HELPING STUDENTS DEAL WITH CRISIS THROUGH COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Schools can play a critical role in the prevention of and the response to crisis situations. "How schools respond to a crisis can shape the immediate and long-term effects on students and staff, thus impacting student achievement" (National Association of School Psychologists). Therefore, Catholic schools have the responsibility to develop and promote a crisis response plan that safeguards the physical, psychological and spiritual well-being of students and staff.

COMPREHENSIVE CRISIS PLANS

The tragic events at Sandy Hook Elementary School have given all schools pause to consider their own responses to threatening situations. Even though most Catholic schools are not equipped with the comprehensive staffing that their public school counterparts have, it is still essential that they review and adjust their plans to respond to all crisis situations.

There are three main areas that should be considered: prevention, crisis response and after-care. What follows is a list of things to consider when assessing your crisis plan. Given the complex nature of crisis preparedness and response, this article should only be considered a starting point and it is not meant to be a comprehensive assessment of any crisis plan. After reviewing this list of factors, your school may identify a need for further professional development in this area. Resources are listed at the end of the article.

PREVENTION

The first step in effective crisis response is to exert control over all the factors that can reasonably be controlled by a school. It can be helpful for the school's crisis team to review the plan on a regular basis. Here are a few factors to consider when examining the preventative aspect of the crisis plan.

The crisis team should be just that – a team. In the unfortunate circumstance where the principal is the "holder of the plan" and that principal is the one involved in the crisis, the school will lack the appropriate leadership and cannot respond effectively.

Crisis plans must be written. In the "heat of the moment," it can be next to impossible to remember the various steps. A written plan can provide the necessary structure for the team to respond effectively. The crisis plan also should contain templates and sample letters for the school's communication to parents and families. At the height of the crisis, it is difficult to create such communications at the "drop of a hat."

Crisis plans should be reviewed with staff in an ongoing fashion. This will help to ensure that new staff members are fully aware of the school's plan.

Assess visitor check-in procedures. Check-in procedures vary school to school. I have encountered schools that practice effective visitor check-in, including checking my driver's license. Other schools don't require me to sign a visitor's log or put on a name badge. The check-in process is a vital method to control access to the building and the one process that can become lax over time. Periodic review will help with enforcement procedures.

PHYSICAL PLANT

Review your physical plant. A simple control of access strategy is to review all doors to ensure that they lock correctly. Reminding student, staff and parents not to prop open doors is critical (and an easy step) to maintaining a safe school. I encountered a school, in a challenging neighborhood no less, that made it a habit to leave a side door open for easy after-school access. Upon arriving at the school for my appointment, I easily entered the door and was not questioned by any staff until I arrived at the main office.

Review safety procedures with all students and families. Remind students and families to refrain from opening doors to outsiders – even if the visitor is recognizable. The day after the Sandy Hook tragedy, when I was returning my son back to his school after an orthodontist appointment, someone opened the door for me and I didn't need to be "buzzed in" by the office. Although it was well intentioned, the act (a common one) is a serious breach of security.

CRISIS RESPONSE

Does your crisis plan have a response for all types of crises? Crisis doesn't have to mean an intruder. It can also mean an accidental death on
or off school property. Does you plan account for a differential response?

Is there regular practice on responses to different types of intruders? Many states now require these drills in the same manner that drills for natural disasters are required. It is important that these responses be practiced. It is an unfortunate reality that schools must have a plan to respond to such threats.

Does your crisis plan include strategies to interact effectively with media? With the immediate availability of news, it is critical that the school’s crisis plan outline the process, including who will be the spokesperson, for the school. Please contact your diocesan office. It may be able to help with and even provide a spokesperson for your school, which is very helpful.

After care

Crisis situations demand care for all those touched by the crisis. This is the area that may not be as fully developed in most crisis plans. Careful attention to these factors can really help to promote resilience for all those in the system. Failure to plan effectively for this area may result in long-term behavioral and emotional needs for students.

Develop partnerships with external agencies (Catholic Charities and social services, diocesan offices, public schools and community mental health agencies) to develop a concrete plan for follow-up care for your school. This plan should include phone numbers (especially after-hour contact information and specific contact names). These numbers should be included in your written crisis plan. Please share these numbers with your diocesan office.

If you are a part of a parish, have you created an explicit plan with the pastor for spiritual support across the crisis continuum? Although it may be taken for granted, it is very important that the clergy be involved in the response to such situations. For those schools without this connection, explicit plans should be made with the ministry team to provide this necessary level of support.

Public acknowledgement of the crisis should be respectful of the developmental level of the students. Younger children grieve differently than adults. Whereas adults can gain comfort and make meaning out of discussing the crisis incident, younger students will not always gain this same comfort in protracted discussions. Continual discussion may actually exacerbate the grief response. Younger children grieve in “spurts.” It is not uncommon for youth to be very consumed with grief and then engage in play an hour later.

Do you have an on-going plan for emotional support past the initial period of crisis? Emotional responses to crisis situations happen over a period of time and built-in support should occur over this period. It can be a common mistake for schools to terminate these supports once the initial period of crisis is over because everything seems “okay.”

Does that plan include follow-up care for the first responders in the school? Often we focus so much on the students that we serve that we neglect the needs of the school staff who are responding to the needs of the students.

Memorials

Is there a plan for determining memorials? Something that is well intentioned (such as having a physical memorial for a person who died) can turn into a battle for schools. One school had a conflict when a very involved and supportive parent died and a memorial was created. Tragically, when another parent who was “not as popular” with the community died that same year, a very uncomfortable struggle occurred when trying to decide on the memorial for this individual. It is best to consider guidelines for memorializing those that have died. Having a guideline can equalize the response and thus remove most of the contention.

Is there a review of the school’s response built into the crisis plan? Reviewing the school’s response is important to identify areas of strength as well as areas that may need improvement.

Next steps

Schools should consider an evaluation of their crisis response plan. Reaching out to public school counterparts and including them as “critical friends” in this review can be an invaluable resource. If your school does not have a formal crisis team, one should be formed as soon as possible. For schools, seeking additional training, the National Association of School Psychologists has developed PREPaRE, a evidenced-based curriculum that provides training to schools in crisis prevention and response. This training may be available locally with your public school district. If your local schools district is not presently offering this workshop, a list of upcoming workshops is available at the PREPaRE website: (http://www.nasponline.org/prepare/upcoming-workshops.aspx). If a school has difficulty in locating the appropriate level of training, please contact the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness. The center has conducted PREPaRE workshops for Catholic schools with a certified PREPaRE trainer. Additionally, there are a number of resources about school safety and crisis response available at the NASP website: (http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx)  

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