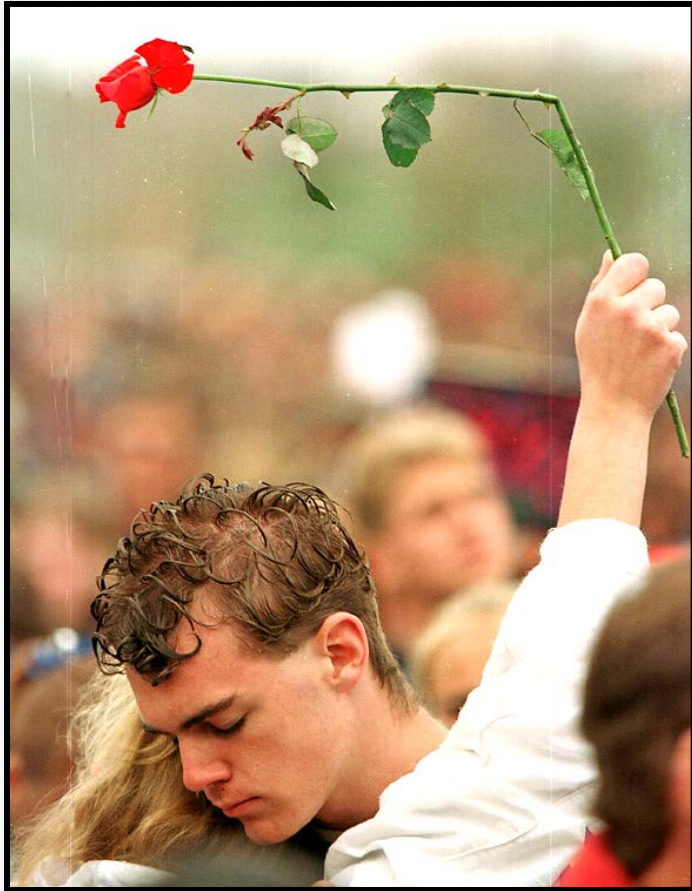




# ***Avoiding Legal Issues Before, During and After a School Crisis***

***Cathy Paine  
National Emergency  
Assistance Team  
&  
Springfield School  
District***

# Our Challenge



*We have to go after this with an attitude that crises will happen again. It is not the question of **IF** anymore, but the question of what the next event is going to be.*

*By preparing for the  
imaginable  
we prepare for the  
“unimaginable”*

*~ Gregory Thomas, Director, National  
Center for Disaster Preparedness  
(2004)*



# *Prevention*



*Reducing the chance that a crisis will  
occur at your school*

# Create a Safe and Supportive School Environment

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- ☐ Prevent bullying and harassment
- ☐ Accept diversity
- ☐ Maintain order through school discipline
- ☐ Ensure student safety


# School Crisis Prevention

- ❑ Minimize likelihood of student injury ~ conduct a safety assessment of each school building
- ❑ Assess vulnerabilities ~ identify potential crises at each building site





# *Preparedness*



*Planning how to respond when an emergency or disaster occurs*

# “It Won’t Happen Here”



- Preparation is the responsibility of every school, community, and state



- No region of the country is safe from the impact of crisis

# Lesson 1: Have a Plan

- Have a written PLAN
- Include local police, fire, emergency and mental health agencies in the planning
- Train all staff
- Know your role





# What's in a plan?

- All hazards:
  - Emergencies (fire, gas)
  - Man-made crises
  - Natural disasters
  - Medical emergencies
  - Mechanical crises
- Roles and Responsibilities
- Evacuation/Lockdown
- Threat Assessment
- Suicide Risk Assessment
- Response checklist
- Family reunification
- Incident command system
- Communication
- Media
- Mental health resources
- Post incident evaluation
- Tabletop exercises
- Sample letters

# Lesson 2: Practice the Plan

- ❑ Include local police, fire, emergency and mental health agencies in the planning
- ❑ Train all staff
- ❑ Practice and drill the plan regularly
- ❑ Know your role





# *Response*



*Providing emergency assistance  
immediately following a crisis*

# Thurston High School -- May 21, 1998



# Lesson 3: Follow the Plan in a Crisis



- ❑ Adopt the Incident Command System (ICS)
- ❑ Have clear roles and responsibilities
- ❑ Make sure everyone does their job
- ❑ Review the response daily

# The Media will come

## *Friend or Foe?*



- Set clear and strict boundaries
- No media on campus
- Jointly release information
- Use the media to disseminate your Information
- Inform staff how to deal with media

# Communication is Key

- ↓ Have a spokesperson for the district
- ↓ Keep school board informed
- ↓ Move communications center away from scene
- ↓ Have back-up communications
- ↓ Verify rumors



# Collaboration with Community

*They came to our aid:*

- Police/Fire/EMTs
  - Lane Co Mental Health
  - Over 200 counselors
  - Red Cross
  - Business & churches
- 
- Establish partnerships before a crisis
  - Hold ongoing collaborative meetings during a crisis
  - Screen counseling volunteers





# Phase I

## *The critical first 5-30 minutes*

### **Parents:**

- Parents rush to the scene
- Want to get their children
- Operate out of fear and anxiety
- Emotions are high
- Don't follow rules or policies

### **What schools can do:**

- Establish trust
- Communicate information as quickly and accurately as possible
- Keep onlookers and media away
- Immediately establish a gathering place and process to reunite parents and students

# Phase 2

## *The first 24 hours*

### **Parents:**

- Seek information, answers
- Emotional
- Fear may turn to anger
- Often do not respond to reason and logic

### **What schools can do:**

- Reassure safety
- Continue to reunite parents and students
- Model calm and control
- Communicate information as quickly and accurately as possible (email, website, media)
- Have staff available to meet with them
- Be visible

# Phase 3:

## *The days and weeks ahead*

### **Parents:**

- Seek information, answers
- Emotional
- Want students' belongings
- Shift concerns to recovery of their students
- May begin thinking of lawsuits

### **What schools can do:**

- Model calm and control
- Communicate information quickly and accurately
- Return belongings
- Have trusted staff assigned to handle parent concerns
- Be visible
- Hold parent meetings to get input
- Mental health support
- Assistance Center



# *Recovery*



*Restoring people to physical and  
mental health; restoring vital systems*

# Lesson 4: Evaluate the Response following a Crisis



- Document everything
- Involve all stakeholders
- Determine the extent to which you followed the plan

# It's not over when it's over



- ❑ Healing takes a long time  
~longer than you think
- ❑ Carefully plan return to school ~ open house
- ❑ Plan for mental health aid through partnerships
- ❑ Be prepared to provide academic assistance

# Some healing strategies you might need.....

- ↓ Ongoing and repeated Posttraumatic Stress training for staff
- ↓ Additional counselors
- ↓ Services and celebrations of life
- ↓ Legal support for district staff
- ↓ Dispersing funds collected
- ↓ A permanent memorial



## A good resource

- Pearrow, M. M., & Jacob, S. (2012). Legal and ethical considerations in crisis prevention and response in schools. In S. E. Brock & S. R. Jimerson (Eds), *Best practices in school crisis prevention and intervention* (pp. 359-375). Bethesda, MD: NASP.

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