

## Thoughts for Administrators

As administrators, you have a unique opportunity to set the tone for your entire building or district. It is always more difficult to deal with things when one is unprepared or when a crisis is unfolding. Take time now to consider the following thoughts. Not all will be applicable in all buildings or districts, but thinking things out ahead of time will pay off.

Anything you do put in place is easier to amend to meet a similar need than starting from scratch. There is a great expression, “You don’t teach navigation in the eye of the storm.” This is so true. We are better off to make decisions when we have a clear mind than when much is at stake. So, consider the following:

Some specific questions school staff and administrators are asking:

- What should we be sure we’re doing in our classrooms every day?
  - Give students time to talk – putting their fears into words does three things:
    - Allows them to begin to gain mastery
    - Once we’ve named it, we can begin to make plans and learn coping skills to address it.
    - We begin to see that we aren’t alone – that others share the same fears.
  - Make sure kids are having fun – lots of laughter.
    - We know that laughter is actually helpful for the immune system.
    - We all need breaks from the oppressiveness of our worries.
- What is the most important thing for me as an administrator to put in place?
  - Communications systems and as many back-up communications systems as you can think of – our most readily available systems often go down (phones, cell phones, email) in the immediate aftermath of these events, so look for alternatives.
  - Plans for how you’ll let staff know what is happening when unexpected events unfold. **It is very helpful for staff to hear the news first and have time to adjust before trying to help students**, so it is suggested that you have a means of giving them warning.
    - Have someone bring written notes to the classroom and pull the teacher out into the hallway to let them know and give them time before they have to go in to read the announcement to their students.
    - Some schools have all teachers wearing pagers – that would work well.
    - Some schools have the means of letting teachers know to check their email while students are studying independently.
    - Some classrooms have phones, or having teachers’ cell phone numbers.
    - Think now about how you can let staff know what is happening first.
    - Coming over the PA system with an all-call is probably the least ideal unless there is a threat to life or limb, because it leaves teachers having to hear the news and try to cope with their own emotions and reactions at the same time they’re having to support students.

- Plans for how to deal with a great influx of parents who will come to collect their children.
  - Create a “staging” area so they have a place to wait while staff go to retrieve students from classrooms. It only takes one hysterical or panicky parent to affect the tenor in a classroom and leave many other students frightened.
  - Make sign-out cards that require a parent to spend a few minutes writing – it is information you’ll need, and it gives them something to do. It also allows them to give you that information without waiting in line to get to a clipboard with a sign-out sheet. Things to have on that card:
    - Name of student
    - Name of parents picking up that student
    - Time of the pick-up
    - Cell phone number of parents (both!) and students, if they have a cell phone.
    - Where they plan to go. In New York one parent would find their child and an hour later the other parent would show up – if their home was in the “Red Zone” around Ground Zero, they couldn’t go home. Often the second parent didn’t know where to start looking.
    - Alternative people outside your community that this family will continue to contact until all have checked in and been accounted for. Might be an aunt in another state, for instance.
    - Phone numbers of neighbors or others close to where the student and parent intend to go.
    - Place for a signature.
- Evacuation plans that give you the choice of moving students in at least three different directions so, if the threat is airborne and from a specific direction or source, you can move them downwind no matter which way the wind is blowing.
- Communications to parents
  - Let them know now how you would handle the reuniting should you have to evacuate the school. It is likely that there will be some streets you’d rather they didn’t use so you could have easier access for emergency vehicles. It is possible you could tell them one alternative site for each building where they are to go wait for their children or for word on how to find their children. That could be a church down the way or another school.
- Getting your media releases into skeleton form now so you can fax out information to media very quickly. Ahead of time:
  - Get the fax numbers of all local media to whom you would send information
  - Create a skeleton that has:
    - Name of school and district
    - Streets you’d like parents to avoid
    - Where they are to go to reunite with their students
    - What number to call for further information, reminding them that tying up the phones unnecessarily simply jams lines.
    - Procedures you expect to have in place at the relocation site
    - How parents will receive ongoing updates in information
  - Leave space so you can add:

- Nature of the event
  - Direction to which you are evacuating and where students will be
  - Any special measures you can already predict – special information about busses or transportation.
  - Whether you plan to have a parent meeting, and if so, where and when.
  - Anything else that would be helpful
- Learn now how flexible your data system is. Would you be able to:
  - Do a data search to determine all parents who might be working in a particular building or area of town that has been destroyed?
  - Determine where the spouses of your staff work?
  - Pull up information that would tell you which building the children of your staff attend? If one school has a catastrophe, often teachers throughout the district whose own children are in that school need support or need to be released.
- To watch or not to watch?
  - We know that the psychological saturation from watching television gives rise to more Post Traumatic symptomology than hearing about something and being able to ask questions. Students will see more television than is probably good for them in most homes, so it is wise not to contribute to nightmares and flashbacks.... Children are more apt to have frightening dreams if they've actually seen footage of a terrifying event than if they have been told of it and been able to talk about it. You know that when you go to a frightening movie, your heart rate picks up when someone on screen is in danger – it is as though there is less psychological distance between a person and the event if that person views graphic news coverage.
- Expect stress, frustration and anger.
  - Rifts that exist now will be magnified. Likewise, those on staff who are likely to want to build community will do so even more when the chips are down. Be prepared to support people who have very differing feelings and beliefs about how things should be handled. Don't take it personally! Crisis is destabilizing, which brings out anxiety, which makes us less tolerant and flexible. Much of the dissention is actually an attempt to feel in control or begin to create a sense of safety.
- Realize that we are better at meeting the needs of the students than we are at taking care of staff. On one level, that is the way it should be. But on another, we need to remember that students can only do as well as the environment we create for them allows, and that means having adults in the best place possible to take care of kids' needs. And of course, that goes for the administrators as well!

*We suggest you read the guidelines for elementary and middle/high school teachers, too. We will be adding activities and parent guidelines soon, so continue to check our web site. There are also guidelines for the possibility of another terrorist attack, and many of the suggestions in those will be helpful now as well. Consider adding our web site to your list of bookmarks. We try to post something current as events unfold.*