Recovering when the unthinkable strikes your school

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DISCUSSION GUIDE
By Lois Brown Easton
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Using this guide

This discussion guide is intended to assist Kappan readers who want to use articles in staff meetings or university classroom discussions.

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Recovering from the unthinkable
A professional development discussion guide

The articles in this issue of the Kappan provide readers with a variety of ways to understand, prepare for, deal with, and heal from school crises. With your colleagues, use summaries of the key points in the articles to consider the advice of the U.S. Department of Education’s Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities (August 2004). Then consider your own school’s or district’s crisis planning. Using the information from the Kappan articles, consider the following questions for both the U.S. Department of Education’s plan and your own plan:

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT CRISIS PLANNING

• What would you add?
• What would you delete?
• What would you change?
• What resources are needed to carry out such a plan?
• What supports would you have for carrying out such a plan?
• What barriers might need to be considered in terms of carrying out such a plan?

A SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS FROM THE ARTICLES


• Every school faces crises; the unthinkable will happen.
• These crises will vary in magnitude.
• Schools can choose how to prepare for and respond to the crises they face.
• Crisis planning used to focus on natural events such as fire; now, planning focuses on acts of violence as well.
• Physical and psychological safety are important.
• The mental health issues may be “more widespread and complex for schools to identify and address than physical harm.”
• Mental issues may be hidden as well as may be “long-lasting and far-reaching.”
• A series of “negative cascading events” may worsen the mental health of participants and bystanders.
• Schools and districts need to implement best practices in terms of “prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.”
• Systems in place for crisis “can include everything from teaching and student supports to facilities management and communications.”
• What’s in place before a crisis occurs affects the recovery from the crisis.
Demaria, T. & Schonfeld, D. J.  
**Do it now: Short-term responses to traumatic events**

- Schools need both immediate goals and long-term goals when a crisis occurs.
- “The school's immediate goal is to minimize the negative effect, support coping, accelerate adjustment, and instill confidence in students that staff members are available to address their needs.”
- Children's responses vary considerably in a variety of areas: sleep patterns, expressions of anxiety, feelings of grief, avoidance of previously enjoyable activities, difficulties with school work, and substance abuse, for example.
- Some may have no reaction at all, but that doesn’t indicate that they are free from stress or distress.
- Students with increased risk factors — such as their own injury or the death of someone close to them, their perception of danger, horror in terms of what they saw, separation from loved ones, for example — may need more time to recover fully from a crisis.
- Interestingly enough, some young people experience personal growth as a result of crisis.
- Adults around students should be encouraged to share their own reactions to crisis so students see that a variety of ways to respond are legitimate.
- Staff may provide support, but they should not be the ones to counsel others.
- Active listening and talking openly about the crisis helps most people, but withholding (or asking others to withhold) information can be harmful.
- Adults can model how to care about others.
- Mental health providers should be the ones to provide counseling, finding those who need it and providing help; they and crisis responders should work with the school community before any crisis occurs.
- The entire school community, including parents, should understand the “short- and long-term reactions” that are likely to follow a crisis.
- Professional learning experiences may help educators weave “psychological first aid” into their classroom strategies and materials.
- Administrators should focus on providing “one consistent and calming voice,” setting both strategy and tone for crisis response.

Garran, C.  
**A death at school: What school leaders should do.**

- Leaders are truly “servant leaders” when a death occurs at a school.
- They need a crisis leadership team and the preparation to activate it.
- They must determine how to initially notify people (whom and how) as well as how to continue communicating in the early stages after a crisis.
- Consider communications as a set of circles, with first communication occurring with those in the inner circle, with closest relationships to the people involved in the crisis, and then moving outward.
- Both “leaving people guessing for even a short period of time is unfair” and “tamping down rumors” are important crisis leadership team functions.
- Suicide needs special consideration; the principal is not the appropriate person to identify cause of death.
- Social media change the dynamic of communications, speeding up the communications process. The leadership team needs to be aware of the “hyperspeed” with which news travels.
- The crisis leadership team needs to plan for special time to grieve and remember, rather than expecting normal school operations to continue after the death of a student or staff member.
- Spontaneous memorials — whether a physical place where people leave remembrances or a time for people to come together on their own — should be expected as well.
• How adults model behavior at this time sets a standard for how students behave.
• The administrative crisis team needs to plan for presence at funerals and memorials; the team also needs to plan what to do with the belongings and presence (such as the chair the student occupied) after the funeral.
• Attention to details, such as removing the student's name from a database, which automatically generates letters, is important.
• Permanent memorials may be appropriate.
• These activities can help a school community heal and even become stronger.

Curry, M.W. Being the change: An inner city school builds peace

• A school community can respond to a crisis in a healing way.
• For example, a high school that had witnessed the slaying of three of its students, dedicated itself to a Season of Peace Building, a “74-day campaign in which over 200 people participated in a ‘fast relay’.”
• They took a Peace Pledge, which, among other things, required them to “not bring drama or discrimination into their community.”
• They engaged in community service and self-published a book about their Season of Peace Building.
• Three factors helped the school reject hopelessness and achieve hopefulness: “a compelling mission, deep community involvement that included social networks and made resources available to the school, and authentic cariño — a holistic commitment to care for and honor the humanity of each child.”
• The school focused on “interrupting inequity and injustice,” creating a “full-service community school” and “authentic and aesthetic” caring in advisories as well as through the school.

Hintz, K. Lessons from a disaster on the Great Plains.

• Natural disasters, such as a 100-year flood in Minot, S.D., cause “physical, financial, and emotional” scars.
• Building needs affected not only individuals and families, but the school district itself, with three schools occupying temporary quarters for two years.
• District educators learned from this experience, including how the losses affected teachers who “lost everything.”
• Donations of books and supplies were welcomed, but gift cards made the most difference to educators and families who could use them in a variety of ways.
• Meaningful messages such as decorated ceiling tiles helped people cope with their losses.
• Students needed the chance to talk and write about their experience, but they needed to indicate both how much and when they wanted to share.
• Sometimes students did not quite understand what had happened to them, and they needed help processing both the event and messages afterward, such as worry that a teacher might leave when the school moved to a new building.
• Schools provided some stability during troublesome times in Minot, and educators needed to provide emotional support for students.
• Ceremonies were needed to mark the end (of the old buildings, for example) and the beginning of the new buildings.
Crepeau-Hobson, F. & Kanan, L.M. *After the tragedy: Caring for the caregivers.*

- A crisis demands much of caregivers and may put them into distress; this is called “secondary trauma.”
- Schools and districts need to be able to support the caregivers, the adults, in particular, who need to continue to “foster the development, learning, and achievement of schools.”
- Beware the “push to return to normalcy” before it’s too early.
- Adults will vary in their responses to a crisis, and certain crises may affect adults in different ways because of their history, experience, and individual characteristics.
- Mental health or problems related to mental health will affect caregivers’ differing responses to current crises.
- Adults already stressed for a variety of reasons are likely to impede caregivers.
- Watch for physical reactions that might not seem to be directly related to the crisis (such as trouble paying attention); also watch for emotional symptoms (such as excessive worry) and social signs (such as uncharacteristic outbreaks of anger).
- Leaders need to ensure that the school’s crisis plan is effective before a crisis, understand the school community’s needs and feelings, provide mental help to caregivers as soon as possible, and make sure that carefully planned events ease the return to “normalcy” whenever possible.
- Caregivers need to understand how exhausting a crisis can be and should help themselves and each other.

Kennedy-Paine, C., Reeves, M.A., & Brock, Stephen E. *How schools heal after a tragedy.*

- The authors, all school psychologists with experience with school crises, suggested that — unlike most school events — crises have no definite ending.
- They share lessons about what “recovery” means for schools, illustrating their points with two examples from high schools.
- The authors say the first lesson is “be prepared before a crisis happens,” and they note that the “character and connectedness of the school climate” shape a school’s capacity to be ready.
- Capacity is shaped by programs that already support students’ well-being.
- The authors advocate developing a crisis plan by trained individuals and community members.
- Having a plan helps people act as one, specifies roles, reduces confusion, minimizes trauma, and establishes hope.
- The second lesson is that the immediate response has an effect on long-term recovery and should include “ongoing evaluation of psychological trauma risk” — the first three days are critical.
- The authors share their observation that most students will recover naturally, with resources they already have, but some will need more support at a time when external resources may be scarce.
- Some who need mental health services may be unwilling to seek them because of perceptions of stigma attached to seeking help; communities would do well to destigmatize mental health needs before the need for service.
- Counselors can help students learn healthy coping strategies and should keep a database related to student and staff needs.
- The third lesson is to provide effective mental health support from a mix of school and community professionals.
- Those who know the students best might be the most effective with them, but internal supporters can become overwhelmed.
- The fourth lesson is that school personnel need to prepare to “address a variety of reactions over the long-term,” ranging from wanting to resume normality right away to exacerbation of already present mental health issues.
- Consider conducting a “schoolwide emotional wellness” survey about three months after a crisis.
- The fifth lesson is to acknowledge that the school will never return to what it was; the “new normal” will be different.
- Memorials — both temporary and permanent — are part of the healing, but educators should be wary of “accentuating the act of suicide.”
**Consider the U.S. Department of Education Guide**

With colleagues, use the questions and the summaries of the articles in this month’s *Kappan* to consider the advice from the U.S. Department of Education’s *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* (August 2004).

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**Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities**

U.S. Department of Education

**PREPARING YOUR SCHOOL FOR A CRISIS**

Taking action now can save lives, prevent injury, and minimize property damage in the moments of a crisis. If you do not have a crisis plan in place, it is time to develop one. If you have one, review, practice, and update your plan. This brochure is designed to assist schools and communities in either situation. Although every school’s needs and circumstances are different, these checklists provide general guidance that can be adapted as appropriate to each district’s or school’s circumstances.

If you would like additional, more detailed information on how to prepare your school or district for a crisis, you can order a free copy of *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*, from which these checklists have been taken, on the U.S. Department of Education Office of Safe and Drug-Free School’s emergency preparedness web site: www.ed.gov/emergencyplan. This web site contains many other crisis planning resources as well.

Additional web sites

- [www.ed.gov/emergencyplan](http://www.ed.gov/emergencyplan)
- [www.ready.gov/](http://www.ready.gov/)
- [www.fema.gov/kids/](http://www.fema.gov/kids/)
- [www.redcross.org/services/disaster](http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster)
- [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

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**Mitigation and Prevention**

The goal of mitigation is to decrease the need for response as opposed to simply increasing response capability.

- Connect with community emergency responders to identify local hazards.
- Review the last safety audit to examine school buildings and grounds.
- Determine who is responsible for overseeing violence prevention strategies in your school.
- Encourage staff to provide input and feedback during the crisis planning process.
- Review incident data.
- Determine major problems in your school with regard to student crime and violence.
- Assess how the school addresses these problems.
- Conduct an assessment to determine how these problems—as well as others—may impact your vulnerability to certain crises.

Retrieved from [www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/crisisplanning.html](http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/crisisplanning.html)
PREPAREDNESS

Good planning will facilitate a rapid, coordinated, effective response when a crisis occurs.

• Determine what crisis plans exist in the district, school, and community.
• Identify all stakeholders involved in crisis planning.
• Develop procedures for communicating with staff, students, families, and the media.
• Establish procedures to account for students during a crisis.
• Gather information about the school facility, such as maps and the location of utility shutoffs.
• Identify the necessary equipment that needs to be assembled to assist staff in a crisis.

RESPONSE

A crisis is the time to follow the crisis plan and make use of your preparations.

• Determine if a crisis is occurring.
• Identify the type of crisis that is occurring and determine the appropriate response.
• Activate the incident management system.
• Ascertain whether an evacuation, reverse evacuation, lockdown, or shelter-in-place needs to be implemented.
• Maintain communication among all relevant staff at officially designated locations.
• Establish what information needs to be communicated to staff, students, families, and the community.
• Monitor how emergency first aid is being administered to the injured.
• Decide if more equipment and supplies are needed.

RECOVERY

During recovery, return to learning and restore the infrastructure as quickly as possible.

• Strive to return to learning as quickly as possible.
• Restore the physical plant, as well as the school community.
• Monitor how staff are assessing students for the emotional impact of the crisis.
• Identify what follow-up interventions are available to students, staff, and first responders.
• Conduct debriefings with staff and first responders.
• Assess curricular activities that address the crisis.
• Allocate appropriate time for recovery.
• Plan how anniversaries of events will be commemorated.
• Capture “lessons learned” and incorporate them into revisions and trainings.

Consider Your Own Crisis Planning

Then consider crisis planning for your district or school. Working together, link the information from the articles to your own plan and ask the questions you asked about the U.S. Department of Education plan.
Applications

This Professional Development Guide was created with the characteristics of adult learners in mind (Tallerico, 2005):

- Active engagement
- Integration of experience
- Choice and self-direction
- Relevance to current challenges
- Learning style variation

As you think about sharing this article with other adults, how could you fulfill the adult learning needs above?

This Professional Development Guide was created so that readers could apply what they have learned to work in classrooms (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001):

- Identifying Similarities and Differences
- Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition
- Nonlinguistic Representations
- Setting Objectives and Providing Feedback
- Cues, Questions, and Advance Organizers
- Summarizing and Note-Taking
- Homework and Practice
- Cooperative Learning
- Generating and Testing Hypotheses

As you think about sharing this article with classroom teachers, how could you use these strategies with them?

References


About the Author

Lois Brown Easton is a consultant, coach, and author with a particular interest in learning designs — for adults and for students. She retired as director of professional development at Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center, Estes Park, Colo. From 1992 to 1994, she was director of Re:Learning Systems at the Education Commission of the States (ECS). Re:Learning was a partnership between the Coalition of Essential Schools and ECS. Before that, she served in the Arizona Department of Education in a variety of positions: English/language arts coordinator, director of curriculum and instruction, and director of curriculum and assessment planning.

A middle school English teacher for 15 years, Easton earned her Ph.D. at the University of Arizona. Easton has been a frequent presenter at conferences and a contributor to educational journals.

She was editor and contributor to Powerful Designs for Professional Learning (NSDC, 2004 & 2008). Her other books include:

- The Other Side of Curriculum: Lessons From Learners (Heinemann, 2002);
- Engaging the Disengaged: How Schools Can Help Struggling Students Succeed (Corwin, 2008);
- Protocols for Professional Learning (ASCD, 2009); and
- Professional Learning Communities by Design: Putting the Learning Back Into PLCs (Learning Forward and Corwin, 2011).

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