

# School Crisis Guide

*Help and Healing  
in a Time of Crisis*



**BEFORE**



**DURING**



**AFTER**



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## INTRODUCTION

When crisis strikes, the daily lessons imparted in classrooms and on school grounds across the nation take on even more importance. In addition to academic subjects, our children learn respect and resilience and feel the daily embrace of school staff’s love and care. As educators, we are committed to keeping schools safe and supporting children and their families. That is why we developed this easy-to-use crisis guide, created by educators for educators. This publication is a shorter version of the more comprehensive online guide, which includes tools, templates and case studies.

Based on our experiences throughout the nation, this National Education Association (NEA) and National Education Association Health Information Network (NEA HIN) guide spells out essential, to-the-point advice for schools and districts to:

- Prepare for emergencies
- Respond effectively as a crisis unfolds
- Help students and staff recover after a crisis

Knowing what to do can be the difference between stability and upheaval. This step-by-step resource can make it easier for NEA leaders and school district administrators and principals to keep schools safe — so teachers can teach and students can learn.

The guide also suggests ways for NEA state and local associations to lend expertise, saving schools precious time in the midst of a crisis and helping children and staff return to learning.

It is written and designed to help the reader move through information quickly.

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1.

**BEING PREPARED  
BEFORE A CRISIS**





# 1.

## BEING PREPARED BEFORE A CRISIS

Part One focuses on how to help district and school staff make prevention and preparedness a top priority, including the key elements of an emergency and preparedness plan, tips on forming crisis response teams, types of emergencies your plan should address, communications, training and recovery.



### Getting started — create a plan

An emergency preparedness and crisis response plan is a written set of guidelines to help schools prevent, prepare for and respond to emergencies and crises. The goal is making safety and a secure orderly environment for learning a part of the daily school routine. The plan not only details action to help schools prepare for and respond to emergencies and crises, but also emphasizes prevention by instilling a culture of respect and addressing all potential hazards and vulnerabilities that may face a school community.

The time to plan is now. An unprepared school is asking for chaos. Knowing what to do can keep students and staff out of harm's way during emergencies and ultimately save lives.

A district-level plan [pg. 5] spells out a school district's safety policies and instructions for handling emergencies and crises, and for supporting staff, students and families.

A school-level plan [pg. 7] aligns with the district plan, identifies staff roles and responsibilities during emergencies and crises, and addresses building-specific procedures such as lockdowns and evacuations. School plans should be updated regularly, and everyone should practice emergency procedures in the plan regularly.

The district and schools should closely coordinate their plans.



### Creating a plan for your district or school — who's at the table?

Whether designing a district- or school-level emergency preparedness and crisis response plan, the team should designate an individual to spearhead the work and ensure deadlines are met. Plans should be updated and practiced regularly.

**TIP:** District-level plans should also include development and implementation of Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with key response partners in the community, as well as business and operations continuity plans. This includes tapping outside community assistance in assessing damage and providing off-site delivery of education if necessary.



### The team for a district-level plan

District leaders should coordinate with community experts and local emergency responders to create a plan. Team members include:

- District staff (superintendent or designee, transportation chief, communications director, personnel director, facilities person)
- Local or state affiliate representative
- Parent representatives
- Local emergency responders
- Community experts

### The team for a school-level plan

Team members are selected largely from school staff. Their work should be coordinated with the district's plan.

Team members include:

- Principal
- Assistant principal
- Representatives from the teaching staff
- Facility manager
- Food service representative
- Front office professional
- NEA affiliate representative and/or other association leaders
- Parent leader
- Physical/mental health professionals (e.g., counselor, school nurse, psychologist, social worker)
- Security officer
- High school student leader(s) (if applicable)
- Technology specialist
- Liaison to district communication office



## Creating a DISTRICT-LEVEL emergency preparedness and crisis response plan — key elements

When developing a district-level plan, these are among the major categories to think through and address:

- **Prevention.** The shared commitment to preventing crises demonstrated through the creation of a culture of respect, and a safe and orderly learning environment.
- **Crisis response team personnel identification.** Specific roles and responsibilities assigned to district staff in emergency situations.
- **Policies and procedures.** School district safety policies, research-based violence prevention programs, intervention procedures and threat assessments.
- **Communication channels.** Clear communication channels for students, families, staff and the community to report threats or suspicions to avert potential violence. School districts and schools should put in place threat assessment teams to evaluate threats and to provide mental health support and outreach to students and staff in crisis.
- **School safety assessment.** Schedules for inspecting each school building's safety and assessing potential vulnerabilities in school organization and culture.
- **Comprehensive communications for internal and external audiences.** Equipment, policies and



procedures for contacting emergency services, staff, parents and students, and responding to media inquiries. (Be sure to have an alternative backup plan for communication if electricity or phone lines are not working.)

- **Equipment** — laptop computer, cell phones, two-way radios
- **Policies** — confidentiality of student records, release of student photos
- **Procedures** — mental health referrals, spokesperson identification, media protocols, student and staff emergency contact information, phone trees
- **Technology** — New technologies can be both an asset and a problem. While the use of cell phones, text messaging, email and other technology can help get the word out quickly, it also spawns rumors and unverified information, making it hard to control accurate messages.
- **Alert response procedures.** Written step-by-step instructions for notification of and response to various crises. Include checklists for use during varying degrees of danger levels:
  - **Monitor** — raising awareness of emergency or potential crisis to avert potential crisis and/or prepare to respond
  - **Standby** — securing resources to respond if the situation worsens
  - **Emergency** — deploying resources to respond
- **Command post.** A location to which district- and school-level crisis response team members should report, equipped with communication equipment such as phone lines, computers with access to the Internet, televisions and fax machines.
- **Community resources.** Relationships with community support agencies, public health, safety, law enforcement and the media.
- **Equipment and supplies.** Supplies such as building floor plans, backup generators, walkie-talkies, cell phones, etc.
- **Healing assistance.** Protocols for assisting all those affected by crisis, including students, staff and families. Procedures for using community-based mental health resources.
- **Recovery after the crisis — both operationally and in human terms.** Written plans for post-crisis healing activities such as staff and student counseling; classroom lesson planning; and where to reassemble students and staff if the school building is unavailable.
- **Training and practicing.** Training needs, dates and types of training to be offered, and practice schedules for schools.



## Creating a SCHOOL-LEVEL emergency preparedness and crisis response plan — key elements

Many schools use commonly available templates to begin creating their crisis response plan. These templates provide a starting point and should be customized for each school, taking into consideration the district's plan as well.

- **Prevention.** The shared commitment to preventing crises demonstrated through the creation of a culture of respect, and a safe and orderly learning environment.
- **Procedures.** Document how the following actions will be addressed and by whom:
  - Alert school staff about the nature of an event with calm, level-headed information.
  - Notify school crisis response team members, school staff, students, parents and the community of information about a crisis.
  - Support teachers with backup staff to cover classes.
  - Release students to parents and guardians and have an accountability system for verifying names.
  - Manage crowds and movement during crises, including evacuation procedures.
  - Provide student and staff transportation to evacuation or relocation sites, if necessary.
- Address needs of all students, including those with physical disabilities or limited English proficiency.
- Communicate between every room and the school office.
- Check in visitors.
- Deal with funerals or memorial services.
- Debrief after the emergency or crisis. What worked? What didn't?
- **Important locations.** Consider the following locations and build them into the plan:
  - A command post on and off campus to which school crisis response team members should report, equipped with communication equipment, such as phone lines, computers with access to the Internet, etc.
  - Evacuation sites and reunion areas where students, staff, parents and caregivers can meet, if necessary.
  - Designated areas in the school for staff and students to receive help before, during and after school.
  - Alternative sites for conducting school if an emergency renders schools unusable.
  - Utility hookups and emergency exits.
  - A media operations area to which reporters may be confined during a crisis. The location should be close enough to the school for access to information, but away from emergency response efforts.

- ***At-your-fingertips information.*** Consider placing the following information in a clearly marked section of the plan:
  - The chain of command to ensure continuity of operations.
  - Roles and responsibilities of school crisis response team members.
  - Steps for action in various emergencies.
  - A list of school personnel trained in first aid and CPR.
  - Equipment and supplies.
- A list of activities to help students discuss and deal with grief, fear, confusion, anger and other feelings that arise from crises.
- Media resources — a school information fact sheet.
- A list of internal and external emergency contacts.
- Student/staff rosters that include students with special needs and a description of required medicine and care.
- Parent/guardian student release authorization forms.

## Prevention programs

The best way to prepare for a crisis is to make prevention and school safety the highest priority. As you develop crisis preparation plans and assess potential threats and vulnerabilities, prevention programs should be identified and incorporated into your plan *and* daily school operations.

Prevention programs create and maintain a safe school environment. Every school district and school should develop a consistent code of conduct that reinforces values such as respect, fairness, tolerance and personal responsibility. The code should clearly outline unacceptable behaviors, including bullying, and consequences for violations. Bullying behavior includes not only physical aggression, but also verbal and cyber threats, name calling, rumors and menacing gestures. All staff, including support personnel, should receive training on how to identify bullying and other destructive behaviors and how to respond.

Encourage students to report threats to safety by teaching the difference between tattling and reporting potentially dangerous situations. Instill the message that “friends do tell.” Clear reporting policies and safe school hotlines help protect confidentiality, and troubled students should have access to mental health support.

Adopt research-based programs that increase students’ understanding of behaviors and attitudes that lead to violence, how to resolve conflict peacefully and create a culture of respect and focus on learning. Consider such factors as the type of program (curricular, extracurricular), the target age groups, costs and resources needed.

## How local, state and federal laws may affect a school or district plan

From the start, it's important to consider how local, state and federal laws may impact a district's or school's emergency preparedness and crisis response plan. For example, does your state require bully prevention education or annual crisis response training for staff? Does your school district require regular safety practice drills?

To help better understand and include such issues, take a closer look at these examples and consider others specific to your state or local area:

- **Federal laws.** The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law that affects the release of student information.
- **State laws.** California public schools are required under state law to prepare a safe school plan to address violence prevention, emergency preparedness, traffic safety and crisis intervention.
- **School district policies.** To comply with the state law, Los Angeles Unified School District regulations require that each site administrator ensure that a safe school plan is updated annually. Plans must include prevention programs and emergency procedures.

## The crisis response teams

Establishing a chain of command in advance of a crisis or emergency will help everyone know who is in charge and what the roles and responsibilities are when a crisis strikes. When assigning members to the crisis response teams, keep in mind that some staff will be caring for children and will not be able to both care for students and take on other responsibilities.

- **A district crisis response team** is an organized group of school district personnel and community experts who prepare plans for responding to emergencies and dealing with crises, and provide support to schools during a crisis. It often is led by the safety and security director or the superintendent.

- **A school crisis response team** is a group of school personnel who have the knowledge and skills to act in any emergency or crisis in a school. It is led by the principal.

### Incident Command System (ICS)

Each district and school crisis response team should organize specific roles and responsibilities according to the ICS. These roles include incident commander, safety officer, communications director, liaison officer and operations chief.

There will likely be both similarities and differences between the district and school crisis response teams. Factors such as the size of the district or school, the type of crisis and staff skills will influence how the response teams are formed. For example, both the school and district teams may have incident commanders and safety officers, but a communications director at the district level is dispatched to the school site to answer media questions.

The best approach is to review the ICS roles and think about how to tap district and school staff to meet the needs that are unique to the size of your district and school as well as the crisis or emergency. For example, it may be necessary to combine responsibilities in smaller districts.

It is also important to understand that in most cases, police and fire personnel will take over when they get to the site. Consider involving local representatives from police and fire agencies as appropriate in the planning process and work closely with them as an emergency or crisis unfolds to disseminate up-to-the-minute information to staff, students, parents and other stakeholders.

**The bottom line:** The more collaborative planning school and district leaders do in advance, the better prepared they will be to respond when an emergency or crisis strikes.

### The district crisis response team

#### Members include:

- School district superintendent or senior administrator
- School district safety and security director
- School district communications director
- School district department directors
  - Student services — psychologist, social worker, nurse, counselor, etc.
  - Technology
  - Transportation
  - Food services
  - Facility use and maintenance
  - Risk management/legal counsel
  - Human resources
- Community mental health agency representative
- Community victim assistance representative
- Public safety officers
- NEA local association representative

#### Responsibilities for preparing for a crisis:

- Create the district-level emergency preparedness and crisis response plan — a written document that spells out a school district's safety policies and instructions for handling emergencies and crises, and supporting staff, students and families.
- Prepare guidelines for individual school crisis response plans and oversee the implementation of individual school crisis response plans.
- Arrange training for school crisis response teams, including mock training exercises. Make sure practices are appropriate for the developmental level and emotional needs of students.

- Establish connections with community experts and local emergency responders such as counseling agencies, hospital personnel, law enforcement officials, fire departments, media outlets, etc., and maintain corresponding contact information.
- Build a central library of materials on emergency preparedness and crisis response.
- Gather equipment and supplies.
- Identify key staff to review and approve school crisis response plans.
- Ensure public safety agencies receive copies of district/school crisis response plans.

#### Responsibilities for responding to a crisis:

- Provide school crisis response teams with support and backup during a crisis, and dispatch resources to schools as necessary.
- Stay in contact with leaders of emergency responders.
- Manage the release of information. Verify factual information, authorize the release of information to the public and coordinate communications with the public and media.
- Report immediately to evacuation sites or hospitals if students or staff are being sent there.
- Meet and talk with parents of students and spouses of school staff.
- Authorize the purchase of services or materials needed for recovery after a crisis.
- Evaluate the crisis response with an after-action report to the superintendent and a plan for follow-up.

#### The school crisis response team

##### Members include:

- Principal
- Assistant principal
- Facility manager
- Food service personnel
- Front office professional
- NEA building representative
- School nurse or social worker
- Mental health professional (e.g., counselor, social worker, psychologist)
- Security officer
- Technology specialist
- Teachers as available and needed
- Liaison to district communication office

#### Responsibilities for preparing for a crisis:

- Create the emergency preparedness and crisis response plan for the school — a written document that aligns with the district plan, identifies staff roles and responsibilities during emergencies and crises, and addresses building-specific procedures such as lockdowns and evacuations. School plans should be updated regularly and be practiced by all participants.
- Make sure students know how to respond in a crisis. For example, students should know how to evacuate and how to behave in a lockdown. Tell students where the “safe” and “unsafe” classroom cards are stored. These cards are put under the door to inform emergency responders of the situation in the classroom in case of a lockdown.

- Communicate with parents about the major elements of the school’s safety plan, how the plan will be used in case of an emergency and how the school will notify parents.
- Provide training for the school crisis response team members, including on-site mock training exercises with public safety officials. When planning exercises, think carefully about who should be present. When is it appropriate for police and fire to practice in the building without staff? When should staff be present for drills? When should students be involved in the drills? Should media be allowed to observe practice exercises? Ensure parents/guardians are informed of the need to practice crisis preparedness drills.
- Provide information to the district-level crisis response team, including copies of the school crisis response plan, floor plans, location of shut-off valves, master keys, bell and bus schedules, student rosters with identification of special needs students, and evacuation routes and locations. These items should also be included in the school emergency or “Go Box” kits.
- Create a telephone tree to contact school crisis response team members and all other school staff when school is not in session. Also, create a plan to notify all school staff of an emergency during regular school hours.
- Gather needed equipment and supplies, such as walkie-talkies, radios, flashlights, office supplies and a bullhorn.

**Responsibilities for responding to a crisis:**

- Initiate emergency notification.
- Launch and direct the emergency response, including evacuation and parent notification.
- Secure the school and search for affected or injured individuals.
- Arrange medical care for injured individuals.
- Communicate with the district-level crisis response team and communications director.
- Determine whether counseling services are needed. Work with the district-level crisis response team to mobilize resources and oversee mental health services provided to students and staff.

**Types of emergencies and crises plans should address**

Prepare step-by-step plans for responding to emergencies and crises such as fights on school grounds, potentially volatile public demonstrations, deaths, disasters, medical situations, violent incidents, and traffic and utility problems. Also consider hazards unique to your community. Are there airports or railroads nearby? Are animal

**Emergency.** An urgent need that calls for immediate action such as a school shooting, tornado, gas leak or fire.

**Crisis.** An unfolding situation that has reached a critical phase with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome such as a hostage situation or terrorism.



disturbances, such as lion, bear or rabid animal attacks, or chemical contaminations possibilities? Are natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, fires or tornadoes, likely?

During this planning, school districts should identify a list of possible emergencies and crises and determine special issues and tactics for each one.

For example, earthquakes in some communities might be likely, yet unpreventable. However, school districts might be able to mitigate structural damage or injuries by requiring specific building enhancements.

### **Levels of alert for increasing response times and mitigating damage:**

- **Monitor** — raising awareness of emergency or potential crisis to avert potential crisis and/or prepare to respond
- **Standby** — securing resources to respond if the situation worsens
- **Emergency** — deploying resources to respond

## **Communications and media relations**

Accurate and consistent information and updates are critical for restoring order and supporting the school family.

The strength of your plan's communications and media strategies will help ensure everyone has the most up-to-date information.

**Determine who and how the school or district will provide information during a crisis about:**

- What happened?
- Who is in charge?
- Has the situation been contained?
- Are the victims being helped?
- Why did this happen?
- Did you have forewarning?

**Develop tools for communicating information:**

- An emergency Web site, linked to the district homepage, with regular updates and links to resources.
- An email listserv to stakeholders who must be contacted regularly, such as staff, media, parents and elected officials.
- Translation services.
- Electronic message from school and district offices to provide the latest information.
- A daily fact sheet.
- Letters or emails to parents at affected school and other schools in district. Frequently asked questions and answers that can be distributed to media and put on the crisis Web site.

**Identify tactics for answering media questions, sharing accurate and up-to-the-minute information and developing positive working relationships with the media:**

- Know who to contact and how to reach all local media. Think about how your community gets its news. For example, do people rely on radio stations? Is there a local news station?
- Develop template news releases and advisories that can be quickly filled in and updated with information.
- Follow all district policies and state laws when releasing information to the media.
- Identify an experienced spokesperson to field media questions and requests.
- Craft key messages about school safety and talking points specific to the emergency or crisis.
- Identify who will provide guidance to teachers on media interviews.
- Establish policies regarding media presence on school grounds and in buildings.
- Consider distributing NEA's "Preventing Copycat Incidents" fact sheet and the "Open letter from the classroom to the newsroom" to encourage more productive news coverage.
- Manage media coverage of benchmark dates.
- Create a letter or email that encourages media responsibility.



## **Training**

Staff and students should receive training annually on the procedures outlined in the emergency preparedness and crisis response plan. (Be sure to include bus drivers and substitute teachers.)

Identify in the plan who will provide training and what training is necessary so everyone understands his or her role in a crisis.

The plan should also outline steps for other activities to raise awareness about the plan such as:

- **Orientation for new staff.** Orient new staff to the plan. Make sure each classroom has a copy of step-by-step emergency response procedures. Arrange for substitute teachers to receive copies when they arrive at new schools.

- **Communication.** Communicate components of the plan to parents and guardians, and other appropriate stakeholders. Public safety agencies should be provided with copies of each school's and the district's emergency preparedness and crisis response plan.
- **Practice.** Practice major aspects of the plan regularly, such as lockdown and evacuation procedures, using tabletop exercises and actual drills with law enforcement officials, so everyone is confident in fulfilling their roles.

## Emergency/crisis response actions

Different emergency situations will require different reactions. Common emergency responses include:

- **Lockdown** — Lock all exterior doors and move students and staff to secure locations. Lock or secure classroom doors.
- **Shelter-in-place** — Contain staff and students indoors due to external threats such as chemical spills or sniper attacks.
- **Evacuation** — Move all students and staff from the building in an orderly fashion to a predetermined evacuation site. Determine how students and staff will be reunited with their families.

## Plans for recovery

Another major component of the emergency preparedness and crisis response plan is to identify ways to help students and staff heal after a crisis and return to learning.

**The plan should identify how to:**

- Provide support and counseling for students and staff to facilitate individual and collective grieving.
- Decide whether to suspend regular instruction to discuss the disaster.
- Line up extra substitute teachers to be on call.
- Provide additional resources to teachers who will be dealing with troubled students in need of extra attention.
- Plan for the first day back at school.\*
- Deal with funerals or memorial services.\*
- Create a timely means for informing parents and the community of new information.
- Consider how anniversaries of a disaster may provide an opportunity for planning a special remembrance.\*



## How does your existing plan measure up?

Have a plan already? Update your plan regularly to take into account best practices, changes in facilities and staffing, and other factors.

Here's a helpful checklist to help get you started. **Does your plan:**

- Identify safety policies, research-based violence prevention programs and intervention procedures?
- Have a process for informing parents about the plan's key elements and procedures prior to an emergency?
- Include a mechanism for police to notify the school of critical incidents, such as the death of a school-aged child, the death of a school employee or a significant event that in the opinion of police may impact children and school staff?
- Include threat assessment procedures and guidelines?
- Determine how school staff will be notified of troubled students who may pose a threat to safety?
- Identify ways students, parents, staff and community can report threats and suspicious incidents such as providing a specific contact name, phone number and email address?
- Outline notification procedures, including assigning responsibility for calls to families?
- Determine procedures for canceling school, early dismissal, using the school as a shelter for lockdowns, evacuations and relocation?
- Include a way to verify factual information about the crisis and share it with staff and parents?
- Provide steps for aiding victims and "normalizing" the school environment in the aftermath of a crisis?
- Include ongoing collaboration and input from public safety and other response partners?
- Provide MOU with response partners?
- Incorporate the structure and tenets of National Incident Management System (NIMS)/ ICS?

# 2.

## BEING RESPONSIVE DURING A CRISIS





## 2.

### BEING RESPONSIVE DURING A CRISIS

Knowing how to respond in a crisis is key to restoring order and supporting our students, staff and school community. Part Two identifies action steps for the first hours of the crisis as well as ongoing responses. These action steps include strategies to manage operational issues, such as ensuring student and staff safety, and the setup of communications systems and activities. All of these responses will be part of the plans developed in Part One, but are organized below for quick reference for those who find themselves unprepared in the midst of crisis.



#### Day one — first hour

##### Nine things to do immediately

- 1. Assess the crisis**
  - What must be done immediately to protect lives? Should the school go on lockdown, evacuate or close off areas of the building or grounds?
  - Are people injured?
  - Is medical attention needed?
- 2. Call for assistance**
  - Contact police and fire/rescue agencies.
  - Contact leadership and crisis team at district central office.
- 3. Mobilize at site**
  - Initiate site-based emergency plan.
  - Activate incident command team and protocols.
  - Call for school buses, if needed.
  - Determine if actions (e.g., lockdown) must be taken at neighboring schools.
- 4. Gather supplies**
  - Collect the “Go Box” with essential supplies, such as walkie-talkies, portable radios, flashlights, office supplies, class lists, key phone numbers and school site plans, including location of shut-off valves.
- 5. Communicate to key internal audiences**
  - Bring first aid kits.
  - Collect staff and student directories with home phone numbers and emergency contact information.
  - Activate cell phones and walkie-talkies. Keep one phone line open to the district office in case of lines jamming during the crisis.
- 5. Communicate to key internal audiences**
  - Develop a preliminary statement — what’s happened, what’s the immediate response.
  - Develop a script for people answering phone calls.
  - Disseminate accurate information to staff, district leadership, district communications department and other schools.

## 6. Communicate with families

- Initiate crisis plan parent notification system.
- Determine how, when and where families will be reunited.
- Begin external communications:
  - Contact local and state NEA leaders.
  - Communicate with appropriate state and local agencies.
  - Contact school district attorney.

## 7. Manage media relations

- Establish a media briefing area.
- Work with law enforcement to set a designated area and perimeter for media.
- Identify the spokesperson (site-based or district official).
- Develop an initial media release.\*
- Provide school and district fact sheets that include basic information about the school and school district, such as number of students and staff, location and grade levels served.\*
- Hold a press briefing in conjunction with law enforcement.

- Control rumors by getting facts out as soon as information is verified.
- Take into account that personal communications tools, such as cell phones and text messaging, allow students to contact media and others directly.

## 8. Establish network to account for missing and injured

- Determine who is safe and who is not accounted for.
- Establish a liaison with local hospitals, if necessary.

## 9. Contact mental health support

- Request counselors and other trained professionals from neighboring schools.
- Contact district crisis response team.
- Contact local mental health agencies or centers.
- Contact state and national agencies who can provide immediate support to students and staff.

## Day one — first 12 hours

### Plan for communications command center to be operational in the next day or two.

- Determine best location based on crisis site. Consult with school principal, facilities manager, security and law enforcement.
- Develop a list of supplies that will be needed at the command post, such

as cell phones, copier, fax machine, computers, printers, televisions and radios.

- Assign a volunteer coordinator who will solicit communications experts and volunteers from local, state and national sources, if needed, to help with media relations, answering phones, making copies, etc.

### Establish communications channels for internal and external audiences.

- **Initiate phone tree and email to staff, students and parents.** Carefully craft a script with what is known and not known to share with students and families.
- **Create a recorded message on district voice messaging system** and update regularly as new information becomes available. Include a phone number where people with questions can reach a “real” person.
- **Update the district and school Web sites** with information about the crisis. Cross-reference hotline numbers and provide links to other resources, such as mental health support.
- **Set up an information hotline** staffed by central office personnel or trained volunteers from the teacher’s association, retired administrators, etc. Provide a script and answers to frequently asked questions. Have operators log calls and keep track of new questions that arise.
- **Develop fact sheet template** to be used throughout the crisis. Send fact sheet electronically to internal and external audiences daily at a set time, such as 10 a.m.
- **Send group email.** Send an email to staff at the affected site and all other central and school sites in the district with the latest information about what happened and what is being done. Provide information on how to get updates through the Web site and hotline.
- **Deal with rumors.** Make sure all central and school-based staffs have

accurate information that they can share in the community to squelch rumors.

Recognize how technology — such as cell phones and text messaging — can accelerate the spreading of rumors.

- **Provide scripts for office personnel** on answering questions or giving directions to the staging area or other important locations.

### Prioritize stakeholders.

Take care of internal audiences first, such as:

- Staff at the affected site, other schools, central office, substitutes and retired staff.
- Students and parents at the affected site.
- Students and parents at neighboring schools.
- Families districtwide.
- Key community leaders such as school board members, other elected officials and clergy.
- Media. Provide service to local media first, then national and international.

### Continue to address priority needs, including facilities and people management.

- **Reunite families.** Have a list of all students and check them off when they are picked up by parents or legal guardian.
- **Contact local hospitals.** Establish a liaison between the school district and the hospitals to get ongoing reports of victims’ conditions.
- **Secure building and grounds.** Work with law enforcement to secure perimeter of school.



- **Get top district officials to the scene.** The superintendent and/or top administrators, along with key communications department staff, should tour the scene as soon as possible. Decide whether the superintendent will make a media statement.

### **Manage media relations.**

The media will want ongoing information. Be available, open and honest.

- **Designate a spokesperson** who can serve throughout the crisis. If the school district has a communications office, it's ideal for the director to serve as spokesperson. Determine carefully whether the principal, superintendent or school board members will make public statements and who is most appropriate. Consider:
  - Is the official emotionally ready and able to give a statement?
  - Does the community/media expect a high-level official to take an active, visible communications role?
  - What are the legal considerations and long-term implications?
  - Which official is appropriate? Who has the most information and represents the district best in the public arena?
- **Consider distributing** NEA's "Preventing Copycat Incidents" fact sheet and the "Open letter from the classroom to the newsroom" to encourage more productive news coverage.
- **Prepare officials for their roles:**
  - Provide talking points in writing.
  - Prepare a list of frequently asked questions and answers.
- Practice, including asking difficult questions.
- Determine a specific length of time for the interview or media conference. Begin and end on time.
- Put the communications director in charge to introduce the spokesperson, manage the question-and-answer period and decide when the interview should end.
- **Meet with media spokespersons** from law enforcement and the fire/rescue agencies to determine how you will coordinate release of information.
- **Develop a call log** and track media calls, news agency and reporter names, and questions asked.
- **Set up a regular schedule of press briefings.** During the first few hours, as the incident is unfolding, hourly press briefings may be required, even if there is nothing new to report. That frequency can decrease as the situation stabilizes. During press briefings:
  - Discuss how the identity of victims will be released. Names should not be released until they are verified. Law enforcement, fire and rescue, hospitals and families should be involved in this decision.
  - Provide information about evacuation. The media are very helpful in getting information out quickly, so families know where their children are and how to be reunited.
  - Express sympathy and acknowledge pain and grief suffered by victims, their families and the community. Connect on a human level. Grant permission to feel the range of feelings associated with a crisis.



- Thank individuals and agencies. Acknowledge the good work of school staff, first responders and community agencies.

### Take care of staff.

Set up a staff meeting as soon as practical to talk with staff and express support and

caring. Practice active listening, allowing staff to safely vent and be heard.

### Make decision about classes the next day at affected schools as well as other schools in the district.

Release information about the following day as soon as possible.



## Day one — evening

### Meet with first responders and school/district crisis team.

Discuss what worked and what didn't. Talk about the next steps and how the agencies will work together over the next few days. Determine where and when the agency representatives will next meet. Establish a process to coordinate media response.

Hold a meeting with school incident command team, school/district crisis team and communications team to address the following issues:

- What worked well — Did we follow our emergency plan? Did it work as expected? How did we communicate? Did we do everything we could to ensure safety?
- What must we improve — What parts of the plan didn't work? Were responses prompt and appropriate?
- What lies ahead — What can we expect tomorrow? How will we communicate to key stakeholders?

### Plan for the next day for issues that affect students and school staff.

- Will school be open?
- Where will students and staff gather?

- What actions must we take immediately regarding mental health, safety and security, internal communications and media?
- Whom do we need to contact in our community, such as elected officials, former board members, hospitals, first responders, opinion leaders, district leadership, principals, staff, parents, attorneys, etc.?
- What help do we need, such as volunteers for hotline, phone banks, media relations, family liaisons, etc.

### Develop a longer-term media strategy.

The longer-term media strategy should include when, where and how you will communicate to the media on an ongoing basis. Appreciate that the media need a story and your role is to provide accurate, timely information. Messages should include your concern about safety and what you are doing to assure a safe learning environment.

- **Understand the cycles of media response** because the needs and desires of the media change as the situation evolves. During the first hours, there is a mad scramble for

information, and you can minimize rumors by releasing timely, accurate reports. After the facts are known, the media will begin to analyze the causes and look for different angles, emerging issues and people to interview. Media will also want to cover special events, such as memorials, the first day back at school and athletic activities.

- **Set a goal to heal and return to “normal” through your work with the media.**
- **Decide when, how and where to communicate with the media.** Will the media have access to the building? Grounds? Consider sending a letter or email to the media asking for cooperation.
- **Monitor the media.** Volunteers can monitor television news from the command center or from remote sites. Staff or volunteers should also clip local and national newspapers and monitor news Web sites.
- **Develop media protocols.** You may want to develop media request forms to track and organize media inquiries.

Decide how to handle interview requests with staff, students and families. Will a spokesperson appear on talk shows? How will local vs. national media requests be handled? What advice will you provide staff, parents and students regarding media interviews? How will you work with the school district attorneys regarding media releases?

#### **Hold an executive session.**

The executive session should include legal counsel and the district’s governing body (e.g., the board of education) to share what happened, discuss legal ramifications of the crisis and determine next steps.

#### **Stock the communications command center.**

Stock the center with appropriate supplies and materials.

## **Day two**

#### **Provide meeting place for staff.**

Determine a safe location for staff to meet informally and as a group. Hold a morning debriefing with first responders, school administration and district officials. Provide mental health support. Assure there are sufficient food, healthful snacks and beverages. Talk to staff about their rights with the media. Practice active listening, allowing staff to vent and be heard in a safe, caring environment.

#### **Designate a drop-in location for students and families.**

Offer mental health support and provide food and beverages. Give regular updates on activities and events. Arrange for child care.

#### **Attend to families of victims.**

Assign a district liaison to work with the families and offer mental health support

as well as assessing other needs, such as seeking local accommodations for close family members who must fly in for funeral services. Publicize funeral arrangements. Check condition of hospitalized victims.

#### **Take care of other schools in the district.**

Determine whether mental health support or additional security is needed at other schools. Provide ongoing updates. Watch for copycat incidents and work with the media to prevent them.

#### **Consider facility and operational issues.**

Work with the district insurance company and facilities staff on repairs.

#### **Identify a restart date for school.**

Consult with law enforcement, health/mental health officials and facilities staff about when school can resume.

#### **Set up long-term communications channels.**

These channels need to be available as long as necessary depending on the crisis and its aftermath such as:

- An emergency Web site, linked to the district homepage, with regular updates and links to resources for parents and staff, such as signs of post-traumatic stress, how to talk to your child about trauma, etc.
- An email group list to stakeholders who must be reached regularly, such as staff, media and elected officials.
- Voice mail messages at school and district offices to provide the latest

information. The messages should be updated daily and include information about school activities, memorials, funerals and donations.

- A daily fact sheet for key stakeholders. Develop a fact sheet template and update information every day at a set time.\*
- A letter or email to parents at the affected school and other schools in the district providing them with information and resources.\*
- Frequently Asked Questions. Develop an ongoing list of frequently asked questions and answers that can be distributed to the media and put on the crisis Web site. Questions should include what happened, who was involved and how the community can help.\*

#### **Revise media protocols as necessary.**

Determine what information the media will need based on monitoring of print and broadcast coverage. Make decisions regarding ongoing press briefings: Who will be the lead agency, how often, location, spokesperson, other speakers, etc. Discuss the need for a joint information center with the other involved agencies.

Ensure key media, such as local reporters, are receiving regular press releases and fact sheets. Look for positive stories to share with the media to promote healing. Consider distributing NEA's "Preventing Copycat Incidents" fact sheet and the

“Open letter from the classroom to the newsroom” to encourage more productive news coverage.

#### **Assign volunteer responsibilities.**

A staff volunteer coordinator can screen volunteers and assign them to appropriate duties: staffing hotlines/phone banks, answering media calls that focus on facts as opposed to opinion, monitoring the media, providing food, accepting donations, writing thank-you notes, etc. Volunteers must be trained with accurate, updated information.

#### **Develop systems for accepting donations.**

People will want to make cash donations and donations of goods and services. It’s important to keep good records and be accountable for these donations. Tasks include:

- Check state laws and regulations that govern the collection of donations prior to developing a process for accepting donations.
- Set up a bookkeeping system to track financial donations — where they are coming from, if the donor has a specific use in mind, etc.
- Develop a process for cataloging and storing cards, letters and gifts.
- Assign volunteers to write thank-you notes for donations.
- Be aware of special funds that interested individuals and victims’ families may set up.
- Work with organizations that want to set up fundraisers to ensure the activities are appropriate and the funds are

being collected and distributed in an accountable manner.

#### **Coordinate efforts with other agencies.**

Determine jurisdictional issues, such as who is in charge of a building; is the building a crime scene; who makes decisions about when the building can be repaired and reopened; and who releases information about victims and perpetrators. Key tasks:

- Decide when visitors can enter the building. The governor or other elected officials often want to tour the building.
- Determine who will plan memorial events and activities. Sometimes government officials and well-meaning community members want to rush into holding special memorial events. Be thoughtful in planning any formal events and involve students and their families. Be considerate of religious and cultural diversity. Opinions vary on whether there should be a schoolwide memorial event. The developmental level of the students is an important factor in how the school handles memorial events and activities. If there is a memorial event, involve students in the planning and make it brief, respectful and hopeful.
- Make a list of all key agencies and determine communications channels. Agencies include:
  - NEA, state and local teacher associations
  - Local, state and federal law enforcement as well as emergency management agencies
  - Fire and rescue agencies



- American Red Cross
- Hospitals
- Local, state and federal mental health providers, including National Organization of Victims Assistance
- Local and state elected officials, including governor, legislators, city council and county commissioners
- Federal government agencies, including Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice and Department of Education



## First week

### Support families by providing information and resources.

There are several strategies school and district leaders can use to support the school family. Hold a parent meeting at school to answer questions and address concerns. Have a mental health expert address post-traumatic stress. Provide handouts on mental health issues and information on long-term mental health resources.

It is also important to provide safe places for students and parents to meet informally. Include planned activities (games, crafts) as well as mental health support. Form parent support groups with the help of mental health agencies. Practice active listening to allow a safe place for grief and anxiety to be vented and heard.

### Make sure staff is valued and informed through daily meetings and phone calls.

Involve staff in planning special events, memorials and back-to-school activities. Make mental health services available, including Employee Assistance Program, if applicable. Practice active listening and acknowledge pain and anxiety as well as a healing process that has ups and downs.

### Return to normalcy.

It's important for everyone to return to a routine as quickly as possible while honoring those injured or dead. Determine when to resume extracurricular activities and classes in consultation with law enforcement, mental health and facilities staff.

### Continue to provide regular, ongoing communications.

There is no such thing as "overcommunication" in a crisis. Regularly update Web sites, voice mails and phone scripts. Maintain a master list of questions and get volunteers to research answers. Continue daily fact sheets as needed.

### Manage the ongoing needs of the media as the story evolves.

The media will look for new angles as the crisis stabilizes. While the number of press conferences decreases, individual requests for information and interviews continue. Ask the media to consider what images are portrayed and how that affects potential retraumatization of victims. Develop media protocols regarding media pools and credentials for special events and memorials to minimize intrusion while ensuring media access. A media pool is a commonly used

practice that provides access to a limited group of media representatives who are required to share video and sound with all other media outlets. Consider distributing NEA's "Preventing Copycat Incidents" fact sheet and the "Open letter from the classroom to the newsroom" to encourage more productive news coverage.

**Continue to meet and coordinate with appropriate agencies.**

Especially in the case of a crime, keep in close contact with law enforcement agencies.

**Meet with key stakeholders.**

For rumor control, hold face-to-face communications with all district principals and administrators, school board members, former board members, parent leadership, elected officials and other community leaders so the community receives accurate and timely information.

**Research financial resources.**

Grants may be available from local and state agencies, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. These grants can help fund additional nurses, mental health workers, substitute teachers, after-school activities and consultants.

 **Back to school — when students and staff return**

**Support students and families to help them feel safe and to promote healing and a sense of normalcy.**

Getting back to a regular routine will help students feel secure. It will be important to develop a re-entry plan that gradually reintroduces the school routine, such as tours of the building, where students and their parents can return to school for a short time and feel comfortable.

Helping people feel safe is critical. Make sure parents and students know about the presence of new adults in the building, such as police, mental health counselors, and volunteer door and hall monitors. Encourage parents to be in the school as volunteer support, door monitors, etc. Decide on the schedule for the first day

back to school. Do you want to have a half or full day of classes? Some schools begin with having students meet and talk with the teacher whose class they were in when the tragedy struck. Schools also should have mental health professionals available.

Provide meaningful opportunities to mark the occasion. Consider whether you want to start the day with a moment of silence. Students might write letters to those injured or thank-you notes to the first responders.

Reinforce rules about leaving the building, student movement in hallways and staircases, and reporting suspicious incidents. For students who can't return to school, consider offering the option of homeschooling.

### **Provide support for staff so they feel capable of being caregivers and educators.**

Actively listen to staff concerns and issues. Reflect concerns back to staff, providing support and answering questions. Set up a “safe room” where staff can go for a break or to seek guidance from a mental health professional. Have substitute teachers available to take over classes if teachers need a break.

Before school starts, have a meeting with all staff, administrators and mental health professionals to discuss curriculum and talking points. The school should develop a prepared statement so teachers can give the same information at the same time to all students. Before releasing any information about victims, ensure it is verified and the family is willing to disclose it publicly. Avoid use of public address systems or large assemblies to make announcements about crisis situations. Ensure office staff knows the latest developments and has a script for answering phone calls.

### **Provide classroom activities for teachers to use with students.**

Classroom activities should be developmentally appropriate, help students express grief, feel safe and look forward to a positive future. Students can express their feelings through art and writing.

### **Take care of staff.**

Have volunteers bring lunch and snacks for staff members.

### **Take care of the community.**

Invite first responders to visit the school and serve them a “thank-you” lunch on a day students are not present.

### **Consider operational issues that make staff and students feel more comfortable.**

For example, think about changing the sounds of the fire and emergency alarms. Also consider changing the “look” of affected parts of the building; don’t use rooms where violence, injuries or death occurred; and visually block off damaged areas.

### **Manage media coverage of the first day back.**

Establish policies regarding media presence on school grounds and in the building. Establish a perimeter for photographers and satellite trucks. Set guidelines on still and videocameras in the building. Consider holding a meeting or conference call with the media prior to the first day back to set the tone and parameters for the day. Remember the goal is to establish a normal routine, heal and foster a sense of safety. Host a media tour when students are NOT in school, so reporters have footage to use later.



# 3.

## BEING THOROUGH AFTER A CRISIS





# 3.

## BEING THOROUGH AFTER A CRISIS

Continued healing requires addressing the aftermath of the crisis, including how to handle long-term mental health needs and the ongoing process of recovery. In Part Three, find information on handling donations, managing reminders, such as anniversaries of the crisis and long-term communications. It includes tips on evaluating the crisis response and revisiting a crisis plan after a tragedy.



### Long-term mental health needs

#### The ongoing process of recovery

Healing takes time and everyone reacts to tragedies differently. The rate of recovery differs for each person based on many factors, such as age, experience and closeness to the incident.

The online crisis guide has comprehensive resources on how teachers, parents and other adults can help students as well as how children at different developmental levels experience grief.

Some tips:

- **Establish a routine and strive to achieve a “new normal” to help students and staff recover.** While things will never be quite the same, students and staff will come to realize a new equilibrium can be achieved.
- **Continue to provide mental health support and encourage participation.** Teachers should not be expected to provide mental health treatment; experts should be available for students and staff.

- **Encourage staff use of the district’s Employee Assistance Program.** Provide in-house or contracted mental health services to help employees deal with personal problems.
- **Have guest experts meet with staff and parents** about the issues related to post-traumatic stress.
- **Enhance communication between home and school** and let parents know if their children are exhibiting signs of post-traumatic stress.
- **Seek help from other communities** that experienced a similar tragedy.

#### Common reactions to crisis

Trauma can change the way those involved look at the world and make them feel less safe and secure. Remember that not only staff and students at the affected school, but also those at neighboring schools and perhaps the entire district may experience stress and have emotional and physical responses to the crisis.

After a traumatic event, most people will go through a cycle of grief and eventually return to a “new normal.” Reactions will depend on the severity of the trauma, prior experiences, personality, coping mechanisms and availability of support. For some, the trauma will become a growth experience. For others, post-traumatic stress will have lifelong, negative implications, and they will never fully recover.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), an anxiety disorder that can occur after a traumatic event, is marked by feelings such as fear, confusion and anger. When these symptoms don’t go away or get worse, it can disrupt normal daily activities and trigger self-destructive behaviors.

It’s important that children and adults get help if they exhibit these symptoms. Many educators post this list of common reactions in their teachers’ lounges as a means of informing school staff about possible reactions for their students and themselves. In addition to being informative, having the list posted also serves as a form of permission to experience the full range of feelings that bubble up in the aftermath of crisis. Continue to monitor students and staff for signs of PTSD.

After a trauma, both children and adults may experience:

- Guilt and self-blame. Students and staff might feel that they should have done more to help during the crisis or to prevent the crisis. Many will feel guilty that they survived when others didn’t.

- Hopelessness and depression. A traumatic event changes how people feel about their personal safety, and they may feel helpless and depressed. They may feel out of control, like they’ll never stop crying.
- Misuse of drugs, alcohol and food. People may turn to substances to ease the psychological pain. Loss of appetite or compulsive eating can occur.
- Sleep disorders, including insomnia or nightmares, are common reactions to stress.
- Numbness and withdrawal. To avoid feeling the pain, people may withdraw from family, friends and activities.
- Physical problems. Stress often manifests itself through headaches, stomachaches, sore shoulders and other physical problems.

In addition, students may experience:

- Fear, panic and overconcern about safety. When events outside their control occur, children may experience fear that something else will happen.
- Difficulty with concentration and school performance. When students are upset, it is difficult to learn. They may have lower grades and more absences.
- Regression. Children might return to behaviors that they had outgrown, such as thumb-sucking.
- Anger and acting out. Often discipline incidents increase in schools after a crisis because students need an outlet for their anger and want to feel in control.

- Clinging to family members or friends. Children need to know that their support system is there for them.
- At-risk behaviors, such as suicide and teen pregnancy, often increase after a tragedy. Self-destructive behaviors such as cutting may also occur.
- Increased sensitivity. Staff may be jumpy and overreact to student behaviors, sounds (e.g., alarms, loud voices).

### **Psychological impact of natural or manmade disasters**

Natural disasters or manmade catastrophes such as building explosions, bridge collapse, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes can have serious psychological consequences similar to those experienced during acts of violence. Issues related to the destruction of homes, property, heirlooms and livelihoods will compound the feelings of loss and powerlessness. These disasters often multiply normal stress such as finances, and create new stressors from problems caused by the disaster — homelessness, transportation issues and lack of basic services. When recovering from natural or manmade disasters, it's important to keep the family together as much as possible. Children will pick up feelings of anxiety from their parents, so it's critical to talk about what is happening and how the family will recover together.

The National Association of School Psychologists suggests that children process their emotions and reactions to trauma within 24 to 36 hours.

Staff may feel:

- Sense of grief and loss. Remember that staff throughout the district, and especially in neighboring schools, may have personal relationships with colleagues and perhaps students directly affected by the tragedy.
- Inability to carry on school routines. Staff may have trouble concentrating on lessons and carrying out their daily duties. They may need more time off for physical and mental distress. Consider a "safe room" where staff can take a break when needed.
- Heightened concern about student safety and personal well-being.
- Sense of responsibility. Staff concerns about their responsibility for students and ability to keep students safe may increase.

## Handling donations

Often after a tragedy, people from across the country, and even the world, want to express their condolences through cards, gifts and cash donations. Unfortunately, these donations pressure school districts and associations into making quick decisions about handling the gifts. Check state laws and local regulations that govern the collection of donations before developing a process for accepting them. (Unless the

contribution is made to a nonprofit organization, the donation is not tax deductible.) Be sure to keep accurate records on donations and immediately design a process for how funds will be allocated. It's also helpful to identify actions that people can take immediately to feel and be useful, such as donating food, clothing or water, housing, etc.

## Managing long-term reminders

Benchmark events — such as memorials, the first day back at school, the anniversary of the event, the birthday of the victim and graduation — will likely bring back memories for staff, students and the community.

Other “firsts” — the first major holiday, the first activity the victims are missing, the first day of a new school year — will also trigger memories. Provide mental health support for students and staff to help them through these events.

### Memorializing victims

Take into account the developmental age of the students. Include students, staff and families in planning activities. Be attentive to ethnic and cultural diversity. Proceed slowly when creating a permanent memorial — going too fast doesn't give people time to grieve and diverts attention from meeting the immediate needs of victims.

### Triggers for unpleasant memories and flashbacks:

- **Places.** The specific classroom where the tragedy occurred, the desk of a deceased student or the evacuation site may be painful reminders. Carefully consider how the building will be repaired and remodeled.
- **People.** Classmates and teachers who experienced the tragedy together, relatives of victims and first responders can remind each other of the tragedy. Find ways for staff and students to process the event together and support each other.
- **Sounds.** Helicopters, fire alarms and ambulance sirens often reinforce memories of a crisis. Consider changing the sound of school alarms. Ask news media to keep helicopters away from school events.
- **Similar events.** A tragedy in another community brings back unwelcome memories. Make sure that mental health support is provided when a similar crisis occurs elsewhere.



## Long-term communications and media strategies

Communication with staff, students, parents, the community and media is just as critical after the emergency or crisis has passed.

### Communications strategies

- Continue to provide regular communications and realize that the need for updated information continues in the aftermath of a crisis.
- Update Web sites, voice mails, phone scripts and fact sheets as needed.
- Maintain a master list of frequently asked questions and answers.
- Meet as needed with key stakeholders to identify questions, quell rumors and provide accurate and timely information.

### Media strategies

- Convey a message of resilience, continued healing and a return to normalcy when working with the media.
- Issue media advisories about memorial events open to the public, anniversary dates, fundraising or donations, etc.

### Managing media coverage of benchmark dates

The media will cover benchmark events, such as the first anniversary. For special events such as anniversary dates, establish

a media area to determine where the media will set up cameras so as not to intrude on the ceremony. Create a perimeter for photographers and satellite trucks. Set guidelines on still and videocameras in the building. Decide if you will have a media pool (selected media representatives who share information) or allow all media to attend the event.

It's helpful to meet with the media in advance to establish mutually beneficial guidelines. Ask the media to:

- Refrain from replaying or reprinting images of the crisis. Showing disturbing pictures has the potential to re-traumatize victims.
- Honor the victims and not glorify the perpetrators of violence.
- Respect the privacy of those who do not want to be interviewed.
- Consider a "no fly" zone over an outdoor memorial service.

Be proactive about pitching story ideas to the media that promote hope and healing. Develop a list of students and faculty willing to talk to the media.

## Evaluating your response

### What worked? What didn't?

Evaluate each crisis response with a report to the superintendent and a plan for follow-up. For example, did you:

- Notify the appropriate people at the onset?
- Activate resources immediately to meet the needs of the students, families and staff?
- Provide regular information updates and maintain open communication with teachers, other staff and parents?
- Monitor rumors and maintain timely, accurate information?
- Speak through one spokesperson to provide factual information to the media?
- Develop media messages that communicated ways that parents can support the recovery of their children?
- Provide mental health resources for those in emotional distress and identify and follow up with vulnerable students and staff during the recovery period?
- Identify during the aftermath any cues that could be traumatic reminders of the crisis and monitor behaviors among students and staff?

## Revisiting your crisis plan

### Thoroughly review your current plan — at the district and school levels.

Keep in mind shifts from when it was first developed, such as changes in:

- District policies and procedures
- School facilities and grounds
- Availability of evacuation sites and routes
- Emergency phone numbers and resources
- Special skills among staff members
- Bell and bus schedules
- Special needs of students
- Lessons learned from emergency/crisis response
- Community hazards and risks

An emergency preparedness and crisis response plan is a living document that must be reviewed on a regular basis in order to make needed modifications and improvements to the plan. The review process should also include public safety and other key stakeholder input.





**HELPING SCHOOLS  
IN CRISIS**





## HELPING SCHOOLS IN CRISIS

If a crisis, natural disaster or other emergency hits your school, remember that you are not alone. Your colleagues across the country have done an amazing job handling crises, and their support is just a phone call away. NEA HIN can put you in touch with national experts as well as experienced colleagues in the field to provide the help and resources you need. The contact information is:

**NEA HIN**  
1201 16th St., NW, Suite 216  
Washington, DC 20036  
202-822-7570

### NEA State Affiliate Crisis Response Teams

Several NEA state affiliates have organized crisis response teams that are dispatched to help members within their states deal with a traumatic events or emergencies. These teams may be dispatched to assist other state affiliates that experience a crisis (go to see which teams respond out of state).

The teams can assist in various ways including managing the media, ensuring that members have mental health support, providing direct intervention and mental health support, developing member advocacy programs, accessing community resources, and more.

Three states — California, Ohio, and Minnesota — have the most established crisis response teams. These teams are made up of state affiliate staff (mostly UniServ Representatives) who, in most instances,

volunteer to be a part of the team. While each team shares the same goal of assisting and advocating for members and locals in crisis, each team does so using different models and response approaches.

Teams vary according to their type of approach (member advocacy, organizing, community, first-responder); the training they receive (NOVA certification or crisis management); types of assistance they provide; request for assistance protocols (in state and out of state); and how they are funded.

While most state affiliates do not have organized crisis response teams, several provide assistance with crisis response and other school safety issues through different types of programs.

### Existing NEA State Affiliate Crisis Response Teams

- **California Teachers Association:** CTA Traumatic Events Assistance and Management Cadre (TEAM CADRE)
- **Ohio Education Association:** OEA Crisis Response Team and Safe Schools Cadre
- **Education Minnesota:** Education Minnesota Crisis Response Team

**ROLES OF THE NEA**  
**AND STATE AND LOCAL ASSOCIATIONS**





## ROLES OF THE NEA AND STATE AND LOCAL ASSOCIATIONS

### Part One: Being Prepared — Before a Crisis

Association leaders such as UniServ representatives, local presidents and others can help their communities prepare, provide support to staff and help in the aftermath of a crisis.

#### Crisis preparedness

- Forge relationships and networks before a crisis strikes.
- Offer to help leaders develop district-level and school-level preparedness and crisis response plans.
- Assist in efforts to identify community experts and resources.
- Establish communications channels capable of informing and updating local association members.
- Decide which association staff will:
  - Work with the district or school crisis response team.
  - Arrive on-site to meet association member needs.
  - Handle the phones in the association office and provide callers with accurate information.
  - Communicate with NEA headquarters.
  - Write correspondence and seek out extra resources for affected areas.
  - Provide information, research and best practices on how to deal with member and student needs.

### Part Two: Being Responsive — During a Crisis

#### Day one — first hour

- Contact state and local associations to access any crisis response resources that may be available. Provide as much information as possible and determine what supplies and resources may be needed.
- Assign local or state association liaison to work with the school district. Determine who should report to the site based on skill set, proximity and availability. Find out whether a lockdown is in place and how it might impact association participation.
- Develop a script for those answering the phone at state and local offices. Include accurate information on what happened and what is being done. Provide information about how the state and local associations are involved.

#### Day one — first 12 hours

- Provide support for staff at the site. The state or local liaison can help assess staff needs for the next 24 hours and beyond.
- Account for all members affected and where possible and appropriate,

personally connect with them to express support.

- Where possible and appropriate, develop a letter to the school community from the state president expressing sympathy and support. This can be shared with membership and the media.

### Day one — evening

- Debrief how association involvement worked. Meet with school and district representatives, local and state association representatives to review what happened, what worked well and what needs improvement.
- Identify a long-term liaison. Who from the local and state association offices will continue to work with association members and school district representatives?
- Learn district media protocols. Most school districts have established media policies. Find out how to avoid contradictory or competing information.
- Gather materials to share with school staffs.
- Gather statistical information on school safety that can be shared with the media.
- Assess whether the establishment of a fund where citizens can contribute money, needed items or just sentiments of support is appropriate and needed. This could include connecting contributors to an appropriate existing fund.

### Day two

- Seek out people needing assistance and encourage all staff to seek mental health support. Understand that there

will be hurt, frustration and misplaced anger, and you can be an objective listener. Provide information on concrete ways the association can help.

- Provide support for staff. Little things, like food, sweets and flowers, show that you care.
- Communicate member needs to district officials, including needs for the Employee Assistance Program or other mental health services to provide for long-term counseling.
- Send letter to all staff in affected school offering sympathy and support.
- Provide written materials such as mental health fact sheets and talking points for teachers and other school employees.
- Offer volunteers to cover phones in affiliate and district offices.
- Keep members informed across the state and nation. Where possible and appropriate promote an established fund where members and the public can contribute money, needed items, or just sentiments of support.
- Ensure that the fund or address receiving money, needed items and expressions of support is adequately staffed and that a plan is in place to account for donations, distribute them and to thank contributors.
- Consider distributing NEA's "Preventing Copycat Incidents" fact sheet and the "Open letter from the classroom to the newsroom" to encourage more productive news coverage.

### First week

- Help district and school staff with media relations by channeling requests to

speaking to association members. Develop media talking points and key messages regarding public education and school safety for school staff.

- Coordinate media contacts with the school district and log all media activities. Make educators' voices heard by speaking about how society can help troubled youth.
- Provide guidance to association members on media interviews. Share rights and responsibilities. Talk about such considerations as do they have a story to tell? Are they comfortable? Are family members and colleagues supportive? Is the district aware of the interview? Are there legal, ethical or mental health consequences of talking to the media?
- Help organize memorial services and back-to-school events.
- Provide ongoing support and recognition for members and other school staff. Sometimes after the first few days, everyone expects to be "normal." Reassure members there is no perfect way to handle disasters. Encourage staff to take the time to heal. Make personal calls to spouses of staff to see how the family is doing. Encourage use of mental health services.

- Continue promoting the established fund where members and the public can contribute money, needed items or just sentiments of support.

### **Back to school — when students and staff return**

- Have a liaison at the school to assess needs and provide support.
- Provide curriculum materials.
- Bring lunch, cookies and "care packages" to staff.
- Meet with association members after the first day to debrief and learn about what went well and what the ongoing needs are.
- Send personal letter of support to each member at his or her home address. Thank members for their dedication and hard work, and again encourage members to use mental health support.
- Release a statement of support for students, members, other staff and their families.
- Call on the public to recognize their courage and the media to respect their privacy and promote healing.



## Part Three: Being Thorough — After a Crisis

### Long-term mental health needs

- Continue communications with affected members to determine what support is needed. As time passes, people have an unrealistic expectation that everything should be “back to normal.” It’s important to recognize that healing is a long journey, not a sprint, and staff will need ongoing support and encouragement.
- Be advocates for change. Make sure the safety needs of the members are being met, and new programs and policies are put in place as needed.
- Provide expressions of caring. Have association liaisons visit the school on a regular basis, bringing goodies or mementos.
- Provide resources. Link members with colleagues in other schools where similar traumas have occurred so they can share and learn from each other.
- Contact national trauma experts to provide information to staff.

### Handling donations

- Check state laws and regulations that govern the collection of donations before developing a process for accepting donations.
- Start a memorial fund or fund to accept contributions. In some cases it may be appropriate to connect to an existing fund. If a member was lost, consider a scholarship fund to honor him or her. Coordinate with school efforts.
- Help with implementation of scholarship funds. Educators know what kinds of scholarships are most useful for their school or district and how to administer them. Offer to help establish a process for operating the scholarship program.
- Ask volunteers to catalog gifts and write thank-you notes. Retired members are eager to help with these types of tasks.
- Work with the school and district to coordinate efforts. If donations and gifts are received by the NEA, make sure there is a process for informing the school and district, determining how to allocate funds, and displaying or storing gifts.







## TOOLS AND TIP SHEETS





## TOOLS AND TIP SHEETS

AVAILABLE ON THE WEB SITE AT [WWW.NEAHIN.ORG/CRISISGUIDE](http://WWW.NEAHIN.ORG/CRISISGUIDE)

- **Planning:**
    - Who Should Create a District-level Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Response Plan?
    - Equipment and Supply List — District-level Crisis Response Team
    - “Go Box”
  - **Media Relations:**
    - Media Relations in a Crisis: Immediate Issues
    - Media Relations in a Crisis: Long-Term Issues
    - Media Protocols at Special Events
    - Sample Association Media Messages
    - Students, Staff and Parents: Your Rights with the Media
    - School Safety Statistics
    - Media and the First Anniversary
  - **Command Center:**
    - Sample Communications Command Post Supplies
    - Sample Volunteer Information
  - **Mental Health Issues:**
    - Sample Back-to-School Talking Points for Educators
    - Recovery: How Teachers can Help
    - How Parents and Other Caring Adults can Help
    - Concept of Death at Various Ages
    - Classroom Activities
  - **Long-term Issues:**
    - Managing Benchmark Dates
    - Managing Memorial Activities
    - Permanent Memorials — Issues to Consider
    - First Anniversary of the Crisis
  - **Case Studies:** Examples of Recent Crises and How NEA HIN Helped
  - **Web Links:** Sites with Resources Regarding Planning, Response and Recovery
- Templates available on the Web site**  
These easy-to-use templates are available in Microsoft Word and can be downloaded and adapted for your specific situation. For a complete list, visit [www.neahin.org/crisisguide](http://www.neahin.org/crisisguide).
- **Media Templates:**
    - Template for Initial Media Release
    - Media Request for Interview Form
    - Media Request for Information Form
    - Open Letter or email to the Media on Covering Crisis
    - Frequently Asked Questions
  - **Fact Sheets:**
    - School Fact Sheet — Basic Data about School
    - Daily Fact Sheet — Updates on Crisis
  - **Letters:**
    - Letter or email to NEA Local Members from State President
    - Letter or email to Parents
  - **Other:**
    - Emergency Contact List

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