

## Does Your Crisis Plan Really Protect Your Students (and School)?

Recently, ISM had the privilege of sharing some of its risk management ideas with over 100 school administrators. In our discussions, it quickly became clear that many well-intentioned schools have neither a comprehensive crisis plan nor a business continuation plan. The former is required by law in some states (and represents good stewardship and the “right thing to do”); the latter, simply good business practice. This *I&P* article outlines an appropriate crisis plan for private-independent schools. A future article will target the business continuation plan.

Most crisis and safety experts warn against a “cookie-cutter” crisis plan or an approach where the school purchases an off-the-shelf plan. While tempting, this is not the way to go (other than perhaps to use as an outline) when constructing or reviewing your own plan. Your crisis plan should be tailored for your school, and should address the three phases of a crisis: Prevention/Safety, Response, and Recovery.<sup>1</sup>

### Getting Started

With guidance from many sources,<sup>2</sup> schools are strongly advised to create their own plans, addressing their own special issues to help assure familiarity with, and buy-in of, the plan by all of its constituents. The contemplation, creation, and implementation of your crisis plan must be visibly supported (communicating the plan and participating in the plan) by the Board and School Head for it to come to life and become a part of your school’s culture.

ISM suggests the creation of an “über” team to perform initial risk identification and assessment and provide direction, as a preliminary step. Followed shortly thereafter is the creation of three subsidiary teams to focus on the three phases of a crisis—again, they are Prevention/Safety, Response, and Recovery.

While each of these teams necessarily has separate focus, individual members can be on more than one team (and will likely need to be if yours is a small school)—this allows for cross-pollination of ideas and for each member to be familiar with the work of the other teams. These teams should be created and operate simultaneously in a fully integrated approach. It is critical to include “back-ups” (trained alternates) for each role created on these teams.

### Preliminary Phase

The first step is to establish your Crisis Team (the “über” team), typically overseen by the School Head or Business Manager. When assembling this team, include the School Head, a Trustee, a key administrator (preferably the Business Manager), a school attorney, key members of the faculty, grounds/maintenance personnel, and representative medical professionals and local first responders (e.g., EMS, police).

This team would perform an initial risk assessment to identify concerns and to determine which risks present the greatest exposure to the school and, thus, should be addressed first. The team would also develop general over-arching goals for the crisis plan. This list of “concerns” would naturally include issues of safety—region-specific weather or geohazards; the surrounding neighborhood (e.g., an open campus, proximity to railroads, adjacent highways); athletics and athletic fields; transportation; and facilities.

Once the “larger” issues and concerns are identified and broad goals have been developed, this group would then select subsidiary teams. These are tasked with the responsibility of further assessing risk (on a more detailed level) as it relates to their respective focus (Prevention/Safety, Response, and Recovery) and to create procedures to address them. For these teams, consider adding selected representatives from your parent body and students (in nonhazardous roles).

In addition to the primary roles noted above for the Crisis Team, for the three subsidiary teams, consider individuals who possess complementary, individual attributes and characteristics such as leadership qualities; technical expertise; medical, physical, and psychological knowledge; and the ability to remain calm under pressure.

### Phase One: Prevention/Safety

The Prevention/Safety Team will start by determining its goals. These should include, among other elements, (1) safety of students and all constituents, (2) prevention or mitigation of loss (property), (3) preservation of revenue and assets, (4) protection of the school’s reputation, and (5) legal compliance.

The team then identifies issues implied by the above, and that present risk that must be addressed and planned for. Focus here is preventative in nature and would include:

- general security issues (e.g., open campus issues);
- monitoring visitors;
- background checks of faculty and staff, volunteers, and vendors;
- drop-off and pick-up procedures;
- harassment/bullying and conflict resolution training;
- athletics and transportation/field trips;
- summer programs and after-school care;
- use of volunteers;
- fire prevention plan;
- monitoring playground and facilities;
- first-aid training/certification and protocols; and
- role of first-responders.

The Prevention/Safety Team must create a safety plan reflecting procedures and protocols to address each of the above, which becomes part of the overall crisis plan. Then, the team will communicate this plan to the school. Training in these procedures and then practicing them are the “final”—though never-ending—aspects of this plan. Modification of the plan may occur from these practice sessions if gaps are noted during the training/testing.

## Phase Two: Response

The Response Team writes and communicates the Emergency Operating Plan (EOP), encompassing the following goals—which are more limited and focused on “real-time” events. These goals include (1) safety of students, faculty, staff, and visitors; (2) effective communication to all stakeholders (including off-hours procedures); (3) timely involvement of first responders (911); and (4) protection against property loss (where possible).

The team must then create specific emergency response procedures (and identify needed resources) for possible occurrences such as:

- an intruder;
- an assault;
- a bomb threat or weapons on campus;
- children “at risk” issues or child abuse (actual or suspected);
- pandemics and communicable diseases;
- criminal activity;
- death, serious injury, or illness of a school community member;
- a suicide threat or attempt;
- fire, smoke, explosion, gas leaks, or chemical spills;
- a missing or lost student, kidnapping, or hostage situation;
- nearby emergencies;
- a school bus or field-trip emergency;
- severe weather;
- biohazards;
- a utility failure; and
- first-aid administration—administering cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) or using an automated external defibrillator (AED); calling 911.

The focus then moves to possible actions needed in response to the above, including:

- plan initiation procedures,
- functional responsibilities (who does what) using an emergency “flip chart,”
- lock down and/or shelter-in-place (preventative and emergency),
- building evacuation/campus evacuation,
- neighborhood evacuation (outpost operations), and
- parent re-unification (uniting students with parents) or reverse evacuation (moving students back into the classrooms after an emergency situation).

The Response Team should prepare on-site and off-site “crisis kits” (grab-bags of needed emergency items), including:

- plan initiation procedures and functional flip charts,
- a list of team members (and backups),
- all critical contact information (including first-responders),
- cell phones or two-way radios,
- a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) radio, and
- maps and evacuation routes.

The team must also develop parent/community communication protocols, including a section in the parent handbook on “what to expect when” and perhaps computer-assisted devices to get critical messages to all needed persons.

The team should also sketch out a plan to deal with the media when a crisis occurs. Designate one spokesperson (with back up), and develop a script. Plan to be factual but brief; for example, “X has occurred; we are working with the proper authorities. When we have more details, we will be back to you.” (Note: The school should develop a relationship with the local media *prior* to an emergency.)

Training and practice, while necessary in all phases of the plan, are *most* critical in this second phase. These help assure efficacy of the plan and provide insight into any modifications needed, helping to better assure that the processes developed will work when it really counts in a true emergency.


## Phase Three: Recovery

The Recovery Team considers goals and desired outcomes in dealing with the aftereffects of the crisis. These may include (1) creating a safe haven (e.g., individual counseling and/or group sessions; providing additional resources such as substitute teachers, at-home learning, and transportation), (2) “continuity” of operations, and (3) resumption of normal operations (including a business continuation plan).

## Summary

Once all three aspects of the plan are in place, the plan must then be published and communicated to all those involved with the school. Then it is critical to “practice” by conducting all-team “table game” exercises (what-ifs while sitting at a table), as well as “functional exercises” (role playing and acting out various scenarios, roles, and responses)—similar to fire drills, but for all contingencies. Also consider planning a “full-scale test” with the guidance of local first-responders during which all students, faculty, and staff are evacuated from the buildings, with local authorities overseeing and participating in the exercise.

The above is, indeed, a lot of work—and not without some cost in the form of resources and money.<sup>3</sup> But, there is nothing more important for you as a key administrator to do than protect your students, faculty, staff, and school community at large.

After all, it’s not only the “right thing to do,” but it will also help to better assure your school’s long-term viability and ability to deliver on its mission through forethought, planning, and implementation of this most important document and process. 

<sup>1</sup> A “crisis” at your school does not need to make the national news. It can be the death of a student or teacher, a fire, an intruder at the school, and the like.

<sup>2</sup> Safety experts, local first responders, insurance agents, associations you belong to, government resources (FEMA, NIMS) and the like, as well as FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and NIMS (National Incident Management System). See also [www.SafehavensInternational.org](http://www.SafehavensInternational.org)

<sup>3</sup> Because of the resources and funding required, ideally the crisis plan should be tied to your next strategic financial plan to make sure the process is successfully completed.