

Chapter 3

SCHOOL RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider this situation in a typical high school. Two students are hassling each other in a hallway by shouting and shoving each other. A teacher tells them to quiet down. One does but the other student punches a locker, denting it. The same student then screams, “This school is driving me crazy. I could kill someone.” Historically, the school would have dealt with this situation by internal discipline and many teachers and students would have thought the student was just “blowing off steam.” However in the wake of numerous school shootings, school personnel and police have erred on the side of caution when threats are made.

In this case, a court hearing would determine whether the student should be charged with misdemeanor charges of causing a disturbance at a school, threatening to commit a crime and malicious destruction of property under \$250. This would be in addition to the school discipline. Did the student cross the line in what he said or was he just blowing off steam?

These and other issues are now facing school personnel. In some locations school personnel are focusing on security issues by requesting that schools have metal detectors, student ID’s and transparent back packs. Others are focusing on early recognition and prevention programs to reduce the feelings of alienation and distress among students. What combination is best can only be determined by an analysis of local needs and resources. The task force therefore makes the following recommendations in Isabella County.

PRE-PLAN PREVENTION PHASE RECOMMENDATIONS

CURRICULUM

The thread that connects most, if not all, of the recent school shootings is that of individual alienation. Broad based school efforts are necessary from the elementary grades to teach children to deal with conflict at home and in school. The following approaches are promising to bring about wide scale change.

- A. Determine the needs of area students via building climate surveys and others, such as student asset surveys. (Example: *Search Institute, Developmental Assets – A Profile of Your Youth*, Thresher Square West, Suite 210, 700 South Third Street, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55415).
- B. To support continuity and education of safe schools through education of all, incorporate standard or additional curricula within the schools. (Example: *Smart Choices – Better Chances – A Natural Helpers Program*). For additional research-based, exemplary programs, see Appendix B. Arrange for staff training in selected curricula.

BUILDING EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Recent legislation and analysis of school violence events require and support the need for individual building plans for emergencies. The need for a consistent, universally accepted approach that works for law enforcement and schools is necessary. One such plan is the Incident Command System (ICS) for training school personnel. The components of this training are listed:

- A. Training of teachers, administrators and clerical personnel at each building site: crisis response box, aerial photos of campus, map of local streets surrounding school, campus layout, blueprint of school buildings, teacher and employee roster, keys, fire alarm turnoff procedures, sprinkler system turnoff procedures, utility shutoff valves, gas line and utility line layout, cable television and satellite feed shutoff, emergency communication procedures, student photos, incident command system, key responders' phone numbers, designated command post and staging areas, emergency response phone list, evacuation sites, student disposition forms and emergency data cards, student attendance roster, inventory of staff resources, list of students with special needs, first aid supplies, location, emergency first aid supplies, bus roster and routes, list of locations of disaster kits.

- B. Detail the number of schoolrooms, doors and roofs, including identical numbering throughout districts for ease of location.
- C. Set up plans for neighboring schools in the event of a crisis at one school, since that can cause turmoil with staff and students in another school.
- D. Provide disaster kits throughout the school with contents to include name tags, notebooks, pens and markers, hand radios, batteries, first aid supplies, tape, blankets, megaphone, tools, separate placards with directional words such as PARENTS, COUNSELORS, MEDIA, CLERGY, VOLUNTEERS, KEEP OUT, and caution tape.
- E. Develop sign-out procedures for students and staff.
- F. Prepare student and staff identification tags to be worn at all times during school functions. Additional possible uses for the tags are in the library, at meals, sporting events, and other school events.
- G. Provide staff identification tags with emergency statements on the backs of them (crisis roles).
- H. Establish an unpublished phone number for school, preferably a separate phone line with numbers available to fire, law enforcement, and central office.
- I. Adopt an Incident Command System plan of specific language that everyone, such as visitors, substitutes, and new students, can understand. (Example: **lock down outside, lock down inside.** Lock down outside means the threat is outside and no one is to leave the building. Lock down inside means the threat is inside the school.)
- J. Establish a common communication system both inside and outside of school site with the same wave frequencies as police.
- K. Develop training for various types of emergencies specific to school site. For example, in the case of lightning or chemical spills, and have responses to emergencies easily visible on flip charts for faculty and staff.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Systemic change is necessary to create a school environment that discourages alienation and provides support to youth during a time of changing expectations in adolescence. The following policy considerations are recommended:

- A. Adopt and develop a policy on the resolution of conflict. Bullying policies may suggest a one-sided approach and do not emphasize the necessary skills to avoid future problems. The issue becomes the overall alienation of youth by their peers within the school environment. This needs to be addressed (see Appendix D).
- B. Adopt and develop a policy to support mental health workers in our schools. The exploration of school and community mental health partnerships is encouraged (see Appendix C).
- C. Adopt and develop a scholarship and donation policy relative to responses by the community to school crises (see Appendix E)

COMMUNICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. Develop a plan in collaboration with law enforcement for communication sent home with students regarding a crisis or possible crisis issues.
(Example: One school district sends a letter with each student whenever a situation occurs, such as a bomb threat. Law enforcement can respond to follow-up calls after hours.)
- B. Develop a policy regarding who represents the school district to media, preferably one person, pre-assigned, to speak with the media.

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

Create the opportunity for law enforcement, fire department, judicial, faith-based, hospital, school, local media, and mental health members to develop strong working relationships. This group will join the already developed quarterly meetings as an extension of the Federal Safe Schools Law (PA-102. See Appendix F). School and law enforcement groups should invite these groups to the meetings.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Information from the National Center of Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University indicates that parents can have a great deal of influence in deterring adolescents from using illegal drugs, drinking, and smoking, by exercising “hands-on” supervision. The Columbia report suggests that mothers and fathers should be parents rather than pals to their children. “Hands-on” parental supervision means:

- A. Expecting to be told where the children are going (evenings and weekends) and being told the truth.
- B. Keeping tabs on where the children are by checking on them.
- C. Monitoring their TV and Internet usage by time and content.
- D. Restricting which CDs and videos the children can view and buy.
- E. Being very aware of the children’s school performance.
- F. Setting a weekend curfew.
- G. Having dinner together six nights a week and turning off the TV during dinner.
- H. Holding children responsible for chores.
- I. Having an adult present when children get home from school.

Although more parents are working more hours to make a living, it is important for parents to know what is going on in their children’s lives. Analysis of many school shootings found that parents were unaware of what their children were doing and thinking. The task force recommends that parents not fall into the belief that peers, media, and outside influences take over when children become teenagers. Parents can have a great deal of influence and be instrumental in the early recognition of students who need assistance.

We recommend the development and implementation of a School-Parent Compact within all local and charter schools.

- A. A process should be established for each parent or guardian of a pupil to enter into a school-parent compact that will commit the parent or guardian to assist and cooperate with the education of his or her child.
- B. A written commitment by the parent or guardian to share responsibility for pupil learning would include all of the following:

1. Making sure his or her child is ready to learn when he/she arrives at school.
2. Reviewing and helping with his or her child's homework.
3. Attending school-parent meetings.
4. Becoming familiar with state and district academic standards for each grade and subject area.
5. Communicating with teachers.
6. Supporting other positive parent responsibilities related to successful pupil learning at school.

Each local school district should develop and implement a program to build parent involvement that includes:

A. Helping parents understand why they are important to their children's school success by:

1. Focusing on the strengths of families. Parents know their child better than anyone else. Find ways to get that information to teachers and other school staff.
2. Giving parents specific suggestions about how they can help their children. (Examples: read aloud every day; tell your child, "I love you" every day; talk with your child; and listen to what he or she has to say every day.)
3. Helping parents understand why excessive television hurts children. Television robs children of needed play, exercise, reading practice, and study time. It dulls critical thinking and encourages obesity through snacking.

B. Giving parents specific things they can do to help their children.

1. Know why parents say they are not involved. (Don't have time. Don't know what to do. Don't feel comfortable in school. Don't speak English.) Don't make judgments about parental lack of interest in their children's education.
2. Encourage teachers to assign homework that requires talking with someone at home.

3. Investigate “voice mail” systems, e-mail, and Internet sites to keep parents up-to-date on homework and school activities.
 4. Help parents to understand that student effort is the most important key to school success, not just ability.
- C. Working to win parent endorsement of the school’s educational program.
1. Conduct school surveys to reveal family attitudes about school, creating simple evaluation forms to get parent feedback on every meeting or event. If schools ask, parents will tell what they want.
 2. Involve parents in goal setting for their children. It promotes working as a team.
- D. Giving parents specific information that they want.
1. Try a short student-written newsletter for parents about what students have been learning.
 2. Have children write personal notes to their parents on school papers, surveys, and invitations to school programs.
 3. Videotape class sessions for parents whose children are having discipline or other problems. Showing the “candid camera” tape to parents and children works wonders.
 4. Make sure all staff know the top things parents report they want to know about school. (Examples: How they can be involved with their child’s education. How they can spend more time in school. How to talk to teachers and other school staff. How to help their child at home.)
- E. Knowing how to get parents to READ what is sent home.
1. Provide a brief parent newsletter. One sheet of paper is best. Additional tips include:
 - a. Remember: “30-3-30” in writing school newspapers. Eighty percent of the people will spend just 30 seconds reading it. Nineteen percent will spend three minutes. One percent will spend 30 minutes.
 - b. Remember the “dollar bill” rule for newsletters. A dollar bill placed anywhere, at any angle, on any page should touch some

element of graphic interest – headline, box, screen, bullets, bold type, picture – or it is too dull for most people to read.

- c. Written information sent home should be at a fourth- to sixth-grade level of readability.
- d. Send “quick notes” home. (Example: notes the day something happens.)
- e. Understand one key reason for parent non-involvement: lack of information. One memo won’t do. Try letters, notes and signs, calls, newspapers, radio, and television. Repetition works.

F. Providing training and support to parents.

1. Have a ready reference list of helpful materials on hand for parents to use to help them cope with student problems. (Examples: lending library, Caring for Our Kids notebook.)
2. Offer parents classes by way of educational television, videos, and handouts.
3. Sponsor day-long parent academies with short, repeated workshops on topics such as building self-esteem, language development, motivating children, encouraging reading, discipline, talking with kids about sex, dealing with divorce. Consider alternative times for workshops, such as evenings and Saturdays.
4. Encourage and assist parents to network among themselves to solve common problems; it builds parent support.

G. Adapting ideas that have worked for others.

1. Establish a friendly contact with parents early in the year. Don’t wait until it’s too late to tell parents about potentially serious problems.
2. Remember the three “Fs” for success: Food, Families, and Fun.
3. Provide “Go to the Office” slips for teachers to give students who do something good. The student takes a slip to principal, who compliments the child and writes a note to parents on the slip (or calls the parents) and sends it home.

4. Provide “Good News” postcards for teachers to write short, positive notes about students and mail them home.
5. Provide childcare for school meetings.

LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. The task force recommends workshops for school personnel on the early and imminent warning signs of “at-risk” behavior (see Appendix J). **Early warning signs** include social withdrawal, excessive feelings of isolation and being alone, excessive feelings of rejection, being a victim of violence, feeling of being picked on and persecuted, etc. (See Appendix J). **Imminent warning signs** include serious physical fighting with peers or family members, severe destruction of property, severe rage for seemingly minor reasons, detailed threats of lethal violence, possession and use of firearms and other weapons, other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide.
- B. A plan of action to address each identified and imminent warning sign should be developed.
- C. An effective referral process to refer identified “at-risk” youth to appropriate agencies within the community should be developed and implemented.
- D. A network system needs to be enhanced by including social service agencies within the community.
- E. The referral process may need to be included within the school safety plan each school system develops.
- F. A procedure that students can follow when reporting their concerns about another student who is communicating or exhibiting inappropriate behaviors should be developed and implemented. (Youth Services Unit has a toll free confidential tip line in effect. That number is **1-800-440-8154**. The YSU also will be adding an e-mail tip line.)
- G. Develop and implement a Conflict Resolution Program that empowers students to build relationships and resolve conflicts effectively is recommended.

- H. Effective conflict resolution steps are to create an effective atmosphere, clarify perceptions, focus on individual and shared needs, build shared positive power, look to the future then learn from the past, generate options, develop action steps and make mutual benefit agreements. (See Appendix B for research based programs.)
- I. Floor plans should be updated and distributed to the appropriate agencies as outlined in chapter two.

INCIDENT CRISIS PHASE RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. During any crisis, the Incident Command System plan should be implemented as described in chapter two.
- B. Develop a uniform communication system for schools, law enforcement, central dispatch, and all rescue units.
- C. Use media to notify parents where they can meet students.
- D. Have one administrator stay at the central office if a major crisis occurs.
- E. Send staff or designees to the hospital with each injured student.
- F. Have a school-based or community mental health person go to the hospital to help with students and parents.

POST-INCIDENT FOLLOW UP PHASE RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. A media plan needs to be in place as part of Incident Command System. Update the media on a daily basis.
- B. Meet with parents face-to-face as soon as possible after the incident. Part of the Incident Command System plan will be to meet with parents on the second night following the incident.
- C. Fax press releases to other area schools to keep others informed.
- D. Hire an outside company to clean the crime area. Do not use a school custodial team to do cleaning, as it may be too traumatic.

- E. Develop an outreach plan between school-based mental health workers and community mental health personnel.
- F. Be prepared to deal with the fact that things will never be “normal” again or the same as before. A new norm will have to be established.
- G. Require debriefing for all faculty and staff within 72 hours; defusing is recommended on-site as needed.