

PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO VIOLENT ATTACKS IN SCHOOLS: EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND FACILITY IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The high profile school and college shootings in the United States in Colorado, Wisconsin, Connecticut, Texas, and Pennsylvania have caused communities to implement additional strategies to prevent or improve responses to school crises involving violence. It is important that schools not only attempt to prevent these violent acts but that they also well-prepared to respond if such an event should occur. By adequately preparing for violent attacks school corporations, universities, and colleges can help to ensure the safety of students and staff.

This paper will address education, training and planning strategies to prevent and/or respond effectively when a school crisis involving violence, such as a violent intruder or a bomb, occurs. Recommended steps that school administrators, teachers and parents can take to reinforce the safety of school environments will be described. Methods used to conduct a formal review of school safety policies and procedures will also be included. Examples of effective methods to use and maintain communication and conduct training and drills with community partners (emergency responders, area hospitals, victim's assistance, etc.) will be explained. The need to review emergency response plans and the key roles of staff, teachers and students will be described. Strategies to harden school facilities and key elements needed to respond if a crisis involving violence will be outlined.

Introduction

Despite effective prevention and preparedness efforts, natural or manmade mass casualty incidents involving schools continue to occur in the U.S. These events like most crises are by definition rare and often unexpected events, and no plan can anticipate the unique circumstances and special challenges associated with each crisis event (Cornell and Sheras, 1998). Columbine, Littleton, Nickel Mines,

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Virginia Tech and other school shootings each occurred without warning and created an increased concern for the safety of our children (Aspiranti, 2011).

Violence in schools is endangering the health, welfare, and safety of students and teachers (Lunenburg, 2010). Adults and students struggle to understand why these events happen and, more importantly, how they can be prevented. It is important that schools not only attempt to prevent these violent acts but that they also well-prepared to respond if such an event should occur. By adequately preparing for violent attacks school corporations, universities, and colleges can help to ensure the safety of students and staff.

Background and Thesis

Students, teachers, parents, and school administrators have become increasingly concerned in recent years about the rising tide of school violence (Leary et al, 2003). Students cannot learn when they are in fear of harm from their classmates (Lunenburg, 2010). Over the past 20 years, there have been almost 600 school shootings, not including planned or attempted shootings that were prevented. Violent attacks such as the high profile school shootings in Colorado, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania can cause concern within school communities, even if they are not directly affected by the event(s).

Confronted by increasing incidents of violent behavior in schools, educators are being asked to make schools safer. Schools, however, receive little guidance or assistance in their attempts to establish and sustain proactive discipline systems (Sugari et al, 2000). Stephens (1994) believes that there are only two kinds of schools: one that has faced a crisis and one that is about to face a crisis. This justifies the importance for schools to attempt to prevent these violent attacks but also to be prepared to respond if an attack should occur. Crisis management proposes strategies and processes for preparing for, preventing, responding to, managing, recovering from, and learning from crisis events (Gainey, 2010). These mitigation and prevention strategies include all activities, initiatives, and programs designed to mitigate or prevent harm from occurring to students, staff, and visitors while at school.

Preventing Violent Attacks

A heightened awareness of the potential tragedy of a school-related violent incident has prompted school administrators, law enforcement professionals, and mental health providers to put into place methods for identifying and intervening proactively with potentially violent students and situations (Mulvey and Cauffman, 2001). In order to provide for a safe and secure learning atmosphere for students, school districts must be able to expel violent students; transfer violent students to alternative schools; report violent offenders to law enforcement officials; require court counselors to confer with school officials; expand immediate school actions; and take privileges away from students (Lunenburg, 2010). School districts should take immediate actions to make schools safer. These actions should address comprehensive approaches to prevention, intervention, and crisis management (Daniels, 2012). Some ways of preventing school violence include toughening weapon laws and dealing with violent students (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The use of school security officers, peer mediation, crisis intervention teams, and the development of policies and procedures governing student behavior can also help to mitigate school violence (Meltzer, 2011).

School principals and superintendents can provide leadership in reassuring students, staff, and parents that schools are generally very safe places for children and youth and reiterating what safety measures and

student supports are already in place in their school. There are a number of steps that administrators can take to reinforce the fact that schools are safe environments and increase student/adult comfort level. Some examples of ways in which administrators can help to build a culture of safety and prevent violent acts in school are the following:

- Write a letter to parents explaining the school safety policies and crisis prevention efforts and cite statistics that less than one percent of violent deaths are “school associated.”
- Be a visible, welcoming presence at school, greeting students and parents and visiting classrooms.
- Issue a press release about the school district efforts to maintain safe and caring schools through clear behavioral expectations, positive behavior interventions and supports, and crisis planning and preparedness
- Conduct a formal review of all school safety policies and procedures to ensure that emerging school safety issues are adequately covered in current school crisis plans and emergency response procedures. (Such reviews should be conducted at least annually.)
- Review communication systems within the school district and with community responders. This should also address how and where parents will be informed in the event of an emergency.
- Connect with community partners (emergency responders, area hospitals, victim’s assistance, etc.) to review emergency response plans and to discuss any short-term needs that may be obvious in response to the current crisis.
- Provide crisis training and professional development for staff based upon needs assessment.
- Highlight violence prevention programs and curriculum currently being taught in school. Emphasize the efforts of the school to teach students alternatives to violence including peaceful conflict resolution and positive interpersonal relationship skills

These examples from the New Jersey Department of Education’s School Safety Manual (Libera et al, 2004) can help to prevent a violent attack and provide a sense of security to students and teachers.

Importance of School Safety Policy

Schools need to be ready in case a violent act, such as a bomb threat, suicide, hostage situation, explosion, severe weather, school bus incident, occurs (Eaves, 2001). By establishing and implementing a school safety policy, schools can create an atmosphere where students and teachers are not in constant fear. School Safety policies encourage students to take responsibility for their part in maintaining safe school environments, including student participation in safety planning. They, better than adults, know the hidden or less trafficked areas of the school that are more likely to be dangerous. Students are then encouraged to promote compliance with school rules, reporting potential problems to school officials, and resisting peer pressure to act irresponsibly. Many states have enacted the Weapon- Free School Zones Act to enhance school safety policy (Kafka, 2012). Other school corporations have implemented anonymous reporting systems, such as student hot lines, suggestion boxes, and tell an adult campaign to promote reporting of violent and suspicious acts. While each schools safety policy may differ, they all help to by creating a safe, supportive school climate that provides school-wide behavioral expectations, caring school climate programs, positive interventions and supports, psychological and counseling services, and violence prevention programs (bully-proofing, social skill development, conflict mediation).

Effective Communication Methods

While the development of a school safety policy is helpful in creating a safe atmosphere at school, it is also important to establish an effective method of communication to help mitigate violent acts.

Administrators can reinforce the importance of school safety by creating a caring school community in which adults and students respect and trust each other and all students feel connected, understand expectations, and receive the behavioral and mental health support they need. A necessary player on the crisis team is any professional that can translate and possibly provide insight into the culture (Annandale et al, 2011). Studies have shown that the conditions of schools are strongly influenced by the conditions of their neighborhoods (Benbenisty, 2011; Lassister, 2010). It is important that key stakeholders such as parents, students, teachers, school administrators, and community members are all aware of the safety policies and the plans for communication.

When developing the types of communication necessary it is important to take into consideration the culture of the target population. Information for students should be based entirely on their need, developmental age, and relationship/proximity to the event. The goal is to reassure students that although there is always a possibility of a violent event taking place in a school, the probability of a school experiencing a high profile violent act is extremely low. Students need to be assured that schools are safe places and that school staff work with parents and public safety providers to make sure that everyone is safe. Communicating to students that they play a vital role in school safety can be very helpful. Students should be encouraged to be observant and let an adult know if they see or hear something that makes them feel uncomfortable, nervous or frightened. Students can be part of the positive solution by participating in anti-violence programs at school, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from an adult if they or a peer is struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control. Open communication between home and school is critical to the safety and well-being of our students, teachers, and staff. Parents need to have open communication with school administrators if there is a concern or question about school policies or their child's safety.

Securing School Grounds

In taking a proactive approach to preventing school violence or violent attacks, grounds security is a main topic. It also may be helpful to address the important balance between sufficient building security and providing students a healthy, nurturing, normal school environment. Several steps can be taken to improve the security of school grounds, such as 1) limiting access to school buildings (designated entrance with all other access points locked from the exterior); 2) monitoring the school parking lot (parking lot monitors who oversee, people entering and leaving the campus); 3) monitoring and supervision of student common areas such as hallways, cafeterias, and playgrounds; 4) presence of school resource officers, local police partnerships, or security guards; 5) monitoring of school guests (report to main office, sign in, wear badges, report unfamiliar people to school office); and the 6) presence of security systems (metal detectors, video monitoring, exit door alarm systems). School-community partnerships to enhance safety measures for students beyond school property (Block Parents, police surveillance, Community Watch programs) can also help to secure school premises.

Review of Emergency Response Plan

Planning, training, and conducting exercising must be integrated into a school's and community's emergency response plans. Threat assessment and risk-assessment procedures and teams are essential for reviewing response plans. School preparedness drills, such as intruder alerts, weather warnings, and fire drills should be routinely practiced. Focusing on the response and recovery allows prevention and preparedness to be woven back into consideration. During crisis situations, school personnel need to know exactly what action to take in responding to the event (Aspiranti, 2011). In order to adequately perform these duties, they need to practice them. It is important that the Emergency Response Plan is reviewed frequently and that all staff and personnel are familiar with the action plans. The Emergency Response Plan is not just a document that should be placed on a shelf or in a file but staff should practice their roles and perform drills so that when a crisis occurs, everyone is well-prepared. During crisis plans and preparedness trainings, there should be regular review of the plans and simulation drills. Staff need to know what to do in a crisis but also how to respond to the questions and concerns of students.

Conclusion

It is difficult for both students and teachers when they are in an atmosphere where fear and anxiety prevail (Bulach et al, 2008; Kupchik, 2011). It is important that school administrators, teachers, parents, students and community members work together to prevent and respond to school violence. Violence in the schools will be stopped only when the schools join with local law enforcement, parents, juvenile court counselors, and other agencies to work together to solve the problem (Hulac,2011; Omer, 2011). While everyone would like to prevent a violent attack from occurring, it is important to be prepared to respond if this event was to occur.

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