12 Steps for Creating a Viable Crisis Plan

1. Form a broad based committee which involves all the people and agencies who might be called upon during an emergency. Cooperation of law enforcement agencies, fire, mental health providers, HAZMAT (Hazardous Material Action Team), civil defense, media representatives, evacuation site representatives, hospital personnel, parents, community leaders, politicians, and local clerical leaders, results in a creditable plan-team. School-side members of the team would include administrators, counselors, school psychologist, transportation director, technology director, school union representative, teachers, students (where appropriate), custodians, and school board representatives.

Schools can develop a sense of ownership in a plan through the active involvement of those who might be first responders in a crisis situation. Involving interagency leaders in the process, demonstrates a unified approach.

2. Define the kind of the crisis that you will include in your plan. The list of crises that is provided above, is a good beginning. Districts need to include items that may be specific to the uniqueness of their local community as well as those that are state specific or national issues. For example, Florida would include a section on hurricanes, whereas North Dakota would not.

3. Conduct an internal and external assessment of the current safety level of the schools in the district. By assessing the current reality of safety within the schools, three things happen: First, information regarding what is or is not in-place is gathered. Second, information regarding perceptions and important issues are identified. Last, it broadens the base of involvement in the planning process. Analysis of the data can provide the plan-team with valuable information to guide them in creating the plan.

4. Create a plan that includes a district policy, identifies the crisis response team, includes response procedures and medical protocols, delineates roles, responsibilities, training, practice, and an ongoing assessment process. The plan should include a short, concise checklist of the types of crises, the response, who is responsible, and who is the spokesperson(s).

A crisis management leader must be appointed prior to a crisis. If a crisis counseling team needs to be summoned into action or an area needs to be readied for media briefings, someone who knows the crisis plan inside-out must be ready to hit the ground running. During a crisis, the last thing a district needs is the appearance of being unorganized or ill-prepared to handle the event. Any appearance of incompetency or unreadiness will not bode well with the community and could endanger
students and staff.

A crisis management leader needs to be appointed as soon as the plan is formally adopted. This gives the leader time to bring members of the response team together. The size of the team will vary in size from five to twelve people (Bagin & Gallager, 2001). The district team leader should meet regularly with their crisis management team, as should building level team leaders. These meetings should focus on bringing clarity to the individual roles and responsibilities of each member of the team. Meeting regularly reinforces the readiness of the team to respond.

5. **Secure board approval** of the plan. Before a crisis plan is activated, it must be reviewed and formally approved by the school board. Board approval makes the plan official and gives legal protection for employees who follow the emergency response procedures.

6. **At your fingertips** -- administrators should organize information to have readily available during a crisis. Some things you might want to include in an *at your fingertips* files are:

   - checklist pages from the crisis plan
   - cell phone
   - a copy of important phone numbers: district and building level administrators, interagencies, key parents, and media.
   - staff and student directories
   - media guide or fact sheet about your school
   - daily attendance record
   - evacuation site contact numbers
   - how to disconnect internet and television leads.
   - phone trees

   Administrators should also create an *at-home* packet for themselves. A crisis can happen in off-school hours. For example, a principal is notified of a malicious school break-in where, among other things, the phone system has been destroyed. That principal needs to immediately reach for phone directories, beginning with a call to the superintendent at home.

7. **Distribute the plan widely.** All members of the plan-team, school board, district and building level administrators, and all school personnel should have a copy of the plan. Key communicators should spread the good news throughout the community that a comprehensive plan for crisis management has been completed and has been adopted by the school board. Using plan-team members to communicate the plan to the groups they represent is an effective way to *get the word out*. A police chief who makes a report at a town council meeting regarding the police department’s role in creating the school crisis plan and the interagency agreement, will surely garner media attention. The support of the plan team in making the plan publicly known is profound.
8. **Select the spokesperson and the crisis team leader.** During a crisis, one person, and only one person, should have the responsibility to speak for the district. In the absence of an official community or public relations person, superintendents normally assume this role. Superintendents feel that they are ultimately responsible and that the community would expect to hear the news directly from them.

9. **Train the staff at both the district and building level.** If you do not communicate and practice the plan, you might as well not have one. Too often, the plan becomes a dusty binder sitting on a shelf. In the event of a crisis, the crisis may be that nobody knows what to do. To avoid a crisis within a crisis, it is imperative to provide the entire staff with training.

Reviewing the crisis plan is often welcomed by faculty and staff with a yawn. Principals have been known to distribute the plan and then just tell the staff to read it. A comprehensive crisis plan can be over 150 pages long. It is not likely that the principal will get 100% compliance.

Even worse, principals often forgets that new teachers were not there when the plan was adopted and did not get the advantage of the initial training. Again, the new teachers are handed a thick binder and told to read it when you get time. The section on fire drills is usually read because they know they will be held accountable for the monthly drill. An important part of new teacher orientation is to carefully review the entire crisis plan. Districts that have a new teachers mentoring program should include crisis training within their schedule of services.

10. **Annually retrain the staff.** During a crisis, everyone must know their roles and responsibilities. A staff that annually revisits their crisis plan will be prepared to care for the safety and security of the students and their colleagues. Teachers can get excited about exploring new teaching methods, whereas, practicing for a crisis can be viewed as a waste of valuable teaching time. The odds of a crisis happening are low which makes it even less of a priority.

During a crisis, responses need to be rote. A staff must train and rehearse to be able to respond without hesitation. It is an administrative responsibility to facilitate that training. Surviving a crisis may depend on how a staff is trained.

11. **Annually revisit the plan.** Members of the plan-team should convene yearly, if not more often, for the purpose of reviewing, revising, or making drastic modification to the plan. After every crisis, the crisis-team should assess how well they responded to determine if there are areas that need to be improved. Their suggestions should be forwarded to the plan-team for review and action. Assessing the effectiveness of how the crisis team responded is an essential component. Taking time to reflect will lead to improvement of the plan.
Loop back to STEP 1. Schools need to re-evaluate their plan to keep it up to date. A feedback loop is an essential requirement of good planning.