

Disaster Drills Emphasize Plans to 'Shelter' Pupils at School

BY LINDA JACOBSON
Carson, Calif.

Entering Room 14 at Carnegie Middle School, members of the search-and-rescue team find two victims.

"We've got one permanently immobile and one with a broken leg," Paul Farbman, who normally works as a librarian here, reports to the communications center, using his walkie-talkie.

As his partner, special education teacher Joseph Moses, pulls over an extra chair to prop up 8th grader David Gomez's leg, Mr. Farbman tries to reassure the young man.

"Are you comfortable?" he asks. "Does your head hurt?"

This recent "emergency" was only a practice run—a procedure that California schools are required to conduct to be prepared for an earthquake. David's leg wasn't really broken, and his classmate, who was holding up a sign reading "dead," got up and walked back to class when the drill was over.

But it's a process that for some school officials here in the Los Angeles Unified School District has taken on increasing significance since the terrorist attacks of September 2001, and the ongoing possibility of a terrorist retaliation for the war in Iraq. Even with the recent lowering of the national alert level, administrators remain on their guard.

Other districts around the country—especially those in high-profile metropolitan areas such as Washington—are conducting similar safety drills for the same reasons.

One drill that is becoming more prevalent is the creation of a "shelter in place," in which school authorities order that students, and anyone else in the building, stay inside and often move to interior rooms without a lot of windows in the event of an emergency.

'Lockdown' Situations

"There is heightening anxiety," Pete Anderson, the director of the Los Angeles district's office of emergency services, said while overseeing the recent drill at Carnegie. A 2,000-student campus, the school is located about five miles from the Port of Los Angeles, one of several sites in this state where security has been tightened since the attacks on the East Coast more than a year and a half ago.

"We're facing a number of situations and variables that might call for schools to be locked down," said Deborah L. Leidner, the superintendent of District A in the San Fernando Valley, part of the 736,000-student Los Angeles Unified district. "You never know what is going to occur. Let's give schools an opportunity to practice."

Sheltering-in-place, which is likely to be a school's response to a chemical or biological attack, for example, can also involve shutting down all heating and

air-conditioning systems and sealing vents and cracks around windows and doors with plastic sheeting and duct tape.

In the future, Mr. Anderson added, he would like to give schools four possible scenarios for their drills, one of which would be a terrorist attack.

That shift, security experts say, is necessary if schools are going to be ready.

"Terrorism hits you when you least expect it," said Kenneth Trump, the president of National School Safety and Security Services, a private consulting organization in Cleveland. "Regardless of what the national color code of the day is, we have to maintain some sense of preparedness."

Beyond terrorism, accidental chemical spills or police manhunts in neighborhoods surrounding schools are also cases in which a school might be advised by local law-enforcement agencies to have children and adults stay locked in a school, Mr. Trump said.

Talking to the Children

During the sniper shootings last year in the Washington area, schools in the nation's capital began hearing about shelter-in-place procedures. By the time the war in Iraq began last month, they were conducting drills to perfect those procedures.

But first, principals such as Katherine James at the District of Columbia's Shepherd Elementary School had to decide how to present the topic to her pupils, some of whom are as young as 4.

"We don't want to frighten them, but we must say something to them about why we are doing this," Ms. James said. She added that it had occurred to her that likening the emergency-shelter procedure to a three-day camping trip might be the best way to communicate the concept to her school's 360 students.



Schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District are required to run disaster-preparedness drills twice a year. Special education teacher Joseph Moses, left, and librarian Paul Farbman carry 8th grader David Gomez out of Carnegie Middle School in Carson, Calif., during a simulated rescue.

In their classrooms, teachers began asking students what they might need if they were going to be roughing it for 72 hours without access to any modern conveniences. And in a letter, parents were asked to send in a backpack full of supplies, such as food and a small blanket.

School officials even discussed with the children the possibility of having to use buckets to go to the bathroom and rigging up some type of privacy screens with blankets or large trash bags. And they talked about the possibility that the air outside might not be safe to breathe.

When students moved into the hallways for the drill, Ms. James said they were well prepared.

"I haven't detected any fear," she said.

While some schools have been quick to practice ushering children into hallways or gymnasiums to protect them from outside dangers, some security experts say schools haven't given much thought to what would happen after several hours.

To begin with, if the windows and doors were sealed, it wouldn't be long before there was a

shortage of oxygen, said Jeff Carr, the school resource officer for the 1,600-student Denmark, Wis., school district, near Green Bay.

"I don't think anyone is looking at that," said Mr. Carr, who asked a science teacher at Denmark High School to calculate how long students and staff members could survive in the school's gymnasium if it were sealed with tape or other materials. The answer was less than 24 hours.

But in reality, schools would most likely be in such a situation with no air circulation for maybe four to five hours—not three days, said Karen Doty, a Washington-based security and emergency-preparedness expert who is also the grandmother of two students at Shepherd Elementary. She served on the school's safety committee.

Educating Parents

School leaders say students have responded well to the new drills, but educating parents on the process often has not gone quite as smoothly.

Some parents, Ms. James said, didn't send in the items requested because they just assumed that if

any emergency should occur, they would still be able to rush to the school to pick up their children.

"I can't say there has been 100 percent, whitewash acceptance of what we're doing," Ms. James said.

One of the biggest complaints was that the school had begun discussing sheltering-in-place with students before clearing the idea with parents first.

"But we were in a time crunch," the principal said about the days leading up to the war and President Bush's ultimatum to Saddam Hussein on March 17.

When the shelter-in-place concept was first presented to parents in the 166,000-student Fairfax County, Va., school system earlier this year, some parents became upset when they heard their children would have to strip down and take showers in case of chemical contamination, said Diane Brody, the president of the district's PTA council.

"A lot of it depends on how it is introduced to the public," Ms. Brody said. "It would be very hard on parents not to be able to reach their children, but this would not be in effect unless there was a catastrophe."

RETROSPECTIVE Stories That Were Making News in Education Week

20 years ago ...

MAY 4, 1983

• With two months to go before their deadline, 70 percent of school districts nationwide have completed asbestos inspections of their buildings, an official of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency tells a House subcommittee. Testimony from others, though, suggests wide variation in compliance.

• A District of Columbia jury awards \$1.5 million to a partially paralyzed former high school football player, increasing the anxiety about the liability of school officials for injuries sustained by students in interscholastic sports. The award is one of the largest of its kind to date.

• A debate in libraries, publishing houses, and journals is sparked when librarians in Chicago, San Francisco, and Milwaukee

decide not to purchase Margot Zemach's *Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven*, taking issue with what they see was the book's racial stereotyping.

10 years ago ...

MAY 5, 1993

• Most students have high ambitions for postsecondary study and careers, but lack the guidance needed to reach those goals, a study of 5,000 Indiana public school students, parents, and school counselors finds. Overall, it suggests, students and their parents tended to have little understanding of college-entrance requirements, job opportunities, and other crucial factors.

• The U.S. Department of Education's research centers and regional

laboratories have produced some high-quality research, but a significant portion of their output "could be substantially improved," according to a report by University of Michigan history professor Maris A. Vinovskis, who contends many center studies are marred by design and methodological problems.

• Special educators seek to clarify their role in the school reform movement during a three-day national conference in Washington. Questions dominating the sessions conference included: How can students with disabilities be fully included in classrooms? Where does special education fit into the national movement to set high academic standards? And, do those two goals conflict?

The full text of these stories is available online at www.edweek.org.