

Should Another Terrorist Attack Occur This Year

None of us wants to think about the possibility of another attack, but we would be naive to believe it won't. It is prudent that we address that possibility at least briefly. Also know that, should another attack or national emergency or catastrophic school event occur, we will put helpful handouts and information on our web site as quickly as possible. Bookmark our web site for quick reference and future use at www.cmionline.org. The new emergency information will always be easy to find on the first screen that appears when you log into our site.

Initial first tips:

Don't psychologically saturate kids. Television puts the brain into an automated receptive state that discourages active participation with the information that is being gleaned. It is not helpful to watch events such as the towers collapsing or people jumping from the buildings over and over. Instead, consider asking that televisions be turned off and that, instead, teachers lead discussions or other activities.

Early on everyone wants and needs clear information. *It is always helpful for teachers to have a little advance warning if possible!* Plan ahead of time how you might let teachers know that something is unfolding, give them a moment to prepare themselves psychologically and emotionally for telling the students and providing initial support.

On 9/11, one insightful Middle School principal in New Jersey realized that there was high likelihood that students and staff in his building would lose family members from the collapse of the towers. In order to give teachers a little warning, he went onto the PA system and said, "Students, we have barely begun the school year, so we haven't had time to have a fire drill. But it is a beautiful, sunny day, so I'm going to ask that, in a few minutes, your teachers walk you outside to show you where you would go in an actual drill. We won't pull the alarm; we'll just give you a couple of minutes to get to a stopping place in your current lesson. I'll be back with you momentarily." And then in a couple of minutes, he asked teachers to lead their students out onto the field to their gathering places. When students were out of the building, clerical people went to each teacher and told them the principal wanted to check in with them in the middle of the field, and asked students to hang together and behave for a couple of moments. That gave the principal and teachers just a few minutes to talk about what was happening, for the principal to ask the teachers to share information with their students, to leave televisions and internet connections off. They talked about how they would get updated information as it became available, and he asked teachers what he could do for them. A simple and ingenious way to give teachers critical moments to prepare themselves to deal with the day.

A high school principal in Bergen County, New Jersey, also realized that many of his students and staff would have lost someone in the towers. His office staff quickly ran a search of emergency numbers and parent work addresses and phone numbers. Those students and staff that came up as possibly World Trade Center addresses or phone number connections were called into the office so they could hear about it with lots of personal support and privacy. He gathered all of the staff who were on prep or had flexibility to be able to sit with them to be present before they arrived at the office.

Take a moment to think about how you might respond in the event of another attack.

- How will you let staff and students know of the next event, should one occur.
- Think of ways to give information to teachers first so they have a few minutes to prepare themselves for supporting the students.
- Think of a couple of alternative ways to communicate, depending on the nature of the incident and perhaps other details, such as power outages.
- Think of ways to determine what students might be personally touched by the event.
- Be ready for an onslaught of parents who might be somewhat panicked, wanting to pick up their students. Consider having a "holding place" for them while you send staff to the rooms to retrieve students. It only takes one hysterical parent in a classroom to set a whole new tone for students.

- Consider having some parent flyers ready to copy so you have something to send home immediately. (You can use the copyrighted PDF file handouts contained in this package as long as you leave the footers with copyright information on all copies used or distributed.)
- Be sure you have planned for evacuations for all district buildings to places where they can be reunited with parents. (The Catastrophic Events Resource Manual, a guide for these preparations and many others for helping schools deal with catastrophic events is available on the CMI web site at www.cmionline.org).
- There are likely to be victims who are not from the area of the attack. For instance, many students from around the US lost family members in the airliners and some lost family who were visiting the area. This is a caution in that you may think that an event in a given area is so removed that your students and staff have been spared losses, only to be surprised later.
- Students often appear to be coping better than they actually are. Many do not bring up their sleepless nights or their worries because they feel even more vulnerable in doing so. Create ways to "normalize" their reactions rather than confronting them. Examples might be to have short articles in the student newspaper or have teachers lead informal discussions that tell youth the signs of depression and some of the more usual reactions to trauma. For middle and high school students, it might also be helpful to give them the indicators that professional help might be warranted. For all ages, this is the kind of information that is crucial for parents to receive in letters home, on your school's web page or other means of school to home communication.

The nature of crisis is that it will unfold in an unwieldy fashion, so all plans must be flexible, and all people listed in the plan need back-up people in case they are not on site the moment a crisis unfolds.

Initial steps for teachers:

None of us wants to think about another possible attack. But we need to prepare ourselves for that possibility. Should another attack occur, your students will take their cues from you, and in some ways, will do as well as you do. If you panic and seem rendered out of control, students will, likewise, believe that things are devastating. If you can maintain a steady tenor, students have trust in your ability to see them through for the time being. Here are some suggestions:

- Give clear information, validating students' deep desire and need to know what is happening.
- Do not give false hope.
- Let students ask questions and validate that you can understand why they might be wondering about whatever they bring up.
- Realize that it is better to say, "We don't know that yet" than to guess and have kids lose trust in your ability to be honest. "I don't know" is a perfectly acceptable answer. Sometimes it is the only acceptable answer!
- Don't just to conclusions about who perpetrated an event or who is at fault. "We'll find that out, and probably fairly soon," can be followed up with those you know who will be working on this, such as law enforcement, our government, and so on.
- As you talk with students, don't deny what has happened, but when it feels appropriate, take the focus off the event and bring it closer to home. "What can we do here at school to help us feel safer?" or "What can we do in the hallways every day that addresses that kind of hate closer to home?" could allow students to feel more empowered as you bring the focus to an arena they can impact.

Realize that all of your good work with kids can be torn down in no time at all by parent comments that evening at home. Look for ways to communicate with parents and give them some ideas on how they might address the event in conversation at home. Some of the activities in the parent section of this guide could be adapted to meet the needs of another event.

Remember that what you students value a great deal is the consistency you provide by being there for them every day. Not that you solve all of their problems, but that you care about them consistently and provide ongoing guidance.

If another event happens, bring up the fact that we got through 9/11 remarkably well as a country. As major an event as that was, it didn't cause an irreversible plunge in the stock market, the economy went ahead and remained fairly strong, and much of the country went on without really missing a beat. Remind them that, although we can't see it in the beginning, there are many forces that become mobilized when events such as these occur, and that many good people are working hard to move us into recovery.

In the classroom, keep a balance between supporting students around the event and maintaining regular classroom activities and expectations. Sometimes getting back into academics provides a needed break from the fears and anxieties of the event. It also makes a statement that the event hasn't ripped apart everything about life at school as we knew it.

Remember that it helps us feel less victimized if we can find something to do to help someone else. The cards and letters sent to New York and New Jersey right after 9/11 were wonderful. One of the fifth grade classes that literally ran for their lives as the towers collapsed were at the Red Cross family services tent within a couple of weeks with a great donation of money they'd raised for the families. How's **that** for kids who were victims in the event rising to an amazing response?!

Be sure to check our web site soon after major events occur. We try to post PDFs that can be downloaded immediately for use in classrooms, guides for counselors and administrators and templates for flyers to be sent home to parents.

