmate asked if the school counselor wanted to talk with them before or after the scheduled test. Students will let you know when they are ready to get back to the curriculum. In one situation after a multiple homicide at school the students asked if they still had to take the state accountability test scheduled for next week. Unfortunately, the answer was yes. When students are dealing with grief and such strong emotions, they

give me guidance that matters  
 I'll take the initiative  
 just watch me

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simply can't be expected to focus on learning and testing.

**EIGHT - IDENTIFY THOSE STUDENTS MOST AFFECTED**, and don't underestimate the tragedy's long-term impact. Accept additional assistance when it's offered, and recognize that your role isn't to provide long-term treatment to the students. Students at the highest risk are those in physical proximity to the crisis, those socially closest to the victim and those with their own set of tragic life circumstances. Adolescents who have been exposed to violence and have lost friends and classmates sometimes become suicidal.

**NINE - GUIDE STUDENTS TOWARD APPROPRIATE MEMORIALS**, and allow for a range of religious beliefs. Students often feel a need to do something in memory of the deceased. Whenever possible, the memorial should benefit the living. Positive examples include starting prevention programs to reduce violence or suicide or volunteering in community prevention programs. Caution is suggested in permanently closing off lockers and erecting memorial statues on campus.

**TEN - CONVENE THE CRISIS TEAM REGULARLY** throughout the crisis management, and support the members. Discuss what is working and what isn't. Focus on what lessons you can learn from this crisis to be better prepared in the future.

School counselors are the ideal personnel to ensure that those most affected by a crisis receive follow-up assistance for as long as needed. By doing our part in advance of, during and after a crisis, we can make a real difference in students lives. **SE**

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