

# Keeping Cool in a Crisis

By Raven Padgett  
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**M**ANY schools are able to avoid disasters. How? By creating a strong, deliberate crisis plan and knowing how to implement it effectively.

"Good crisis preparedness requires a culture shift," says Kitty Porterfield, director of communications for Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools. "It requires leadership from the top, a critical mass of trained staff members, careful planning, and excellent communication."

First, decide what is considered a crisis in your school. Then, begin creating a plan appropriate for your school. Prioritizing what is considered a crisis may differ at your school. The plan must fit the school and its personnel.

**Identify a crisis management team.** Gaining input from school staff is a good way to get all stakeholders involved. Make sure the team includes the school psychologist, counselor, and social worker, and that all staff know what their responsibilities are. Clearly defined roles help keep students and staff calm in emergencies.

**Collaborate with local emergency agencies.** Crisis planning, says Porterfield, "requires schools to see themselves as part of a larger community preparedness effort." Work with local police and fire departments and health officials to create a plan that involves them and their resources. They have more experience dealing

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with crisis, and the additional support will help make your plan more effective.

**Post the crisis plan on the school website**, a great way to keep parent communication lines open. Understanding what's expected of them lets them respond accordingly. Posting the plan also says that parents and the overall public are part of the greater school community, and that administrators want to keep them informed.

**Use various technologies** to your advantage. Keep a copy of the plan, and all needed contact data, in a handheld personal digital assistant (PDA). Have cell phones and two-way radios available. More districts also use video to inform the public about crisis plans. Some schools can access response kits, which include a booklet and video about crisis planning.

**Translate the plan into several languages.** As schools grow more diverse, translate crisis plans into Chinese, French, Spanish, etc. A plan won't work if some parents and students don't understand it.

**Practice the plan.** Many schools conduct regular shelter-in-place procedures, when staff and students are secured in the building. In an emergency, staff and students should know how to respond and where they should report, especially if the school is evacuated.

**Follow up.** After the crisis, there is still much work to do. Children and teachers need support after a traumatic experience. South Carolina Assistant Principal Susanne Floyd Gunter's school has a detailed follow-up plan citing approved counselors and after-carers (with phone numbers) who can be called on for help in a crisis.

What if reporters arrive at the school and want to immediately interview you and other staff. If the district has a public relations office, consult that person to see what the procedure should be. If a spokesperson has already been identified to speak to the media during times of crisis, make sure to stick to that plan.

If there is no district PR spokesperson and the responsibility lies with you, make sure you or your designated representative has talking points to rely on when responding.

**Don't overreact.** Once the television crew arrives, remain calm. Don't feel pressured into responding until you are certain of the message you want to convey.

How school staff react to a crisis begins with good preparation. "Crisis preparedness does not happen anywhere overnight," says Porterfield. "But in these troubled times, schools have every reason to get started." 