

A Comprehensive School Violence Response Plan

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School safety has emerged as a leading challenge facing communities throughout the United States. While recognizing the importance of a comprehensive, prevention-oriented approach to school safety and violence prevention, it is also imperative that school communities be prepared for any imaginable crises. The purpose of this article is to share what steps one school community has taken to develop a comprehensive plan to anticipate and, if necessary, respond to acts of violence in our schools. It is our hope that the lessons we have learned will benefit other educators and community leaders in their efforts to address this dimension of school violence in their own school communities.

Introduction

The growing concern over school violence is not unfounded. In the last four years many violent crimes resulting in death and injury have occurred in our schools. The incidents are all too familiar. In February 1996, seventeen students were killed in Moses Lake, WA, when a fourteen-year-old opened fire in an algebra class. A year later in Bethel, AK, a sixteen-year-old killed the principal and two students, and wounded two others in the high school. On April 20, 1999, two teenage students from Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, killed twelve students and one teacher in a fifteen minute reign of terror (<http://www.inside-denver.com/shooting/chronicle>). Senseless violence has also occurred in such places as Stamps, AR; Jonesboro, AR; Edinboro, PA; Fayetteville, TN; Richmond, VA; Littleton, CO; Conyers, GA; and Fort Gibson, OK. As recently as January 10, 2000, a bomb exploded in a Texas high school. The school was evacuated and no one was wounded; however, the potential for crisis was clear (<http://www.infoplease.com>). These incidents have happened all over the United States and are not limited to urban areas. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), serious, violent crime (murder, rape, suicide, attack with a weapon, or robbery) was reported in ten percent of

the top public schools in America (<http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubs988/violence/98039991.html>). Schools are definitely vulnerable to this type of behavior.

The purpose of this article is to share what steps one school community has taken to develop a comprehensive plan to anticipate and, if necessary, respond to acts of violence in our schools. Although we recognize that "Prevention is always the best disaster action." (Witt, 1990, p.4), we believe it is also imperative to be prepared for any imaginable crises. It is our hope that the lessons we have learned will benefit other educators and community leaders in their efforts to address this dimension of school violence in their own school communities.

Background

The Lenape Regional High School District, in conjunction with law enforcement agencies and a community resource agency, has been developing a comprehensive plan to respond to possible violence in its schools. In July of 1998, Steve McGarvey, Chief of Police for Medford Township, New Jersey, invited the region's superintendents and administrators of the region to a meeting of "utmost importance to the safety of the students under our care." The invitation was also extended to the three municipal police

forces and the State Police from the local barracks. The school administrators present at the meeting represented twenty-five elementary schools, six middle schools, and four high schools. The district covers a total of three hundred fifty square miles.

The purpose of this regional group was to open communication and establish a partnership with the police, the community, and the schools. This partnership would lead to developing policies and procedures, providing for training of personnel, and establishing programs for parents, students, staff and law enforcement to address the threat of violence in schools. "It is our responsibility to do everything that we can to provide children with an educational environment that is conducive to learning and free of the disruptive influence of weapons, violence and illicit drugs" (Whitman, Verniero, & Hespe, 1998, Introduction). Chief McGarvey expressed his concerns during the regional meeting and stated that: "It is time for all of us to change from 'it could never happen here' to how can we work together to be as prepared as possible if it should 'happen here.'" McGarvey's sentiments echoed those of Dr. Daniel F. Hicks, Superintendent of the Lenape Regional High School District, who had made a similar statement to the principals and central administrators of the district several weeks earlier. The support of the leaders of both school systems and the police departments is essential (Harpold, 1998). The initial planning meeting to discuss an approach to responding to school violence was held nine months prior to the national school tragedies that occurred during the spring of 1999.

In the initial stage, Chief McGarvey sent several of his officers to a regional convention on community policing. The thrust of the convention focused on strategies to assist educators and law enforcement officials in preventing violence within our schools. According to the National Council on Crime Prevention, three things are necessary in order to accomplish this task.

1. Developing Policies and Procedures- This includes zero tolerance policies concerning weapons, alcohol and other illegal drugs; developing protocols between the police and the schools including sharing information; establishing agreements and systems for communicating in emergency situations.
2. Training- Both law enforcement officers and educators need not only to work together, but also to understand each other's roles in emergency situations and the limitations of their roles in the division of responsibilities.
3. Developing Programs – Involvement should include parents, students, educators and law enforcement officers (National Council on Crime Prevention, 1998).

Response Team Training

As a result of the initial community training of officers, the District and the Law Enforcement agencies jointly planned a conference for school administrators and law

enforcement personnel which was sponsored by the Law Advisory Group and presented by John L. More JD. This program provided information about the circumstances of the Jonesboro, AR shooting, where on March 26, 1998, a thirteen and eleven year old boy killed four students and one teacher and wounded ten other students during a shooting at Westside Middle School (<http://www.4th.90's.4anything.com/>).

The Jonesboro experience demonstrated the need for district procedures and evacuation plans. However, this school-based response to crisis is at odds with police procedures. Police standard procedures include a "stay put" response so that action is not taken until a situation is analyzed whereas, the school's response is to react immediately and evacuate. Participants at the conference also learned that often there is not a procedure for communication between the school system and the police department during a crisis. This conference helped the participating school administrators and law enforcement officials recognize the lack of interaction between the two organizations and the need for greater understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Otherwise, confusion and chaos would likely prevail during a time of crisis. A well-written and articulated plan based on policy would assist in these needs.

The training also included a discussion of the laws in New Jersey as they pertain to education and the protection of our students. One important facet of this discussion is the conflict between the rights of an individual versus the rights of the majority. This conflict was covered in the cases *Bethel School District v. Fraser*, 478 U.S.675 (1986), *Lovell v. Poway Unified School Dist.*, 90 F.3d 367 (9th Cir. 1996), and *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeir*, 484 U.S. 260 (1988). References were made to the draft form of The New Jersey School Search Policy Manual (Whitman, Verniero & Hespe, 1998). Governor Christine Whitman has asked the New Jersey Legislature to revise the state procedures and laws, increasing the consequences for acts of violence in the schools. Demand for a strong response to school violence included possession and use of weapons and assault on school employees, as well as requests for more stringent laws led administrators and police to conclude that it was essential that policies and procedures regarding safety be established in order to maintain a productive learning environment. Anything that interferes with the safety of others interferes with the educational process and the right of the majority.

An important part of the training was dedicated to defining the roles and limitations of both educators and law enforcement officials in school-related incidents. For instance, it has been past practice that when the police have been called to a school they take over the situation and are understood to be in charge. It is unclear from what direction such precedent was established. It was pointed out at the conference, to the amazement of both the school administrators and the police, that far more information about any situation is attainable if the school administrator is doing

the investigative questioning and searching prior to police involvement.

Most people are familiar with the term "probable cause." In order for the police to question students or investigate using search or seizure, they need "probable cause." A simple understanding of the term "probable cause" would be to think, "based on the facts, I'll probably find 'it'" (More, 1998). Educators, on the other hand, in order to protect the "many" and maintain the safety of all, only need "reasonable suspicion." This can be described as "I'll probably not find 'it', but in view of all the facts, the importance of finding 'it' outweighs the amount of embarrassment I'll cause the child." (More, 1998). "Reasonable suspicion" can be based on a reasonable interpretation of current acts, the child's past record including behavioral disabilities, the current school atmosphere, and the amount of danger involved (More, 1998). The limitations on the police in investigating a situation led the school to involve administrative response prior to police response when possible.

According to More (1998), the question of who is in charge when a situation has arisen and both educators and officers are involved can be answered by the following example. If the officer is there for observation or for safety reasons, the educator is in charge, and "reasonable suspicion" applies. If the educator asks the officer for assistance for something such as a search or investigation, the "probable cause" is in effect. An educator need not have a parent present, but an officer must. Because roles sometimes overlap or conflict, many local and national court cases were reviewed during the training. This training was an important first step for the Regional Administrators and Law Enforcement Officials.

The Partnership

Several representatives from the region of school districts, the vocational district, and the respective police departments met in September 1998 at the Medford police station to develop an agreement of partnership to include the plans, policies, and procedures that could be used in case of a crisis. Detective Russell Williams, the community police officer, facilitated this meeting. The idea was to plan for the worst-case scenarios, to establish lines of communication, to be able to exchange supplies, equipment and personnel if necessary, and to understand the routines and the process in case of an emergency.

Several meetings of this large group were held, everyone brainstorming questions, gathering materials, and working in a frenzy to meet a self-imposed deadline for an agreement and a plan by December 15, 1998. This formal document of agreement would be presented to the respective boards of education, the police municipalities, and the prosecutor's office for signatures. The group eventually entrusted a smaller subcommittee, led by Lt. Edwin Wood from the Medford Police and Barry Croll, Assistant Principal, from the Lenape District, with the charge of finding solutions¹. This smaller committee was also charged with collected any

available plans from other districts. By this time, the National Crime Prevention Council had published "Safer Schools: Strategies for Educators and Law Enforcement seeking to prevent violence within schools" (1998) and the Association of Supervisors and Curriculum Developers (ASCD) had published a crisis management guide for administrators (1997). The committee's idea was to prepare a practical document to use in a time of crisis.

Developing the Response Plan

Meeting bi-monthly to read the materials gathered, to develop an understanding for the rationale of certain procedures and to exchange researched information, the subcommittee finally came together as a team. One of the most difficult things was having each side (law enforcement and educators) understand how the other group operated. The law is generally black and white; school discipline is often shades of gray, depending upon the circumstances and degree of involvement.

Other important information was also reviewed. The group researched profiles of the students most likely to be violent. Samples of curriculum for preventing school violence and providing interventions were reviewed. A method of utilizing resource officers in schools was investigated. It must be noted here that many of the committee members, at the end of each session, felt drained and often upset by the very nature of the work.

As fine points of the plan were discussed and argued, members would return to their respective schools or agencies to seek suggestions and return again with new insights. In developing the plan, the team surveyed available resources in their facilities. A needs assessment of all of the schools involved brought forth a disturbing reality. Due to the age of the school buildings and past educational priorities, communication in times of crisis was non-existent in most cases. Responding to this problem was to become the highest priority. As all of the parties involved began to consider the adoption of the agreement, the process, and the plan, the incident at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999 struck home.

All of the plans had to be initiated with or without the agreements. Copycat bomb threats ensued throughout the region creating terrified students, staff members, and parents. The plan was put into effect. Cell-phones with walkie-talkies were purchased and given to all administrators and police officers; resource officers were placed in schools ahead of schedule.

Each building selected a committee to devise an emergency evacuation and lock-down plan. Volunteer emergency response teams made up of teachers, custodians, and others were organized in each building. The intention of the school committee was to have schools practice the plan and work out any difficulties. Students and parents were involved in this phase of the planning so they could understand the procedures and the need for the process.

Staff Development

An effective staff development program is essential for the implementation of a violence prevention plan (Dwyer, Osher & Warger, 1998). With this in mind, the Lenape District devised several layers of training. In addition to the initial conference by the Law Advisory Group in August 1998, which provided training for administrators and law enforcement personnel in their respective roles, another program was arranged for the following June. All administrators attended a Conflict Resolution Seminar. This in-service led to future programs dealing with aggression and anger management. These latter programs were designed to assist administrators in dealing with potentially violent students.

Training administrators to be knowledgeable about and aware of possible violent acts is an important first step in the staff development process. However, once a plan is developed, more intensive and specific training is necessary. To address this need, Lenape District provided a training session called the School Crisis and Incident Command System. Administrators were trained along with the police in how to respond to a crisis situation. A specific scenario was shown on a video and the roles of each of the participating personnel were clearly defined. The training provided everyone with an idea of how to organize during a crisis situation and who should take charge. It is important that these roles be defined in advance and the method of organizing be practiced.

Once administrators were clear on their responsibilities, it was time to train teachers and staff. An in-house safety committee met at each school. The charge was to develop a violence response plan specific to each school based on the parameters established by the regional committee. Roles of every administrator and teacher were defined in this document and locations where students were to report when evacuating were labeled on maps of the school grounds.

Once the school-specific plan had been devised, administrators met to plan an in-service for teachers. The first step, it was decided, was to hold a faculty meeting to discuss the plan with teachers and ask for recommendations. Teacher recommendations were incorporated into the school-based plan and an evacuation drill for teachers was planned for the first in-service day. On that day teachers walked through their procedure and reported to their designated posts. After this run-through, teachers were asked to provide more specific recommendations and the plan was again revised.

The next phase involved students. To ensure that the evacuation drill would not cause a panic, a letter to parents and students was sent the day before the drill. Police were also notified. On the day of the drill, students were told to bring their coats to their homeroom near the end of the day. The procedure was explained to them prior to the drill. An announcement was made and all students evacuated the premises and reported to their designated spots where homeroom teachers took attendance. Classes were grouped

in a single area. For instance, all seniors reported to the football field. All remained calm and the drill was successful. The next drill was scheduled in the middle of a school day. Again, it was announced so that no panic would ensue. Other scenarios such as hostage situations, bomb threats, boiler explosions, and sniper attacks will be used as possible practice drills in the district's schools.

Programs for parents and students must also be provided. Students should learn the need for planned responses through curriculum revisions, possibly in health class. Evening programs for parents could be offered to provide information about dealing with their own teenage children and recognizing the signs of at-risk children. This is also an opportunity to introduce parents to the intricacies of the plan and to familiarize them with how information can be obtained if a crisis should occur. Programs for parents and students are also provided on the district's cable channel, which is received in the homes of people residing in Lenape District's region. Educating parents and students is essential to the success of any program. This aspect of the plan is still being developed.

The Lenape Regional High School District's violence response plan continues to evolve. Many other districts are also at a similar developmental stage. It is impossible to plan for all eventualities yet that is what educators and law enforcement agencies must try to do. The adults must provide a safe and secure environment in which to educate the young. Although it is not the focus of this article, we believe that addressing the critical issues that cause children to act violently toward their school is a national imperative. When violence does occur, however, school communities must be prepared to respond.

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Footnote

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