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Crisis management preparedness of school districts in three southern states in the USA

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Abstract

The following paper describes the results of a baseline study to assess the status of crisis management preparedness in public school districts in three southern states in the United States. Self-reported responses were collected by distributing a 22 question self-reporting survey to all school districts and systems in the states of Tennessee, North Carolina and Georgia. Threats by students were indicated as requiring district team activation by 40% of responding districts. This baseline study indicated that 95% of responding districts have some type of district crisis management plan, 77% have a district crisis management team and 88% have a part- or full-time director designated for crisis situation. While these initial findings sound promising, the low number of districts (less than 50%) self-reporting at least one full day of training in the last year and no full-scale drill is indicative of a very low level of crisis preparedness. This lack of preparedness reported in combination with the relatively high level of crisis incidents, such as student deaths, violence (fights), weapons on campus, and student threats, gives rise for concern, and districts should pay special attention to increasing future training efforts and performing more full-scale drills. Overall, crisis plans should be improved in order to ensure adequate school district crisis preparedness. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Calm, responsible personnel and reactions are vital to the effective management of an emergency crisis affecting a school. Essential to the safety and welfare of every school campus is the preparation and practice of a practical and workable crisis

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management plan. This plan must incorporate locations and routes for evacuation and sheltering in-place for each school building in the school district or system. Every school district and school within the district should also form and maintain a crisis management team that is competent, capable, and adequately trained to handle an emergency situation. This paper discusses the results of a study designed to assess the current status of crisis management planning in school districts and systems in three southern states in the United States.

In 1996, Batsis reported that school crisis events are not unusual. Children in elementary and secondary schools at an increasing rate are likely to experience the death of a family member or close friend, witness a violent death, or themselves be a victim of violence. The increased number of incidences and an increased awareness of such events has compelled school personnel to find new ways of managing crisis situations.

With minimal resources allocated to fund long-term crisis prevention programs at the elementary, middle and high school levels, school staff predominantly handle crises as they arise, making decisions in many cases without benefit of a comprehensive management plan. Without a clear and well-practiced plan and without identifying predetermined roles, district and school staff are more likely to respond to school crisis chaotically. Thus, the development, practice, and implementation of a school crisis prevention and management plan, is particularly crucial in supporting the emergency management four-pronged program of mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. This helps ensure the health and safety of children and adults attending or working for schools within the United States (Batsis, 1996).

Kopka (1997) reported that according to the National School Safety Center study, 1995, many emergencies occur each day in schools throughout the country. School crisis situations can range from a child falling and being injured on the playground, to slanderous rumors being circulated about a teacher, to coping with a mentally unbalanced individual entering a school building with the intent of harming children. In each case, school officials must rapidly respond in a manner that ensures the safety of students and staff (Kopka, 1997).

Since school crises and emergencies occur rapidly, school officials without a practiced crisis management plan may find themselves dazed, confused, and wondering what to do next. While a sense of disorientation is a normal response to an emergency, school officials who have properly planned for just such a contingency are in a much better position to respond rapidly in an appropriate and sensitive way (Hill and Hill, 1994).

Traumatic events can precipitate short-term crisis reactions among school children, whether they occur on or off school grounds. Responses include reactions ranging from sadness and fear to anger or shame; behavioral reactions manifested either as internalizing or externalizing symptoms; relationship difficulties exhibited through withdrawal or anxious attachment behaviors; school difficulties in attention and performance; and somatic symptoms. Specific responses depend, among other factors, on age and developmental level of the child.

If a school-related trauma is not adequately addressed at school, temporary disruptions in children's ability to concentrate can create a downward spiral in

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