

COMMON ERRORS IN SCHOOL CRISIS RESPONSE: LEARNING FROM OUR MISTAKES

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This article describes five school crises involving alcohol-related fatality, self-injurious behavior, school homicide, racial/ethnic conflict, and community violence. In each case example, errors in crisis management by school staff exacerbated the crisis and resulted in deleterious consequences for the school, its students, and the surrounding community. We identify common themes of leadership, teamwork, and responsibility that are critical to successful crisis management. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Guides to school crisis management place great emphasis on the development and implementation of a crisis plan (Johns & Keenan, 1997; La Pointe, DeMary, Irby, & Cundiff, 1996; Petersen & Straub, 1992; Pitcher & Poland, 1992; Watson, Poda, Miller, Rice, & West, 1990). While we agree wholeheartedly that plans are integral to successful crisis response, equally important is the process by which school professionals implement their plan. In this article we contend that qualities of *leadership*, *teamwork*, and *responsibility* are also essential ingredients of successful crisis management. We demonstrate the value of these qualities through analysis of five case examples illustrating weaknesses in leadership, problems in teamwork, and failings in responsibility that precipitated or worsened a school crisis.

Crises are by definition rare and often unexpected events, and no plan can anticipate the unique circumstances and special challenges associated with each crisis event. Furthermore, many crises begin as difficulties with a single student or a seemingly isolated problem that escalate over time. From this perspective, a crisis is more usefully conceptualized as a process than an event. School personnel may fail to recognize problem situations which, left unaddressed, can precipitate crisis events or worsen an existing crisis. In some circumstances, the early recognition that a potential crisis is imminent can lead to effective action and prevent or at least reduce its impact. Prompt response to emerging crises can also reduce the extent of angry feelings of all those involved.

LEADERSHIP

School crisis plans typically highlight the importance of leaders taking charge by assessing the situation, making decisions, giving direction to others, and supervising activities (Petersen & Straub, 1992; Pitcher & Poland, 1992; Watson et al., 1990). Perhaps the first determination any leader must make is whether a crisis is present or imminent. Without the recognition of a problem, efforts to prevent or respond to the problem cannot be undertaken. In an article with the provocative title, "How Schools Promote Violence," Conoley, Hindmand, Jacobs, and Gagnon (1997) identify ten common mistakes by school leaders. At the top of their list, "Let's wait until there's trouble," describes the tendency among some leaders to function in a reactive mode, ignoring potential problems until it is too late.

Duke's (1987) analysis of school leadership stresses that principals must cope with high levels of ambiguity and complexity in most school functions—from evaluating instructional effectiveness to managing student discipline. To be successful, school leaders must have a well-developed *vision* of how their schools should function and what they want to accomplish.

Both authors contributed equally to this article. Case examples are composites which are not intended to represent specific identifiable schools or persons.

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Vision permits a leader to see beyond his or her immediate situation, to comprehend why things must be done in a certain way. Vision enables a leader to make decisions about how best to spend time, not just randomly responding to the demands of others. Vision prods school leaders to be proactive rather than reactive. (Duke, 1987, p. 51)

In addition to vision, school leaders must be able to communicate their ideas effectively, setting clear and reasonable expectations for others and maintaining a sense of common purpose and collaboration among school staff (Duke, 1987).

TEAMWORK

Crisis guides routinely recommend establishment of a multidisciplinary crisis response team (Garfinkel, Crosby, Herbert, Matus, Pfeifer, & Sheras, 1988; Johns & Keenan, 1997; Petersen & Straub, 1992; Pitcher & Poland, 1992; Watson et al., 1990). Teams are usually comprised of school staff, but some teams make use of other school division personnel or community professionals, so that coordination of effort may be complicated by differing lines of authority, responsibilities, and perspectives. For a crisis team to function effectively, at a minimum the members must share common goals, have well-defined roles, and be willing to work together in a coordinated manner. It is particularly important to coordinate efforts with law enforcement, because the goals of law enforcement in some cases will include matters outside those of the crisis response team, such as a criminal investigation or the apprehension of perpetrators.

RESPONSIBILITY

School crises often raise complicated questions of responsibility. The most worrisome questions of responsibility concern liability and blame. Who is at fault? Unfortunately, fears about this aspect of responsibility can override other significant issues and paralyze efforts to respond to the crisis. Leaders may refrain from making decisions and team members may fail to act.

A second aspect of responsibility has to do with jurisdiction or duty. Whose responsibility is it to take action in response to a problem? School personnel may variously classify problems as matters for the police, mental health agencies, parents, or other responsible parties. Turf battles among disciplines or across agency lines often reflect conflicting views of responsibility.

A third aspect of responsibility might be better termed *responsiveness*. Is the school responsive to student concerns and emerging problems, or is there a tendency to deny or dismiss problems? Once identified, are problems likely to be regarded as someone else's responsibility rather than conceptualizing the school as sharing responsibility with other parties, including parents and community agencies? In short, do schools attempt to engage or disengage with problem students? Effective leaders and team members must overcome the tendency to reject or disown problem students, because such attitudes tend to be counterproductive, aggravating student—school conflict and undermining efforts to find more constructive solutions.

School practices such as suspension and expulsion, while necessary in some cases, may encourage the practice of disengaging from difficult students. Morrison and D'Incau (1997) contend that expulsion can reflect a failure to take proactive or preventive action; many expelled students in their study were suffering from personal or family crises, felt alienated from school, or had underlying emotional problems which might have been addressed through special education or counseling services.

In this article, we describe five school crises involving alcohol-related fatality, self-injurious behavior, staff homicide, racial/ethnic conflict, and community violence. These types of events appear in lists of common types of school crises (Petersen & Straub, 1992; Pitcher & Poland, 1992). Absent from this article are crises involving natural disasters or similar events, where issues of anticipation, prevention, and responsibility are less salient. The cases were disguised and some information was

altered so as to protect confidentiality of participants. Our intention is not to assign blame to any of the participants in these crises but to identify common problems and concerns that can serve as useful lessons in school crisis planning and preparation.

CASE EXAMPLES

Alcohol-Related Fatality: Errors in Teamwork and Communication

Forest High School had a fine reputation as a small, academically challenging public school serving mostly college-bound students. After the semester exams were over, students traditionally held a postexam party at a nearby farm. School authorities knew of the party but regarded it as a private matter, whereas many parents erroneously assumed it was a school-sanctioned event. Nevertheless, the party was generally regarded by parents and school authorities alike as an appropriate reward for the students' hard work. Contrary to some parents' expectations, the party was unsupervised and alcohol was freely available. Three of the most popular boys became so heavily intoxicated that when they decided to leave, several friends had to help them get to their car. A few miles down the road, the car swerved into oncoming traffic and collided with a van. All three boys were killed instantly.

The school principal learned about the fatal accident from police shortly after midnight. The next day was a school holiday, but the principal decided to allow students to come to school so that they could meet with guidance counselors and the school psychologist. At the same time, the local police decided to investigate the accident and find out who supplied the keg of beer consumed at the party.

The morning after this tragic accident approximately 100 students came to the school. The hastily assembled team of school staff was unprepared for the large turn-out, and without a more efficient plan, school staff began meeting with students individually or in small groups. Most of the students milled around in the lobby and hallways, crying and hugging one another. The principal retreated to his office to call in more assistance.

When a uniformed police officer arrived at the school, no school staff were visibly present to greet him, and he began his assigned duty of investigating the party. He approached students and asked if they had been to the party, then took them one by one into a classroom where he began to question them about the identity of the person who purchased the beer. The students became upset with the interrogations and rumors circulated about his intentions. One girl began to cry and ran screaming from the classroom. The officer rushed after her and was impeded by several students. There was an angry interchange between the police officer and the students, and then between the officer and the school principal, who was offended at the officer's actions. When a group of parents also came to the school, there were further arguments and airing of accusations and criticisms. The prospect of student arrests on the heels of a tragic loss triggered intense anger among parents as well as students, and derailed efforts to deal with the collective feelings of grief and guilt, which everyone shared. School psychologists and counselors reported that much of their work with students for several weeks focused on anger at the police, and school administrators faced additional anger from parents about the circumstances in which their children were interrogated.

Discussion. This case illustrates how lack of teamwork—in this case primarily between police and school—exacerbated an already tragic situation. Had the school and local police established a good working relationship with open lines of communication, a plan for more coordinated efforts could have been developed. At a minimum, police interviews could have been undertaken by a plain-clothes investigator, parents could have been notified, and school staff could have been prepared for student reactions and concerns. Other problems in teamwork and communication also were present. Parents and school staff had disparate understandings of the annual postexam party, and there ap-

peared to be implicit tolerance of underage drinking. Coordinated efforts to educate students about the dangers of drunken driving might have prevented the tragedy. The small team of school staff called after the tragedy was overwhelmed and not prepared to undertake the daunting task of working with so many grieving students. Poor planning in this case exacerbated the anger many students felt over the school's failure to protect the students during a time of emotional distress and vulnerability.

Self-Injurious Behavior: Errors in Leadership and Responsiveness

An eighth-grade girl at Randolph Middle School returned from spring break much more quiet and subdued than her friends had ever seen her. During lunch she left her friends and went into the restroom, where she cut her wrists with a lunchroom utensil. She returned to the cafeteria and showed the cuts to three of her friends. They began screaming and ran to a teacher for help. The teacher took the student immediately to the principal's office and then to the school nurse, who bandaged the superficial cuts. The school psychologist called for the girl's parents to come pick her up and in the process learned that she had been in treatment for depression for nearly a year. The parents took her to an emergency room where she received a psychiatric evaluation and subsequently was hospitalized.

Many students in the cafeteria had witnessed this young woman, bleeding from the wrists, showing her cuts to her friends. When the girl left without explanation, a number of eighth-grade girls became upset and inquired about her but were directed by the principal to keep quiet about the incident and to return to class. Approximately 10 girls became quite agitated in class. Some of them expressed anger that the school was not more responsive to the girl or to her friends, who were so visibly upset. During the next period, seven students in three different classes were sent to the guidance office and three others left class without permission.

During the next class break, a group of girls began to converse about what they had seen and became more and more angry at the school for "not doing anything" to help. One of the girls declared that she was going to slash her wrists, too, and went into the restroom accompanied by several other girls. Another girl went to the principal's office for help. By the time the assistant principal entered the bathroom, one girl was sitting on the floor bleeding from her arms, having cut herself with her house key. Three others were with her screaming. A third girl who cut her wrists with a broken compact mirror went to a friend's classroom, where she stood in the doorway and displayed her bloody wrists. Her friend inside the classroom screamed and bolted for the door before the teacher could stop her. Other students in the class began screaming or crying. Some of the boys shouted and laughed.

All the girls involved with the incident were identified and their parents were called. Each girl met with the principal and a school psychologist before she went home. Two of the girls were in psychotherapy, and they were taken to see their therapists. The other parents were advised to consider outside therapeutic help for their daughters, who had not previously demonstrated emotional or behavioral problems at school.

The next day at school a number of girls appeared at the guidance department expressing concerns that other friends might cut their wrists. Many students were frightened, and everyone in the school was preoccupied with the incident. Over the course of the next few days, more and more concerned and angry parents called the school to demand information. Teachers found that their students were unable to concentrate, and school administrators were stunned and dismayed.

Discussion. This example illustrates the importance of acting rapidly and decisively in response to highly visible incidents. Student concerns may easily escalate, particularly in the absence of guidance and support by responsible adults. The students misinterpreted the lack of information they received about the first girl to mean a lack of concern for her welfare, but they may have had a

more legitimate concern about the lack of sensitivity shown to their own fears and concerns. An open and direct acknowledgement of student feelings, combined with reassurance that actions were being taken to help the injured girl, quite possibly would have prevented the escalation of feelings and contagion of self-injurious behavior that followed. Instead, the principal reacted by attempting to keep the incident quiet, a strategy that was further reflected in the decision not to send written information and reassurance to all parents. Although school leaders should avoid the kind of public attention that reinforces suicidal behavior (Garfinkel et al., 1988), when such behavior is public knowledge and already eliciting student reactions, some effort to address it is necessary. In the absence of strong, visible adult leadership, the students were highly susceptible to influence by their peers.

The parents' reaction was understandable and even predictable. Parents generally react with fear and then anger after any school emergency in which their children may be at risk of harm (Watson et al., 1990). Parents typically want a detailed account of events and an explanation of future plans or actions to be taken. Parents want to know that problems are being addressed and that their children will be safe (Watson et al., 1990). This incident highlights the anger and confusion which occurs when strong and effective leadership is not present. Had the principal acted openly and decisively at the outset, student turmoil and parental anger might have been minimized. At several points during this process, the school psychologist might have advised the principal to consider the nature of student and parent reactions, and diplomatically volunteered to undertake efforts to calm and reassure students.

School Homicide: A Failure in Responsiveness to Mental Disorder

Larry's behavior problems in school were first noted in kindergarten, when his disruptive behavior, inappropriate laughter, and odd noises frightened other children. Because of low academic achievement, he was retained in first grade and subsequently diagnosed as learning disabled. In middle school, Larry's behavior became more withdrawn and unusual. He talked to himself in class and sometimes stared fixedly at classmates. He often appeared nervous, talked in a stammering voice, and sometimes exhibited a tremor. He refused to enter the school cafeteria and ate his lunch in the restroom.

Efforts to work with Larry's parents were unsuccessful. His father had abandoned the family about the time Larry entered school, and his mother was often not able to attend parent-teacher conferences because of her work schedule. She reported that Larry was a talented artist who had no difficulties at home. She maintained that her son's problems at school resulted from his being teased and picked on by other students, and that the teachers did not like him. Records indicated that he was classified as emotionally disturbed despite his mother's misgivings. School authorities soon despaired of trying to work with Larry's mother, believing her to be too defensive and uncooperative. Over the years, their relationship became openly adversarial and contentious.

When Larry entered high school, he continued to exhibit avoidant, nervous, and peculiar behavior. He became an accomplished player of violent video games and an avid fan of horror movies. He wore black clothing and tried to blend in with a small, isolated group of students with similar interests in violence and the occult. He and his peers experimented with drugs, and Larry began to drink beer and wine on a regular basis.

During a period when he was being mainstreamed, Larry became infatuated with one of his teachers. He often left notes for her and spent free time in the hallway outside of her classroom. On one occasion, he grabbed his teacher and forcibly kissed her, then bolted from the building. Larry was charged with assault, but charges were dropped when his mother agreed to take him for a psychiatric evaluation. During the evaluation, Larry reported hearing voices make fun of him and tell him that his food was poisoned. The psychiatrist prescribed psychotropic medication for Larry, but neither he nor his mother agreed with this recommendation.

As a result of the assault on his teacher, Larry was placed in an alternative school. For the next year, Larry repeatedly left the alternative school and returned to the high school. When found trespassing at the high school, Larry had a series of confrontations with the school principal. Known by his students affectionately as “Mr. D.,” the principal was popular with students despite being known as a strict disciplinarian with a “get tough” philosophy. Mr. D. regarded Larry as a rebellious student, and dismissed evaluations by the school psychologist, which bluntly described Larry as “mentally ill and dangerous.”

Larry was acutely embarrassed by the confrontations with Mr. D., which often occurred in the presence of other students, yet he persisted in returning to the high school. As a result, Mr. D. summoned the police. When Larry resisted being searched, a scuffle ensued and he was arrested and incarcerated for several days. After this incident, Larry developed the delusional belief that Mr. D. had somehow cracked open his head and stolen his spirit from him. He shared this belief with several peers and wrote about it in an English assignment. Over a period of months, he confided in his friends that he was developing a plan to recover his spirit by shooting Mr. D. He hinted to a shop teacher that he might construct a weapon to “get back” at Mr. D.

One morning, two weeks before the end of the school year, Larry drank several beers and then went to his former high school armed with a revolver. He entered the school building through a back door leading to an athletic field, then wandered the halls between classes until spied by a teacher, who notified the principal. Mr. D. was angry that Larry was again defying orders to stay out of the building, and immediately went to confront him. Larry watched Mr. D. approach down the hall, then pulled out his handgun and shot him several times. Larry then left the building without a word and was later arrested at his home. Mr. D. died in surgery.

Discussion. School homicides are rare, but the threat of violence—to students and staff—remains a prevalent problem (Kachur et al., 1996; National Education Goals Panel, 1997; Office of Technology Assistance, 1995), and it is important for school psychologists to be well-informed about the prediction of violent behavior (NASP, 1996). Recent research has determined that serious mental illness does increase the risk of violent behavior, reversing the conclusion of some previous studies (Monahan, 1992). Persecutory delusions are particularly noteworthy indications of potential violence among psychotic individuals (Link & Stueve, 1994), and substance abuse is also an important risk factor, especially when accompanied by mental disorder (Swanson, Holzer, Ganju, & Jono, 1990). Finally, Larry’s explicit homicidal threats merited serious attention. Homicidal statements, like suicidal statements, should always be reported and require prompt, careful investigation.

There were many problems in the school’s work with Larry that preceded this tragic outcome. Because his mother was so defensive and difficult, school personnel abandoned efforts to establish a collaborative relationship. Despite his bizarre behavior and extreme anxiety, Larry was treated as simply another rebellious student with discipline problems, and concerns about his serious mental disorder were discounted. From the standpoint of responsibility, the school failed to respond to Larry as a mentally ill student and concentrated its efforts on excluding him from school. When Larry persisted in leaving the alternative school and returning to his high school, no effort was made to work with him by personnel in either school. Building security was inadequate, and when he came to the high school there was no plan other than to confront him and call the police. Had school personnel been more sensitive to Larry’s mental illness and tried to solve the problem of appropriate placement with his mother, this violent outcome might have been avoided.

Racial/Ethnic Conflict: Errors in Leadership and Planning

It was nonviolence week at Murdoch High School (MHS). The halls were decorated with posters made by students in health and art class reading “Stop the Violence” and “Peace at Murdoch.”

The idea for this project had come from the faculty, but plans for the event had not been developed beyond announcements and a poster campaign. Although MHS had never experienced a major violent episode, many were concerned that there was increasing tension between the White students and the Hispanic minority who made up about 16% of the student body.

On the first Wednesday of nonviolence week, a Hispanic girl in 10th grade noticed that a large poster she had made for the school's lobby had been spray painted with graffiti reading, "go back to Mexico." Angry and upset, she took the poster to the principal's office. The principal referred the matter to the school resource officer (SRO), who offered a \$100 reward to students who would identify the offending party.

By the end of the day, the Hispanic population of the school was extremely angry, and a group of Hispanic girls went to the principal and demanded a meeting with the school superintendent to air their concerns. The principal agreed to hold a meeting with students the following afternoon and announced it over the intercom.

The next morning before school a Hispanic boy went to the SRO to report that his friend (also a Hispanic student) had sprayed the poster "just to see what would happen" and demanded the reward. The officer's investigation had already tentatively identified a White student as the possible offender, and the student had been interviewed by the SRO the previous afternoon.

When students arrived for school, controversy erupted over who could attend the meeting. The original group of Hispanic girls thought they would have a closed meeting with the school administrators. The principal received a number of calls from parents requesting to attend the meeting. Both White and Hispanic students as well as parents contended that they had legitimate reasons to attend the meeting. The principal relented and agreed that everyone could attend the meeting, which would be held in the school auditorium.

Thursday afternoon most of the Hispanic students and about 50 parents arrived at the meeting. The local television station sent a crew. The principal began the meeting stating that this was a time for people to say what was on their mind. He introduced the superintendent, who said a few words. Almost immediately parents began shouting at the stage, claiming that their children had been unfairly treated and the school system was racist. Despite the efforts of the principal to maintain order, the shouts and insults went on for nearly an hour. The superintendent walked out saying that he did not have to hear all this verbal abuse, and shortly thereafter a group of Hispanic students and parents left angrily slamming the doors behind them. The meeting broke up with little resolved.

Friday morning, a White student tossed a soda container into a trash can in front of school, inadvertently splashing a Hispanic girl standing nearby. Angry words were exchanged between two groups of students and a scuffle broke out. The SRO summoned police back-up and two arrests were made. The school continued to have a rash of incidents over the next 2 weeks. On the 3rd week, the principal resigned following another altercation between Whites and Hispanics in the bus parking lot.

Discussion. In this case, it is evident that several major mistakes were made. Overall, the principal failed to lead an effective response to the graffiti incident. A large group meeting in these ambiguous circumstances did not serve a useful purpose and only escalated angry feelings. The principal and superintendent had little to offer parents and students other than vague reassurances, and there was no specific plan to address underlying tensions at the school. Meetings are most effective when there is a structured agenda and specific information or plans can be offered so as to bring some closure or relief to shared feelings or concerns. Group conflicts, fears, and anger can rarely be addressed in a large, unstructured meeting.

Despite school-wide interest in improving the school climate and reducing violence, there was no plan for bringing students together into meaningful discussion of their concerns, or for providing

them with educational experiences aimed at improving racial or ethnic understanding. The non-violence campaign drew attention to an important issue, but failed to go further. Once the crisis began, there was no crisis plan or school team in place. The school psychologist and other staff were not consulted and had no specific role to play. Leaders must be willing to delegate duties and responsibilities to team members. The principal in effect was acting alone and experienced tremendous pressure from vocal parent criticisms and subsequent media attention. His actions had the paradoxical effect of increasing rather than dissipating angry feelings among all students in the school. A more effective course of action would be to establish and work with a school crisis team.

Community Violence: A Lesson in Teamwork and Conflict Resolution

The "Downtown Girls" regarded themselves as not a gang, but a clique, comprised of about a dozen adolescents ages 12 to 18 who resided in the same neighborhood. A series of arguments and conflicts with another group of girls of the same race and age in a neighborhood less than a mile away prompted the second group to call themselves the "Uptown Girls"—a name which served as a mocking rejoinder to the Downtown Girls and intensified the rivalry between the two groups. Conflict between the groups resulted from a series of unrelated, minor incidents which escalated into spiteful insults and rumors. For example, one girl borrowed clothing from another and returned it soiled and torn. One of the Downtown girls accused an Uptown girl of "stealing" her boyfriend. And when an Uptown girl gave birth to a sickly infant, there were false rumors spread by a Downtown girl that the baby had AIDS.

Over a period of months there were several confrontations between the girls, each becoming progressively more serious. Episodes of name calling and hard staring erupted into a fight at a local mall, in which four girls from the Uptown group overwhelmed two girls from the Downtown group. This incident prompted a larger group of Downtown Girls to confront three Uptown Girls in a parking lot late at night. Several girls brandished knives, and one girl was cut on the arm.

All of the girls attended the same high school, and staff were aware of the conflict between the two groups of girls, but took no action to intervene. The principal regarded the conflict as a community matter and not a school matter. Nevertheless, several times teachers intervened when the girls began taunting and threatening one another in the hallway. Boys at school took sides in the conflict and this precipitated at least one fight between boyfriends of rival girls. Graffiti at school containing the name of one group was crossed out by the other group and vice versa. Almost all of the girls in the two groups were having academic or behavioral problems at school. Absenteeism was high among the girls, and several of the younger girls acknowledged that they skipped school because they were afraid of older girls in the other group.

The pivotal incident occurred at a large party held on a Wednesday night at a community center. The Downtown girls confronted the Uptown girls, and several dozen boys and girls began to fight. Both groups were armed with knives and at least one boy had a handgun. Several shots were fired, but fortunately no one was hit. Four girls were stabbed before police could break up the melee.

The morning after this incident it was all but impossible to calm the students and hold classes. Many parents refused to send their children to school, citing fears of further violence. A group of student leaders went to the school office to express their concerns about school safety. The principal held a meeting with local police and representatives from the juvenile court and several community agencies. As a result of this meeting, a team of mediators met with the two groups of girls and over a period of 2 weeks worked out a resolution of their conflict. At the same time, teams composed of school, social services, and juvenile court staff developed individualized plans for each girl, drawing upon resources for academic tutoring, job training, part-time employment, and family and individual therapy. There were no further incidents of violence between the two groups, and all were able to complete their high school education.

Discussion. Many school crises involve events and circumstances that take place entirely outside of school, and it may appear that there is little school authorities can do about them. Yet violence in the community has an inevitable impact on the school, and the most effective schools work in partnership with the community to address it. Once the problem was fully recognized and acknowledged, school authorities were able to work cooperatively with several community agencies. In this case, the lack of a good working relationship and shared sense of responsibility between school and community agencies helped allow the conflict between the two groups to grow worse, and more tragic consequences, such as serious injury or death to the combatants, were narrowly avoided.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In assessing these five school crises, hindsight makes the correct decisions and more appropriate courses of action seem obvious. However, our intention is not to criticize those who found themselves in the middle of these perplexing situations, but rather to identify ways to help educators prepare for future crises. Skillful and competent crisis response is important not only to respond to the dangers of the immediate situation, but to prepare the way for a more rapid recovery and return to normalcy. Crisis victims are at risk for long-term demoralization and post-traumatic stress reactions, which compound the adverse effects of the original event. Staff who respond to the crisis, as well as student bystanders and even parents, can suffer from increased fears and vicarious traumatization (Pearlman & MacIain, 1995). Cohen (1990) described numerous consequences of crisis events, including diminished self-confidence, confused feelings, fear of future difficulties, feelings of depression and alienation, and increased negativism. In addition, victims often experience significant anger.

Feelings of fluctuating resentment and anger resulting from the seeming inability or unwillingness of others, upon whom the victims depended, to help: the unconscious feelings of entitlement that are part of the so-called "victim's" role and the accompanying sense of frustration and disappointment create a vicious circle between the victims, families, and crisis workers. (Cohen, 1990, p. 293)

With leadership, teamwork, and an appropriate sense of responsibility schools can carry out crisis management plans effectively, helping to restore a sense of competence and security that will counteract the feelings of victimization and anger that are so common after crisis events. Effective crisis management can help students to learn and grow from the most difficult of experiences.

Psychologist's Role

The position statement on school violence of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 1996) states that "First and foremost, school psychologists can take a leadership role in encouraging schools to develop a comprehensive approach to violence reduction. School psychologists are trained to (a) respond to crises spawned by violence; (b) counsel victims; (c) implement prevention and intervention programs . . . (d) consult with school staff. . . ." (p. 2). We agree with the sentiments expressed by this statement, but more specific training in these areas may be needed. School psychology programs place heavy emphasis on intervention training with individuals and problems such as attention deficit disorders, conduct problems, and depression, but relatively few programs give attention to violence prevention, substance abuse, and gang involvement (Busse & Larson, 1997), even though such topics are directly related to many of the more serious problems in schools today. In their survey of 123 school psychologists, Furlong et al. (1996) found that 85% had no specialized training in school violence and 73% felt unprepared to deal with violence.

Morrison, Furlong, and Morrison (1994) cite evidence that school psychologists have not received sufficient training in dealing with the violent events that occur in schools. They contend that *school violence* is more properly framed from the perspective of maintaining and promoting *school safety*, and that school psychologists have much to contribute to school safety plans and crisis inter-

vention efforts. In our case examples, school psychologists could have played important roles in anticipating student reactions to stressful situations and advising school leaders on strategies for more effective and timely responses to emerging crises.

Pitcher and Poland (1992) define a crisis as “an important and seemingly unsolvable problem with which those involved feel unable to cope” (p. 10). It may be useful to distinguish individual student crises from school crises. School psychologists are most experienced in responding to individual student crises, such as students who are upset, angry or depressed over personal events, usually unknown to most other students. However, individual crises have the potential to mushroom and have schoolwide impact, substantially changing the nature of the crisis and complicating the school psychologist’s role. School crises differ from individual student crises not only because more persons experience the problem, but also because crisis response is substantially more complex and multidimensional. A school crisis inevitably requires the coordinated efforts of multiple professionals from varied disciplines and usually includes professionals from outside the school such as law enforcement officers and medical and community mental health personnel. In a school crisis, the persons who “feel unable to cope” may include the school staff as well as the students, so that the distinction between helpers and victims is less clear. School crises usually involve events that are upsetting to school staff as well as students. Moreover, the persons responding to a school crisis have a professional stake in their own performance, working under the scrutiny of administrators, parents, and the media. The professionals responding to a school crisis must have a good understanding of their own involvement in such an emotionally charged event, so that they evaluate the situation clearly, make appropriate decisions, and take effective action. It is particularly important for professionals to monitor their own anger and frustration, and to identify the underlying sources of provocation and anxiety. In our experience, professional consultation and peer supervision can be useful means of support and clarification for crisis team members.

Finally, the school psychologist is best trained to perform two of the most important crisis responses. The first is to make certain that meaningful and timely follow-up services are provided to all those affected by the crisis and its aftermath. In the push to “get back to normal,” schools must remain sensitive and responsive to unsettled feelings or unresolved issues, which can continue to trouble students and disrupt the learning process. Especially after tragic events, school administrators and teachers also may require support or assistance. Understanding and responding to these psychological needs is an important contribution school psychologists can make.

A second and concluding function described by Shulman (1990) is to undertake a postevent evaluation of the crisis plan and its implementation. School psychologists can use the results of such an evaluation to highlight team strengths and effective actions, and to recommend improvements in the school’s response capabilities.

In conclusion, errors in school crisis response can be highly visible and acutely distressing to school personnel. Analysis of common problems and mistakes can be a useful means of improving preparation for future crises, which in one form or another are faced by all schools. As is evident from these case examples, a good school crisis plan is not enough. School psychologists and other team personnel must implement their plans guided by leadership, teamwork, and responsibility in order to respond effectively to those unfortunate events which, however unpredictable, are certain to occur.

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