

U.S. Department of Education's Immediate Response to the Events of September 11, 2001

The Department of Education has worked to offer all possible assistance to the victims of the September 11 attacks as well as help the many individuals and groups that were indirectly affected.

- *Information on the Department's Website:* Immediately following September 11, the Department provided resource information on its website to help teachers and parents identify reputable sources for advice on helping students deal with the crisis.
- *School Emergency Response to Violence (SERV) Grants:* Grants were provided to the New York City Board of Education and the state departments of education in New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Virginia to help schools reestablish safe and secure learning environments.
- *Trauma Experts to New York City:* After working with officials from New York City Public Schools to understand their immediate needs, the Department identified several experts in trauma response and provided support for their travel to New York City to assist in the development of a strategy for dealing with the effects of September 11.
- *Trauma Response Training:* The Department sponsored a one-day workshop on responding to traumatic events for officials from nonpublic schools in New York City. Experts from the University of California at Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Unified School System conducted the training.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

To gain a better understanding of actions taken in response to September 11, the Department has met with educators, students, teachers, administrators, law enforcement officials, medical experts and mental health professionals from around the country. These meetings were very productive, and the following items were determined to be critical elements to ensuring successful crisis management.

- We strongly urge schools to have a plan for dealing with crisis, including crises such as school shootings, suicides, and major accidents, as well as large-scale disasters, such as the events of September 11, that have significant impact on schools throughout the country. We recommend that every school review its school safety plan to ensure that it is comprehensive and addresses a wide range of crisis situations. Schools that do not have a school safety plan should implement a plan immediately. Some suggestions regarding issues that should be addressed in a school safety plan are included at the end of this document.
- Effective school safety plans are developed with input from, and support of, a variety of public and private agencies, including agencies representing law enforcement, fire departments, emergency services, victim services, and agencies responsible for homeland security. To be effective, school safety plans must communicate goals and assignments

clearly and be updated regularly to remain relevant over time. Whether schools are reviewing existing plans or developing new ones, they should seek to include agencies with relevant expertise that may not have routinely partnered with schools.

- Developing a comprehensive school safety plan is only part of the task. Schools should conduct practice drills on a regular basis, and the results of practice activities should be reviewed to determine if revisions are needed. Practices can be incorporated within regularly scheduled safety activities, such as fire drills. Schools are encouraged to maintain contact with agencies that respond to crises, such as local law enforcement and fire departments, emergency preparedness agencies, and the National Guard, to ensure schools are included in any community-wide emergency preparedness drills.
- During a crisis, there is no guarantee that normal chains of communication, command, and control will work as intended. Communications between schools and central headquarters can be disrupted, delayed, or otherwise impeded during a crisis. School-level administrators cannot be certain that information, guidance, or orders will be available, and they must have the skills and confidence to respond to any crisis situation they might face. School administrators are encouraged to consider several options for overcoming communication difficulties. First, they may want to delegate decision-making authority to building-level principals during times of crisis. School district officials should work closely with law enforcement officials and other emergency service agencies in advance of a crisis situation to ensure that clear lines of authority are established and well known. Finally, we encourage officials to work with experts in the telecommunications field to understand what communication links are likely to be affected in certain circumstances, and explore back-up systems or plans, including “low-tech” or nontraditional communications strategies.
- Accurate and timely information on a crisis needs to be provided to students, family members, and faculty when appropriate. Absent such information, rumors and false information are likely to spread, which can cause additional problems for school and law enforcement officials. Therefore, school districts should develop a detailed procedure for providing accurate and timely information to students, parents, and faculty.
- School policies that address typical problems may not provide adequate guidance regarding some situations faced by schools in recent years. Policies need to be reviewed to make sure they address a wide range of situations. We encourage school districts to review policies related to the possession of cell phones, terror hoaxes, and assessment of threats against schools, students, and faculty. We believe all threats made against students, faculty, and school property must be taken seriously and handled appropriately. We also encourage schools to work with parents, faculty and students to develop strategies for publicizing the serious consequences associated with making threats.
- School safety plans must address issues beyond safety, and consider the health and mental health needs of students, faculty, and parents that result from a crisis. Crises such as the ones experienced at Columbine and on September 11 affect students, faculty, and parents, to varying degrees, in every school district. When addressing health and mental health issues, school safety plans should recognize that some students, faculty, and parents might need

these health-related services for long periods of time. We recommend that every school safety plan include a section that deals with recovery issues, including the health and mental health needs of students, faculty, and parents.

- Almost every community has access to the health and mental health services that can address the needs of those affected by crisis, but many school districts have not developed linkages with the organizations that can provide these services, and as a result, these services are not immediately available in time of crisis. We encourage school districts to initiate conversations with local health and mental health providers and develop “memoranda of understanding” to delineate roles and responsibilities in times of crisis.
- Schools experiencing major crises invariably receive an outpouring of support from potential volunteers who want to help. However, few districts have a plan in place to screen volunteers to make sure they are qualified and suitable to provide services in schools. We recommend that school safety plans include a process for screening persons who volunteer to assist during a crisis. Schools may want to consider having a cadre of experts and other service providers prescreened, so they can participate in emergency response activities without any delay.
- Only a few school districts have staff members who are adequately trained to deal with the results of a crisis such as a school shooting or the events of September 11. We encourage every district to designate and train a person, or group, to act as lead official(s) for response to crisis situations.
- Students are sometimes further traumatized by actions taken, often with the best intentions, by teachers, faculty, and parents. Constantly retelling or reshaping portrayals of violent events can have a traumatic effect on students. School districts are encouraged to work with mental health service providers, teachers, and parent groups to establish guidelines for activities that respect the developmental capacity of students.

Upcoming Department of Education Activities:

In order to help ensure that schools and students are safe from internal and external threats, the Department of Education is planning several activities, including:

- *Incorporate schools in Federal, State, and Local Emergency Planning:* It is important for educators to be included in emergency planning processes, so we will work with the Office of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to ensure that schools are routinely included in planning for emergencies.
- *International Forum on Response to Terrorism:* The Department of Education is hosting a meeting of educators from 10 countries that have had experience in dealing with terrorism to learn more about their experiences and how they have dealt with them. Information from this forum will be shared with educators throughout the United States.

- *Teleconference on Bio-terrorism:* The Department of Education is collaborating with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to provide educators with the best science available on identifying and handling bio-terrorist threats such as anthrax. We anticipate holding this teleconference in late winter 2002.
- *Teleconference on Developing a Mental Health Response to Crisis:* The Department of Education is collaborating with the Harvard School of Public Health to provide educators with the best possible information on the mental health needs of those affected by crisis. We anticipate holding this teleconference in early spring 2002.
- *Threat Assessment Guide:* The Department of Education is working with the U.S. Secret Service on the development of a Threat Assessment Guide. The guide will provide educators with practical advice on differentiating between persons making idle threats and those posing actual threats. The guide is scheduled for release by spring 2002 and will include a series of supplemental training activities.
- *Bomb Threat Guide:* The Department of Education has been working closely with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms to develop and disseminate materials that will help school officials develop strategies for prevention of bomb threats and for handling them effectively when they occur. Release is anticipated by summer 2002.

Additions to Consider for School Safety Plans in Response to September 11

Schools need to develop comprehensive school safety plans that address the variety of crises they might face. While many schools and school districts have revised school plans to address shootings such as the tragedy at Columbine High School, the terrorist attacks in New York City and Virginia raise concerns that may not be addressed in current plans. The information below identifies specific concerns and suggests possible approaches to addressing them.

- *Evacuation:* A major crisis may require several schools to be evacuated simultaneously. Because school plans frequently call for students to be evacuated to other schools in the district, alternate evacuation sites and routes should be identified. This will necessitate coordination of safety plans for individual schools with district-wide plans. Special plans are also necessary to address the threat or suspicion of bio-terrorism. In these situations, evacuation procedures must ensure that cross-contamination does not occur.
- *Attendance:* In a major crisis, schools may need to quickly account for students. A plan for collecting and maintaining accurate attendance figures throughout the school day is necessary to provide data for this process. Schools should remember that attendance records should be stored in locations that are readily accessible to teachers, administrators, emergency service workers, and law enforcement officials.
- *Information for Parents:* Parents expect schools to provide quick and accurate information regarding the location and status of their children. Schools should establish procedures for making such notifications and should regularly share those procedures with parents. A major crisis impacting an entire community may also require evacuation of parents or other caregivers from their homes or places of employment. As a result, school safety plans need to address alternatives for communicating with parents. This scenario also requires schools to examine procedures for releasing students to parents or other caregivers. If parents or other designated individuals cannot reach their students, or if students cannot be transported to their homes, schools should have a plan to respond appropriately.
- *Transportation:* Alternate strategies for transporting students during evacuations and/or to their homes must be considered. During a large-scale crisis, usual methods for transporting students may not be available. Further, schools located in some sites such as military bases may be closed to the public, thus alternatives for transporting those students would be necessary.
- *Lead Official:* Every school site should have one person designated “lead official,” who is well-trained, well-acquainted with all aspects of the school safety plan, and has the authority to take charge during a crisis. In addition to the lead official, schools should have a deputy or assistant lead official in case the lead official is not available in a time of crisis. Lead officials should meet regularly with law enforcement and other emergency responders to clearly define the roles and responsibilities for everyone involved.