



Critical Incident Management and School Safety

A Critical Incident is a situation that involves imminent or immediate threat of harm to students, personnel and facilities, requiring an immediate response. Such incidents include bomb threats, shootings, hostage situations, fires and natural disasters. An interagency response is required involving law enforcement and/or emergency service agencies.

The following paragraphs contain guidelines for school safety and critical incident management both prior to and during an emergency situation.

1. Develop a comprehensive identification and intervention procedure for troubled students

A comprehensive identification and intervention procedure provides a systematic process for identifying, assessing and intervening with regard to students who may constitute a potential or imminent threat to themselves or others. A policy establishing procedures to identify such risks should include:

- Training of students and staff to recognize warning signs of risk
- The immediate reporting of concerns
- Qualified assessment of threats
- Expedited access to school and community resources for appropriate intervention

While warning signs can not predict that an act will occur, students and staff should be trained in how to recognize and report them. Potential warning signs may include:

- Serious physical fighting
- Physical destruction of property
- Severe rage for minor reasons
- Detailed threats of lethal violence
- Threats of suicide or other self-injuring behavior
- Possession or other use of weapons

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When warning signs indicate that danger is imminent, safety must always be the first and foremost consideration. Immediate intervention by school authorities and law enforcement is needed whenever someone:

- Has presented a detailed plan (time, place, method) to harm others -- particularly if the person has a history of aggression or has attempted to carry out threats in the past.
- Is carrying a weapon, particularly a firearm, and has threatened to use it.

School communities also have the responsibility to seek assistance from appropriate agencies, such as child and family services and community mental health.

2. Develop a School Critical Incident Management Plan with the Schools and the Community (Police, Fire, etc.)

A school that is prepared before a crisis occurs will be much more likely to deal effectively with staff and students. A Critical Incident Management Plan is intended to:

- Protect and sustain life
- Reduce emotional trauma
- Assist emotional recovery
- Minimize injury/damage

The Critical Incident Management Plan should have provisions for the following:

- Preparation/planning
- Intervention/response (including communication to students in extreme situations)
- Post-emergency activities

3. Develop a Critical Incident Response Team

A Critical Incident Response Team can be a highly effective organizational unit for dealing with a variety of crises. Such teams can operate at three levels: individual school building, central office, and community. Well functioning teams at each level can provide a network that can support action whenever a crisis arises.

It is important to remember that critical incident responses are time-limited, problem-focused interventions designed to determine the facts, disseminate accurate information, restore equilibrium and support productive, appropriate responses. There are many key elements to a successful response effort:

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- a) **Communication** -- Effective communication to students, parents and the community is essential. The best means of communication varies with the crisis. Plan ahead for many scenarios. Poor communication can make a bad situation even worse.
- b) **Training** -- Preparation for, and response to a crisis, rely on people understanding the policies and procedures put into place and knowing their role during a crisis.
- c) **Evaluation** -- Evaluate and refine your crisis management plan and school security measures, updating them as needed.
- d) **Partnerships**--Strengthen partnerships with public safety officials and other community leaders.

As a rule of thumb, if a crime has been committed, the police take over the scene; everything else is controlled by the fire department or local emergency response system.

For Further Information

Some of the information in these guidelines was provided by State of Virginia Model School Crisis Plan. To find out more about school safety and crisis management please visit the following websites:

Federal Bureau of Investigation The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective http://www.fbi.gov/publications/school/school2.pdf
National School Safety and Security Services www.schoolsecurity.org
National Crime Prevention Council www.ncpc.org
Virginia Department of Education Resource Guide for Crisis Management in Virginia Schools www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/crisis-guide.pdf
Youth Crime Watch of America www.ycwa.org

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