

Crisis Management in Schools: Best Practices for Supervising  
Students with Special Needs or Disabilities.

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## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades schools around the nation have felt the impact of various natural and manmade disasters. On December 14, 2012, an attack occurred at an elementary school that exposed how vulnerable our public schools are to violent assaults. The small town of Newtown, Connecticut, was shocked when a gunman killed 20 students and 6 members of the faculty at Sandy Hook Elementary School in the quaint community that parents call an adorable little town (Candiotti & Aarthun, 2012). The horrific manmade disaster in Newtown, Ct., would quickly be followed by a devastating natural disaster on May 19, 2013, when an EF5 tornado with winds estimated between 200 and 210 miles per hour touched down for 45 minutes in Oklahoma causing catastrophic damage including taking the lives of at least 7 children at Plaza Towers Elementary School in Moore, Oklahoma (Ng & Castellano, 2013).

In light of recent tragedies at our schools, policy makers and district managers are placing a heavy emphasis on sufficiently preparing their schools for potential disasters. Toward this endeavor, school faculty are being trained by emergency management and security experts how to properly respond if an emergency occurs at their school. In addition, schools have gone to great lengths updating and revising their safety plans, crisis response protocol, and enhancing their security technologies. However, an apparent fault line that exists in school crisis planning is the knowledge base of understanding how to appropriately manage students with special needs or disabilities during crises.

## **Theoretical Rational**

In 1999, a tragic landmark incident occurred at a high school that completely changed how safety in schools would be viewed from then on. On April 20, 1999, shots were fired inside

Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. This planned mass murder attack was carried out by two students at the school. In the end, 13 people were killed, including the two student assailants. The attackers fired over 900 rounds, and planted 30 bombs in and around the high school (Jefferson County Colorado Sheriff, 1999). Following the 1999 Columbine massacre, New York State responded to the tragedy by creating the Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act (SAVE) law, which was passed by the New York State Legislature and signed into law by Governor George E. Pataki on July 24, 2000 (New York State Project SAVE, 2001). The new law mandated schools to create emergency management plans to address a variety of school safety issues, including preparing for, responding to, and recovering from natural and manmade disasters. However, an apparent fault line that exists in the current SAVE legislation is there is limited guidance on how to train school officials to become emergency managers. School officials, as prescribed in these plans, would act as emergency managers on pre-established building-level emergency management teams that would be responsible for the initial response to disasters that might impact their schools. The importance of having well trained school officials became even more clear when just one year later a catastrophic event occurred, which the authors of SAVE failed to include as part of school preparedness.

On September 11, 2001, 19 terrorists hijacked four U.S. commercial planes. Two planes flew into two towers of the World Trade Center, in New York City, one plane crashed into the Pentagon, and a fourth plane crashed in rural Pennsylvania. The attack claimed close to 3,000 lives, and was the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history. We learned about a sophisticated, patient, and disciplined enemy. Their hostility towards us and our values is limitless. They make no distinction between military and civilian targets. We learned that the institutions charged with protecting our borders and maintaining national security failed to understand how

grave this threat could be (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, 2004). Since 2001, homeland security concerns have continued to escalate and to impact educational continuity around America.

For three weeks in October 2002, citizens in the Washington Metropolitan Area were terrorized by the Beltway sniper attacks along Interstate 95. The attacks resulted in 10 deaths, and numerous parents kept their children out of school during that time (Mitchell, 2002).

Terror struck again on September 1, 2004 in Beslan, North Ossetia. A group of Chechen terrorists seized a middle school on the first day of school. The terrorists, armed with assault weapons and bombs, took more than 1,000 students and adults hostage inside the school. After a three-day standoff with Russian counterterrorism units, the end result was 330 dead, and more than 700 wounded (Dunlop, 2006).

Deliberate manmade disasters and acts of terrorism are not the only events that have impacted homeland security and educational continuity in America. An increased number of intense national disasters have challenged the nation. In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the southern and gulf coast region of the United States. The storm was the largest and deadliest to occur in the United States in recorded history. Natural disasters continued to cause devastation after Katrina. On March 2, 2007, Enterprise High School in Alabama, took a direct hit from a tornado which killed 8 students. McKay (2011) wrote that statistics from the 2011 spring's tornadoes are staggering. Storms ripped through Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia, and Kentucky claiming 535 lives. Throughout the month of June there were 1,588 tornadoes, which is well above the previous three-year average of 1,376.

Clearly, threats exist to American schools today that can cause mass casualties and deaths, disrupt educational continuity, and affect our national security. Threats facing schools

include natural and manmade disasters, acts of domestic and international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (chemical, radiological, nuclear, biological), and serious health pandemics, to name a few. The complex challenges schools may have to face in the future in order to maintain safety, security, and educational continuity are vast and multifaceted. Adding to this complexity is the challenging task school officials have when it comes to supervising and protecting students with special needs or disabilities during a crisis. Twomey (2009) wrote that further research is needed to identify the knowledge and training necessary for individuals to create comprehensive crisis management plans. Once the body of knowledge has been identified, mastering that knowledge base will help school officials enhance their ability to lead in this process. One aspect of that knowledge base is a set of conceptual or theoretical frameworks for thinking about both preventing and managing disasters that impact a school. Two of these important theories will be discussed in this paper.

### **Research Questions**

This research study attempted to address the following three questions:

1. What are some of the challenges school officials might face when supervising students with special needs or disabilities during a crisis?
2. What are some ways school officials could better prepare students with special needs or disabilities for potential threats that could impact them at school?
3. What are tactics that school officials could use during a crisis situation to best protect students with special needs or disabilities?

### **Methodology and Research Participants**

This study examined this issue at two large public school districts in the New York City Metropolitan Region. The researcher's goal was to gain more insight as it pertains to managing

students with special needs or disabilities during emergencies. A series of qualitative interviews with special education professionals were conducted. The anticipated end goal of this study was to form a knowledge base of crisis management “best practices” that can be used by school officials that work with students with special needs or disabilities.

Interviewed for this study were six school officials from the New York City Metropolitan Region. The school officials that participated all work with students with special needs or disabilities. All the school officials involved in this study have at least 3 years of experience working in their position. The identities of the participants and the school districts where this study took place will remain anonymous.

### **Situational Leadership Theory**

Situational leadership theory promotes the idea that there is no single best way to lead. The theory asserts that leadership style must be adjusted based on circumstances and the participants. Hersey and Blanchard (1977) proclaimed that the leader must assess the maturity of followers and adjust leadership behaviors to the ability and skill level of those followers. Optimal leadership style is defined in terms of the combination of task-oriented behavior and relationship-oriented behavior, and changes over time as the follower’s maturity levels increases.

Burrell, Huff, Malik, and Rahim (2010) suggested that situational leadership, as applied to public health leadership, is based on the assumption that the nature of changing external environments requires a unique combination of leadership competencies such as adaptability, analysis, strategic planning, and team building. This approach is driven by the theme that successful leaders must change their leadership styles when faced with situational changes and unpredictability. This same concept can be applied to school safety leadership, specifically school officials who act as emergency managers in the face of disasters.

Hersey and Blanchard (1977) propose that there should be different levels of support when considering situational leadership in real world practice. For example, directing leaders define the roles and tasks of the “follower” and supervise them closely. Decisions here are made by the leader and announced by the leader. Communication is largely one-way. In contrast, coaching leaders still define roles and tasks, but they seek ideas and suggestions from the followers. Here, decisions remain the leader’s prerogative, but communication is much more two-way. Further along the continuum are supporting leaders who pass on day-to-day decisions, such as task allocation and processes, to the followers. This style of leader facilitates and takes part in decisions, but control is with the followers. Lastly, delegating leaders are still involved in decisions and problem solving, but control is with the follower. Here, the follower decides when and how the leader will be involved. These four leadership styles are sometimes referred to as telling, selling, participating, and delegating. As proclaimed by Hersey and Blanchard (1977), effective leaders can adopt any of these four leadership styles based on the situation and the persons being supervised.

As defined by Hersey and Blanchard (1977), maturity levels of participants include low maturity, medium maturity with limited skills, medium maturity with higher skills, and high maturity. People at low maturity lack the ability to work on their own. They often need to be pushed to take on a task. People at medium maturity with limited skills might be willing to take on tasks, but require more direction. People at medium maturity with higher skills are ready and willing to work on tasks, but sometimes lack confidence. People at high maturity are able to work on their own. They possess high confidence to complete tasks.

According to Hersey and Blanchard (1977), the most appropriate leadership style for a follower of low maturity is directing or telling leadership. Followers who are considered

medium maturity with limited skills benefit most from the selling or coaching leadership style. The most effective leadership style for followers who are medium maturity but lack confidence is participating or supporting leadership. Lastly, the delegating leadership style is best suited for high maturity followers.

Situational leadership theory tends to put the emphasis on the level of maturity and expertise of followers. However, the type of task the group must undertake has also been proposed as a factor in selecting a particular leadership approach. Hernandez, Bumsted, Berger, and Zwingman-Bagley (1997) emphasized the idea that the application of situational leadership is dependent upon the task as well as the characteristics of the group, interpersonal relationships within a group, and the characteristics of the organizational culture. When applying situational leadership theory to school officials supervising students with special needs or disabilities during a crisis, the likely leadership style is directing or telling leadership.

### **Decision Theory**

Another theory being included as part of the theoretical framework to inform the researcher is decision theory. The concepts of this theory, when applied in the context of crisis management, help explore how school officials make decisions when confronted with a disaster. Hansson (2005) wrote that modern decision theory has developed since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the contributions of several academic disciplines, including economics, statistics, psychology, social science, philosophy, and political science. For this study, decision theory is viewed from the psychological perspective, specifically studying the behavior of individuals in decision making contexts.

Hansson (2005) suggested that the starting-point of modern discussions around decision theory is John Dewey's work in 1910 called the stages of problem solving. According to Dewey, problem-solving consists of five stages, including:

1. A felt difficulty,
2. The definition of the character of that difficulty,
3. Suggestion of possible solutions,
4. Evaluation of the suggestion, and
5. Further observation and experiment leading to acceptance or rejection.

Dewey's five stages were later modified by Simon (1960). Simon described the decision process as consisting of three principal phases. The first phase is finding occasions for making a decision. The second phase is finding possible courses of action. The final stage is choosing among courses of action. There are other models of decision making that propose a different number of steps or phases. For example, Brim (1962) divided the decision process into five steps: identification of the problem, obtaining necessary information, production of possible solutions, evaluation of solutions, and selection of a strategy for performance.

However, regardless of the number of steps or stages in the process, most scholars agree that a major variable in any decision making process is stress. Paton and Flin (1999) suggested that acute stress during a crisis can have positive and negative impacts on a decision maker. The impact of stress on decision making may depend upon the type of decision process used. Klein (1997) described one type of decision making as one made by someone experienced in managing crises. This is where the individual recognizes the situation encountered and, from previous experience, knows what course of action to take. Experienced crisis decision making is probably

more likely amongst school officials that work with students with special needs or disabilities due to their role of defusing micro crises on daily basis.

Paton and Flin (1999) spoke of other types of decision making during crises. One type of decision making is where the individual may have to spend more time thinking about the situation and remembering the appropriate rule or procedure to use. Another type is called analytical decision making, where the individual must consider several possible courses of action and then select the best option. Considering the fact that school officials are used to a directing or telling style of leadership and they make decisions during micro emergencies that occur in their classrooms on a daily basis, the groundwork was already in place for effective supervision and protection of students with special needs or disabilities during a crisis. The next section will discuss the perspectives of the school officials that work with students with special needs or disabilities.

### **Challenges Facing School Officials**

After conducting interviews with the school officials, four main themes emerged with regards to the challenges school officials might face when supervising students with special needs or disabilities during a crisis? The themes are: Limited Understanding of Danger, Increased Anxiety, Physical Mobility, and Effective Communication.

**Limited Understanding of Danger.** According to the interviewees, the majority of students they work with possess a limited capacity to understand a threat. Regardless of whether a potential hazard is natural or manmade, deliberate or accidental, most of the students cannot comprehend the danger such events could pose. This aspect, or mental state of being, in essence eliminates the school official's ability to influence or motivate students to voluntarily take

certain actions to protect themselves. In those cases where the student has a higher capacity to understand a threat, this too is a challenge that will be discussed next.

**Increased Anxiety.** It was learned that a majority of students take various medications. Often included in the “cocktail” of different pills students consume each day is anti-anxiety medications. Many of the students would not be able to function without their meds. One school official explained that her students experience perceived crises daily which is usually triggered by minor incidents that occur in the classroom. Taking protective actions such as turning off lights, locking doors, or attempting to relocate students to safe zones would likely send many of the students in to a higher level of crises than they normally experience. Any alteration to the normal daily routine of these students typically causes them to experience heightened anxiety.

**Physical Mobility.** Depending on the severity of a student’s special needs or disability, moving or having the students move can also be challenging. Some of the students are confined to wheelchairs while others need physical assistance to stand and walk. Often times during emergency situations it is necessary for students and staff to move from one location to another (e.g. shelter to safe areas due to the threat of tornados). In order to reduce risk and protect the students it might be necessary to move from point A to point B quickly. Obviously moving from one location to another, even if locations are relatively close in proximity can be extremely challenging with students with special needs or disabilities.

**Effective Communication.** Arguably, communications is applicable and/or a part of most of the issues expressed already. However, here it is presented on its own because effective communication during a crisis, also termed as *crisis communication* is slightly different than regular communication. Emergency situations require communication to be done significantly

faster than is necessary when there is no emergency. The school officials interviewed described the challenges they face on a regular basis when trying to communicate with their students. Depending on the student's special needs or disability, communication is done in various ways. For example, some of the autistic children do not respond to verbal communication. Therefore, the teachers that work with these students utilize alternative ways to communicate. During emergency situations, school officials must communicate effectively (and quickly) and take assertive actions to protect their students. That said, school officials need to do all this and not increase their student's anxiety levels.

### **Crisis Preparedness for School Officials**

The following suggestions were provided by the school officials as ways to better prepare students with special needs or disabilities for potential threats that could impact them at school:

**Make Emergency Drills Part of the Normal Routine.** The school officials that work with students with special needs or disabilities strive to maintain a normal daily routine for their students. This is done in order to maintain low anxiety levels and foster a more feasible learning environment. Most protective actions require changes to the normal activities experienced by students during a typical school day. During a lockdown, for example, students and staff should move to a section of the classroom out of the line of sight of the door. Lights are turned off, window shades might be pulled down, doors are locked, and students and staff sit quietly on the floor. During sheltering from external threats such as tornados, students and staff should move to predetermined safe areas inside the building. This might be a hallway on the lowest level of the building. Staff and students usually sit on the floor facing the walls. During evacuations, students and staff should exit the building using a safe route and walk to a predetermined staging area located at a safe distance from the school. These three common protective actions,

lockdown, sheltering, and evacuation require actions that are not part of the normal routine during school. In order to create normalcy, these protective actions could be merged in to the normal school routine simply by conducting regular emergency drills at school.

**Find Ways to Effectively Communicate During Emergencies.** As mentioned, many students do not understand verbal communication. And those students that do, teachers must be cautious as to how they communicate in order to effectively relay a messages and not increase anxiety. School officials suggest using alternative and nonverbal ways to communicate. For example, a flip chart with pictures could be a viable method to communicate with an autistic student. Another strategy is to use noise stimulations such as clapping hands or snapping fingers. According to some school officials, using pictures and noise stimulation while modeling (or demonstrating) desired actions is an effective way to communicate messages and stimulate the desired responses. These methods could be tested when conducting emergency drills.

**Maintain a Crisis Response Friendly Environment.** Students that need physical assistance to stand and walk, and those that are confined to wheelchairs still need to be moved to safety during certain emergencies. Whether actions require exiting the classroom to shelter inside the building, evacuating outside to a safe location, or simply moving from one section of the room to another during a lockdown, all students, regardless of their special needs or disability must be moved. It was suggested that this process could be made easier by maintaining an environment that is crisis response friendly. Areas that are designated as “safe areas” such as sections of the room during lockdowns or locations in the building for sheltering, should not be obstructed in any way. For example, these areas should be free of any unnecessary furniture or equipment. Elevators that are needed to transport people should be easily accessible. Routes

that school officials use to travel inside and outside the building should be as direct and short as possible. All these aspects can be tested during emergency drills.

### **Crisis Response for School Officials**

Fay (2006) suggested that the first step in preparing for an emergency is prevention. The secondary focus of preparing is to reduce undesirable consequences when prevention does not succeed. Parents have entrusted the safety of their children to schools, and such a responsibility should not be taken lightly. Once an emergency begins, school officials suggested specific tactics that should be considered to better protect the students under their care.

**Calmness.** School officials should project a persona of calmness in order to not agitate the students. Although emergencies can cause school officials to feel stress, which can result in increased heart rate, sweating, and heavy breathing, it is important that these physiological symptoms are masked or somewhat controlled. Students will likely respond in like manner, therefore, it is important school officials consciously attempt to project calm during crises.

**Consistency.** During a crisis it is extremely important that the actions taken by school officials are consistent with the actions they practiced ahead of time. Obviously this assumes that emergency drills were performed and specific actions were “practiced” by school officials. Considering the fact that most students are not capable of comprehending a threat in the first place, it is reasonable to think that the experience students will have during a real crisis will be no different than what they experienced during a drill, as long as the actions taken during the emergency are consistent with the actions taken during drills.

**Control.** In order for school officials to properly protect students with special needs or disabilities during a crisis, it is crucial they maintain control for the duration of the emergency. Emergency situations are often fluid, therefore, thinking a crisis can be controlled while it is

occurring is unreasonable. However, what probably can be controlled by school officials during a crisis is the environment in which they have to operate. In other words, school officials must maintain control over the things they can control, such as themselves, their students, and the decisions they make. With safety as the ultimate goal, school officials must be prepared to take whatever action necessary at the time of crises to keep themselves and their students safe. As one school official advised, if it meant he needed to physically restrain a student during a lockdown or carry a student over his shoulder to safety, he'd do it.

### **Summary**

School officials are responsible for preparing schools to meet students' needs while facing the complex security challenges of the 21st century. In the event of a crises, school officials, despite not being emergency management professionals, must be able to make appropriate decisions and lead effectively in order to maintain safety and ensure educational continuity at their schools. The actions of school officials before, during, and after a crisis will likely play a key role in the safe and effective delivery of education in the future. This study examined school officials' perspectives on protecting students with special needs or disabilities during crises.

A review of the literature found that two theories, Situational Leadership Theory and Decision Theory, can be applied to supervising students with special needs or disabilities during emergencies. Interviews with six school officials from the New York City Metropolitan Region that work with students with special needs or disabilities were conducted. The interviews revealed some of the challenges they face while working with this community of students. Also discussed were prospective pre-event actions that school officials could take before a crisis occurs as well as the appropriate responses they should take during an emergency.

Some of the challenges that exist include the students' limited understanding of danger, their increased levels of anxiety, their limited physical mobility, and their limited capacity to receive communications. School officials suggested that schools could better prepare for possible emergencies by exploring non-verbal ways to communicate with students during emergencies. It was also suggested that schools should maintain a physical environment that allows for easier crisis response. A major theme that was unanimous with all school officials was to make emergency drills part of the normal school routine by drilling more frequently. Finally, the study discovered three essential traits school officials must possess when supervising students with special needs or disabilities during emergencies. These traits include: calmness, consistency, and control.

### **Future Research**

Further research around the topic of supervising students with special needs during crises in schools could examine decision-making abilities of school officials in the post-incident (recovery) phase of emergency management. More research could be conducted on the use of various communication devices that could be used to communicate with students with special needs during emergencies. Other researchers could take a look at the perspectives of first responders (police, fire, medical) with respect to collaboration and training school officials in emergency management. School safety and emergency preparedness is a dynamic and growing field of research. Any research that could contribute to making schools safer is a worthy venture.

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