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ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT FOR THE STAFF
OF THE UPTOWN SCHOOL COMPLEX

By
Michele Tourigian-McGettigan

A Project

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
Master of Arts Degree
Of
The Graduate School
At
Rowan University
April 18, 2003

Approved by

Date Approved 4-10-03

Abstract

Michele Tourigian-McGettigan

Assessing The Effectiveness of
Crisis Management for the Staff of
Uptown School Complex
2003
Dr. Dennis Hurley
School Administration and
Supervision

The Uptown School Complex has a crisis management plan that needs to be reviewed, updated, and practiced by staff members. In the past year, our country has gone through radical changes with security and crisis management that also needs to be addressed in our schools. The focus of this study is to ensure that all staff members are aware of the current crisis management plan and to revise and update the plan.

The purpose of this study is to provide a highly effective organizational unit for dealing with a variety of crises by evaluating the effectiveness of the current crisis management plan.

The site of the study will be Uptown School Complex. The population will consist of the teaching and support staff that is currently employed by the district. Data will be collected through archived material presented to the staff and through qualitative surveys. The data will be compared to prior knowledge of professional and support staff of the crisis management team.

Mini-Abstract

Michele Tourigian-McGettigan

Assessing the Effectiveness of Crisis
Management for the staff of Uptown
School Complex
2003
Dr. Dennis Hurley
School Administration and
Supervision

The Uptown School Complex realizes that some of its staff may not be aware of the current crisis management guide and procedures. It is the hope that all staff members are fully aware of the guide. When a crisis occurs, effective communication is essential within the building and the district. Effective communication and planning can speed the restoration of equilibrium. Every crisis management plan should include provision for a sensitive and professional communication plan.

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking my university mentor, Dr. Dennis Hurley for keeping me focused and providing me with valuable insight and constructive criticism. Dr. Hurley's years of experience and expertise was greatly appreciated.

I also appreciated the guidance that was provided by my on-site mentors, Dr. Clarence Alston and Mr. Ernest Harper. They were both excellent role models and more than willing to take time with me to share experiences and advice. Their encouragement was invaluable.

I am grateful for the support of numerous staff members at the Uptown School Complex who were willing to lend their ideas and share their thoughts regarding my research and projects, and I am particularly thankful for the input my colleague and friend, Ms. Tracy Hyland and Jodi Burroughs, provided on numerous occasions.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my parents, Michael and Lucy for providing me with the opportunity to become an educator. Last but not least, my husband Kevin, for his unconditional support and faith in me.

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Introduction

In the past year, our country has gone through radical changes with security and crisis management. On September 11, 2001 all schools were affected by the terrorist attacks, whether directly like the schools in New York City or indirectly through watching television images of the collapse of the World Trade Center towers and hearing of the tremendous loss of life. The effects of the surprise attacks still resonate throughout the United States, and a number of educators are urging teachers to draw lasting lessons from the events of September 11 and afterwards.

The primary cause of anxiety for many parents today is protecting their children from acts of violence in school (Robinson & Fuller, 2002). In general, parents and school officials are concerned about preventing children from becoming aggressors or victims. Despite the extraordinary media coverage of and public concern over violence in schools, students are safer there than in any other place except their homes (Robinson & Fuller, 2002).

Violence and crisis are both terrifying experiences for us all, and it's even worse when we are not psychologically prepared for it. Preparing psychologically is important because adults in charge must maintain a calm, in-charge attitude when a crisis occurs (Curwin & Mendler, 1997). Although such incidents are still rare, if a student pulls out a gun in class or takes classmates hostage, administrators and staff members must be as prepared as possible to deal with the incident. Perhaps a more frequently occurring

problem requiring a school action plan is fighting. All staff should be trained in knowing what to do and what not to do if they are confronted with fighting.

Creating an environment of safety also means setting clear standards of behavior and enforcing the rules fairly and consistently when those standards are not met. Having a comprehensive school plan is imperative. Every school should have one, and it should include a variety of strategies for both education and supervision (Allen, 1998).

The Uptown School Complex does have a Crisis Management Plan. In order to ensure that my school has an active plan, which engages the staff and faculty on a daily basis and prepares everyone to handle crisis situations, I propose to evaluate, review, and revise, if necessary, the current crisis management plan. By examining the existing plan, I can better assess the need for change and find possible solutions that will benefit the staff and students for the future.

Chapter 1

Assessing the effectiveness of crisis management for the staff of Uptown School Complex

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide a highly effective organizational unit for dealing with a variety of crises by evaluating the effectiveness of the current crisis management plan. The intern will use a faculty-based evaluation research design. The study will result in a feasibility report to inform teachers, administrators, and parents.

Limitation of the Study

The study will include input from all professional and non-professional staff members at Uptown School Complex. The limitations of the study include poor responses to survey, poor attendance to meetings, negative attitudes, and the use of one technique for data collection.

Setting of the Study

The site of the study is Uptown School Complex. The Uptown School Complex is located in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in Atlantic County. The Uptown School Complex is a large elementary K through 7-community school, located in the northern "Inlet" section of Atlantic City. The student population is 861 with the following ethnic composition: 88.3% black; 9.3% Hispanic; 01.75% white; and

0.50% Asian. The community served by Uptown represents a wide range of income levels, but the majority of the household incomes are on the low end. 91% of the students are on free or reduced lunch programs. There is a large senior citizen population in the immediate geographic area. In fact, a senior citizen complex sits across the street from Uptown, and the school contains a “Senior Citizens” room. Uptown School Complex is one of nine elementary schools in the Atlantic City School District. Uptown School Complex is considered as a “community school”. Uptown School Complex facilitates programs after school, such as the Recreation Program.

The Recreation Program is open on a daily basis from 3PM-8PM. The Recreation Program provides access to the school gymnasium, weight room, ballet studio, and swimming pool. In addition to the Recreation Program, the Uptown School Complex also contains a Family Center. The Family Center complex in the school building provides medical, dental, and family counseling services for students and residents of the community.

The staff at Uptown School Complex consists of 71 professional staff members, 21 support staff, and two administrators. Fifty-four staff members hold a Bachelors degree, 16 hold Masters Degrees and one staff member has a Doctorate. One support staff member has an Associates degree.

The Atlantic City Public School System is a Type II school district that educates

children from K-12. The nine elementary schools house children K-7. There is one junior high school for all eighth graders, one high school, and one alternative school. The school district is located in a casino town, which provides a large portion of the funding for the district.

Definitions

District Crisis Team: The portion of a security organization in the district that is comprised of the superintendent, school board president, and department heads of operations, business, safety, media relations, transportation, maintenance and food service personnel.

Campus Crisis Team: The portion of a security organization in a specific school, which is comprised of the principal, assistant principal, teacher, nurse, counselor, custodian, food service personnel, support staff, school security and parents.

Outside Participants: The portion of a security organization in a specific city, which include local law officials, fire department, HAZMAT division, and medical services.

School Anti-Violence Education: Anti-Violence Taskforce Committee

Code Blue Procedures: A drill used as a “911 Drill”, or an “Earthquake Drill”, or a “General Emergency Drill.”

Code Yellow Procedures: The purpose of this drill is to completely “lock-down” the entire school. Additionally, no person shall attempt to contact the office via

intercom, or internal phone system unless a shooting is witnessed. The intercoms/phones will become inoperable if too many people attempt to use them at the same time.

Activity, Facility, or Location: A real property entity for example, a schoolhouse.

Administrative Inspection: An inspection of a person or the contents of a package with the full consent of the person or owner of the package. Administrative inspections are conducted with prior written notice and authorization, and they follow predetermined procedures.

Administrative Officer: A person in charge of or responsible for an activity, facility, or program operation. Includes assistant superintendents, principals, directors, department heads, supervisors, etc.

Loss Prevention: A part of an overall security program that deals with the resources, measures, and tactics devoted to the care and protection of property. Loss prevention includes identifying and reporting missing, lost, stolen, and recovered property, including documents and computer media.

Physical Security: The part of a facility's security program that is concerned with physical measures designed to safeguard personnel; prevent unauthorized access to equipment, facilities, material, computer media, and documents; and safeguard these against damage, theft, and other criminal acts.

Firearm/explosive device- any weapon that is designed to expel a projectile by the

action of an explosive. This includes guns, bombs, grenades, mines, rockets, missiles, or similar devices designed to explode and cause property or bodily damage.

Gang- an association of three or more persons that has a common name, signs, symbols, or colors, whose members engage in violent or other forms of illegal behavior.

Physical Attack or Fight- an actual and intentional touching or striking of another person against his or her will.

Rape- forced sexual intercourse

Robbery- the taking or attempting to take anything of value that is owned by another person or organization, under confrontational circumstances by force or threat of violence by putting the victim in fear.

Theft/Larceny- the unlawful taking of another person's property without personal confrontation, threat, violence, or bodily harm.

Vandalism- the willful damage or destruction of school property.

Violence- actual, attempted, or threatened fight or assault.

Weapon- any instrument or object used with the intent to threaten, injure, or kill.

Organization of the Study

The remainder of this study will be organized as follows:

Chapter 2- Review of Literature

Chapter 3- Design of Study

Chapter 4- Presentation of Research Findings

Chapter 5- Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Educators have historically addressed school safety from disciplinary, prevention, and intervention perspectives. Principals have handled violations of school rules with detentions, suspensions, and expulsions. Many have only called the police for the most serious of incidents.

Many school officials have done an excellent job addressing the prevention, intervention, and discipline end of the school safety spectrum. However, far too many have failed to address the security and crisis preparedness perspectives, as well leaving their schools vulnerable to those immediate security threats that are outside the realm of traditional discipline, prevention, and intervention strategies (Kendall, 2001).

Research from several sources is necessary to gain a complete foundation for a project such as this. Educational literature, reference books, interviews, surveys, government and state documents as well as current practices in crisis management all contribute to effective planning for crisis management.

Pitcher and Poland (1992) define a crisis as “an important and seemingly unsolvable problem with which those feel unable to cope” (p.10). It may be useful to distinguish individual student crises from school crises. School psychologists or guidance counselors are most experienced in responding to individual student crises, such as students who are upset, angry, or depressed over personal events, usually unknown to

most other students. School crises differ from individual student crises not only because more persons experience the problem, but also because crisis response is substantially more complex and multidimensional (Blauvelt, 2002).

A school crisis inevitably requires the coordinated efforts of multiple professionals from varied disciplines and usually includes professionals from outside the school, such as law enforcement officers and medical and community mental health personnel. In a school crisis, the persons who “feel unable to cope” may include the school staff as well as the students, so that the distinction between helpers and victims is less clear (Allen, R. 2002).

School crises usually involve events that are upsetting to school staff as well as students. However, the persons responding to a school crisis have a professional stake in their own performance, working under the scrutiny of administrators, parents, and the media (Kennedy, 1999). The professionals responding to a school crisis must have a good understanding of their own involvement in such an emotionally charged event, so that they can evaluate the situation clearly, make appropriate decisions, and take effective action. It is particularly important for professionals to monitor their own anger and frustration, and to identify the underlying sources of anxiety.

With the many demands of running a school, some administrators might find it difficult to stay abreast of the latest ideas and resources offered by school safety experts. According to Ted Hayes, “Thorough emergency plans should be developed by school and

law enforcement officials who work together.” Law enforcement officials who are involved with your school will help carry out safety policies and procedures and should have a role in developing them. In addition, it is extremely important to educate staff members about how to respond when they see a stranger in the building or on school grounds. School safety plans should also include lockdown procedures that should be practiced by school staff. Lockdown procedures will ensure that individuals who are causing the danger don’t have access to students and staff as the opportunity to move from room to room will be cut off (Hayes, 2001). Actual training in the school’s lockdown procedures is critical so students will know what to do if a lockdown is needed. There is controversy whether or not training should be implemented, fearing that it could traumatize young students. However, if students have a basic understanding of what to do in a violent situation, injury will be far less likely (Hayes, 2001).

Errors in school crisis response can be highly visible and distressing to school personnel. Analysis of common problems and mistakes can be a useful means of improving preparation for future crisis, which in one form or another are faced by all schools (Cornwell& Sheras, 1998).

To be effective, a security program must receive attention and support from all areas within an organization. Not only does there have to be a written plan or policy to deal with day-to-day activities in a school- for preventing, deterring, or handling violent and criminal incidents- but also a plan to deal with crisis, the foreseeable, and the unexpected (Hylton, 2002). In order to be prepared and responsible, professionally

trained and organized personnel must carry out these functions.

Guides to school crisis management place great emphasis on the development and implementation of a crisis plan (Cornell & Sheras, 1998). Effective school crisis management plans are integral to successful crisis response. In addition, it is the process by which school professionals implement their plan, coupled with qualities of teamwork, leadership, and responsibility. If one or more of these qualities are weakened, a response to crisis can be destructive.

School crisis plans highlight the importance of leaders taking charge by assessing the situation, making decisions, giving directions to others, and supervising activities (Cornwell & Sheras, 1998). In order to establish a crisis situation, the leader must decide if this situation at hand is present or imminent.

Duke's (1987) analysis of school leadership stresses that principals must cope with high levels of ambiguity and complexity in most school functions- from evaluating instructional effectiveness to managing student discipline.

Teamwork is instrumental in establishing an effective crisis plan. Most teams are comprised of school staff and administrators, while others incorporate outside community personnel and parents.

For a crisis team to function effectively, at a minimum the members must share common goals, have well-defined roles, and be willing to work together in a coordinated manner. It is particularly important to coordinate efforts with law enforcement, because the goals of law enforcement in some cases will include matters outside those of the crisis response team, such as a criminal investigation or the apprehension of perpetrators. (Cornell & Sheras, 1998.p.298)

School crises often raise complicated questions of responsibility. Whose responsibility is it to take action in response to a problem? School personnel may classify some problems as matters for the police, mental health agencies, or parents (Brock, 2001). Battles among these agencies often have conflicting views of responsibility.

Effective crisis management can help students and staff learn and feel more secure in the school setting. Through leadership, teamwork, and responsibility, the Uptown School can carry out our crisis plan effectively. It is my hope to help restore a sense of competence and security to the building by assessing the current plan.

Chapter 3

Design of Study

Research Design

This action research project was completed in an effort to understand what strengths and weaknesses there were with respect to our current crisis management plan at the Uptown School Complex. This study was designed to provide information to both the administration and all staff members, professional and non-professional, in regards to communication and comprehension of the current crisis management plan.

Data was gathered by surveys. All staff members, professional and non-professional, and administration were surveyed regarding their knowledge and feelings to the current crisis management plan.

Following the completion of the survey, the data was analyzed. Once again, the goal of this data analysis was to understand what strengths and weaknesses there were with respect to our current crisis management plan.

Research Instrument

A survey was developed by the intern containing six questions used to gather information from all staff members, professional and non-professional, and administration. These questions all related to the current crisis management plan in regards to emergency codes, yellow and blue.

All six questions required the individuals answering the survey to respond with their current knowledge of emergency codes, yellow and blue.

Site and Population Selection

The population that this study addressed was 71 professional staff members, 21 non-professional staff members, and two administrators from the Uptown School Complex, Atlantic City Public Schools, Southern, New Jersey. A population of 67 was used in the data collection procedures.

Data Gathering Procedures

A survey was used to gather information from the 67 professional, non-professional, and administrative staff at the Uptown School Complex in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The wording of the questions was examined to avoid leading, ambiguous, or unclear questions. Individuals were asked to respond to each question by circling yes or no in the space that indicated the statement that best described them. There was also an area for additional comments to the questions that individuals answered yes.

Participants were given the surveys in the beginning of October and were asked to respond within the week. In an effort to maximize the percentage of the surveys completed, the participants were informed of the purpose of the research project at the regularly scheduled staff meeting. The subjects were aware of approximately how long it would take them to complete the survey and when the survey needed to be returned. Confidentiality and appreciation was expressed to the staff in advance for their participation and cooperation.

Data Analysis Procedure

Once it was determined that the majority of the surveys were returned, the responses from the surveys were analyzed according to the frequency of responses.

These frequency responses were then examined for trends.

These responses were also analyzed for parallels in respect to the strengths and weaknesses of the communication process and suggestions for how the crisis management plan could be improved.

Following the collection of the survey data, time was taken to report the data and to explore possible conclusions and areas for further study.

Chapter 4

Presentation of the Research Findings

The goal of this data analysis was to identify what strengths and weaknesses, regarding the current crisis management plan, are perceived to exist between the professional and non-professional staff at the Uptown School Complex. Information regarding the perceptions of these individuals was gathered via surveys and interviews. Once the data was collected via the surveys and interviews, the responses were analyzed according to their frequency.

It became clear through questions asked by teachers and staff regarding the survey and comments written directly on returned surveys, that the majority of the staff did not have a copy of the current crisis management plan. The reason for this is the mere fact that the crisis management plan, in its entirety, is completely cumbersome. A vast majority of our current plan has no relevance to our geographical area. For example, there is a section in the crisis management plan that gives information about earthquakes and how to prepare the school and individual classrooms for an occurrence.

The results of the survey demonstrate that professional and non-professional staff feel comfortable and are familiar with certain aspects of the crisis management plan. Out of the 67 staff members who responded to the survey, 58 felt confident about the

procedures for code blue and code yellow, while nine staff members were unfamiliar with the two codes. Staff members who responded to both clarified their responses with written comments indicating that they would like to start out with scheduled practices with the staff and students of the school.

The final two questions of the survey were used to gather additional information regarding staff knowledge and expectations of the current crisis management plan, along with how confident they feel with the status of the present plan. Both responses were very strong. 51 staff members who responded to the survey reported that they would not categorize themselves as being familiar with the entire crisis management plan, so they would not know what to review or revise. The confidence responses were also significant with 56 staff members responding that they would not categorize themselves as feeling confident about the current plan if an emergency, other than a fire, were to take place. The responses to both of these questions were further explored during follow up interviews.

Grade level, follow up meetings were arranged with one teacher from each grade level. The purpose of these interviews was to clarify why staff members made the selections that they did, and to gain further insight into their interpretation of the results.

The interviews began by informing the staff members of the assumption that the intern had prior to distributing the surveys. The intern had anticipated that teachers and staff members would want to practice and familiarize themselves with codes blue and yellow, in addition to receiving a copy of the crisis management plan. The results of the

survey were then shared with the teachers. All groups did indicate that they needed to practice codes blue and yellow in case there was an actual emergency. At the present time, the students and staff practice fire drills only.

A copy of the crisis management plan was given to one teacher of each grade level (K-7) during these interviews. Each grade level reviewed the crisis plan as a group and were asked to share the strengths and weaknesses of the current plan. All grade levels indicated that the plan was too cumbersome and confusing. They also reported that the plan is very comprehensive and not “teacher friendly.” All grade levels felt that the information from the plan that deals directly with our school needed to be pulled out and made into a smaller guide that was easier to follow in case there was an actual emergency. Three groups reported that each staff member should have an “emergency guide” in the classroom at all times, but to keep the current plan downstairs in the office.

Following the survey and teacher interviews, the results were discussed with the administration, Mr. Harper and Dr. Alston, to get more perspective. Prior to being told of the responses given by the staff members, the administration reported the strengths that they perceived in the communication process of the survey. The administration also communicated their frustration with the over comprehensiveness of the current crisis management plan. The consistency in perceived strengths and weaknesses was positive because it indicated that many of those involved in the communication process saw the same pros and cons.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study

The research findings were conclusive as the intern had anticipated they would be, and there are trends that surfaced from both the survey and interview data. These trends do have merit, and should be considered as the school plans for the future.

Major Conclusions and Implications

The issue that stood out the most through the survey responses and interviews was the need for professional and non-professional staff members to feel comfortable with the current crisis management plan, specifically the evacuation procedures. When this was brought up during the interviews with the staff, most staff members suggested that we practice the drill once a month, just like we practice a fire drill.

There were also some things that came up in respect to communication. Some staff members had some knowledge, and were aware of the proper evacuation procedure; code yellow, while others knew that code yellow meant “lockdown” but were unaware of its specifications. Apparently, those teachers who were somewhat familiar with the plan are members of the site based management team. Those staff members who are not on the site based management team, specifically non-professional staff, were not aware of any evacuation plan, except for a fire drill.

Finally, it also became evident that the current crisis management plan needs to be condensed in a manner in which both professional and non-professional staff members can utilize the document more effectively. Administration agreed that the current plan is confusing to the eye and too comprehensive to access effectively and quickly.

Intern's Leadership Development

During the course of this internship, the intern learned the importance of direct communication and facilitation of staff. The importance of this became evident very quickly after receiving their responses to the questionnaires. The fact that we all work in the same environment, yet have different ideas and approaches on how to react to an emergency situation is startling. As a future administrator, we must regularly and periodically ask staff members about their comfort levels in crisis management planning. Most importantly, we must practice what we preach. We simply can not hand staff members a piece of paper at a staff meeting and expect them to know what to do in an emergency situation without practice. How can we expect the practices of our school to run smoothly without practice?

Organizational Change and Further Study

The majority of change that will occur in the school will take place over time, and the results of the study will continue to influence changes that are made in the future. One immediate outcome that has benefited the organization involves opening the lines of communication. During the interviews the intern was made aware of many different perspectives regarding the communication and information systems of the current crisis management plan. These perspectives were not always as expected, and after hearing other views and being able to share them with other staff members, there seemed to be a better understanding of where each other was coming from.

Another immediate outcome that has benefited the organization involved a small workshop about the two codes of evacuation at the bi-weekly staff meeting. Grade levels were again briefed about code yellow and blue, and then asked to demonstrate how they would organize their classrooms and students to achieve efficient evacuation. A follow up practice drill was implemented the next day and has been a part of our practices ever since. This collaboration has not only helped the adults, but most importantly it has allowed the students to effectively respond to a potential crisis.

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Appendix A
Research Instrument

October 8, 2002

Dear Colleague,

I am currently doing some research for my administrative internship at Rowan University. This research project is based on our current crisis management plan at the Uptown School Complex. The purpose of this study is to find out what is working well so that we can do more of it, and what needs to be improved or revised. Your responses are very important to all of us and the safety of our school.

Attached to this letter is the questionnaire that I need you to fill out. Feel free to complete it at your convenience; it should take approximately five minutes. I will be sharing the results with Dr. Alston, Mr. Harper, and my advisor at Rowan University, Dr. Dennis Hurley, but your answers to the questions are confidential and no one will be specifically mentioned.

Once again, I know that you are busy, but I would truly appreciate your cooperation in returning the survey to school by October 15th. Your response will be very helpful to all of us. Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Michele T. McGettigan

Evaluating the Current Crisis Plan

Please complete this questionnaire to help us improve our current crisis plan.

Return this questionnaire to Michele McGettigan by October 11, 2002. Thanks!!

1. Do you have a copy of the current crisis management program? Yes or No
2. Are you familiar with the current crisis plan? Yes or No
3. Tell me what part of the crisis plan you are familiar with _____

4. Do you understand the procedures for code blue? Yes or No
5. If yes, do you think they are effective? _____

6. Do you understand the procedures for code yellow? Yes or No
7. If yes, do you think they are effective? _____

8. What part of the current crisis plan do you think we need to review or revise?

9. If there were a crisis (unexpected event), other than a fire, would you feel confident with the school's current plan? Explain. _____

Thank you for your time and cooperation!!!!!!!

Michele

Biographical Data

Name	Michele Tourigian-McGettigan
High School	Holy Spirit High School Absecon, New Jersey
Undergraduate	Bachelor of Science Human Development and Family Studies Colorado State University Fort Collins, Colorado
Graduate	Master of Arts School Administration Rowan University Glassboro, New Jersey
Present Occupation	Elementary School Teacher Uptown School Complex Atlantic City, New Jersey