

Head 'Em Up! Move 'Em Out!

Ensure that your school is prepared to relocate students during a critical incident.

By Judy Brunner and Dennis Lewis

Moving hundreds or thousands of students off campus with little or no notice is a daunting task, and it will be made even more difficult if advance preparation has not been thorough. Although there may be an occasion when an evacuation is scheduled in advance, it is more likely that students and staff members will need to vacate the school building with little, if any, notice. Whether as the result of a gas leak, a chemical spill, or sudden damage to the school building, the odds are that during the tenure of a school administrator, this type of event will occur at least once—and preplanning will be imperative.

Everything—including the selection of the relocation site, having adequate supplies upon arrival, and having a well thought out student release procedure—affects the safety of students and staff members and depends on the attention to detail during planning. Consequently, principals should consider the following:

Choose more than one relocation site. When practical, identify at least three relocation sites. Two should be

local and within walking distance of the school and in opposite directions from each other. This is important because the nature of the evacuation event may render walking routes unavailable or make one of the relocation sites unsafe. The third site should be farther away from the school and should be used if the relocation event affects a larger geographical area than the school site.

In the latter situation, transportation issues become much more important; therefore, planning should include school district transportation staff members. It may be necessary to mobilize buses or other types of mass transit, and in some situations, the school buses themselves may become temporary sheltering locations.

Specify the duties and responsibilities of the crisis management team. The school's emergency response plan should detail the relocation procedure as well as specific duties and responsibilities of staff members. Most plans, if properly written, will already have a page of general duties and responsibilities that relate to a variety of emergency situations. Relocating

students off campus, however, is one of several specific types of emergency responses that should have its own detailed list of staff members' duties and responsibilities. Staff members should also discuss and plan how relocation would occur during the lunch period, before school, or during an extra- or cocurricular activity. These types of situations present another set of difficulties to add to an already complicated procedure.

Practice. Practice. Practice. As problematic as it may seem, practicing an actual relocation of students is the best way to verify the plan's components. How to practice may vary according to each school's circumstances, but there will be problems during an actual event that cannot be anticipated in advance, and practicing may minimize the number of problems and provide some level of reassurance to the staff that the plan will in fact work. In addition to conducting an actual relocation of students, emergency management teams should participate in tabletop exercises that simulate some of the procedural aspects. Regardless of how the relocation is practiced, incorporating emergency responders into the process is important so in an actual event, each group will have some familiarity with how others respond to the overall plan.

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Debrief the staff. It is important to debrief after any actual or simulated emergency event, and this is especially true after a relocation drill. If outside emergency response agencies participated in the exercise, they should also be included in the debriefing. As part of the debriefing activity, designate someone in the group as the record keeper. It is important to document concerns, problems, and ideas for improvement during this process. Although it is tempting to skip the debriefing component, especially after an actual emergency or crisis event, we don't advise doing so. Debriefing is just as important as preplanning.

Place a crisis kit at each relocation site. Each relocation site should have emergency relocation supplies (ERS) available for staff members and students. These supplies should include extra name tags or badges, clipboard and writing tablets, pens and permanent markers, flashlights and spare batteries, basic first aid supplies, and student release forms. The ERS kits should be checked prior to the start of each school year by the plan monitor to ensure that each is adequately stocked. Batteries and other dated material should be refreshed as necessary.

Include instructions for parent pick up, staff supervisory duties, restrooms, and so forth. The plan should include where students will be

assigned and detail supervisory and other staff member duties at the relocation site. Other considerations include where parents will be staged and how students will be released, restroom facilities, and primary and alternate communication systems. Local law enforcement officers should know the relocation sites in advance, and a discussion should occur about the logistical issues that may affect both organizations.

Be prepared to direct traffic in the absence of law enforcement personnel and cross train staff members. Where appropriate, staff members should have reflective vests and traffic control aids to help students across heavily traveled thoroughfares. Although the relocation plan may call for law enforcement to provide this function, depending on the urgency to relocate, staff members may find themselves acting temporarily in this role for at least the first 10 minutes of an event. Staff members should be familiar with the plan to the extent that individuals can quickly assume the roles of others. Seldom will everyone be where they are needed at the start of a relocation event.

Inform parents of the evacuation and relocation procedures. Publish the general relocation procedures and ensure that parents have access to vital parts of the plan. Although some people contend that publishing your

procedures in advance creates an added danger, the greater risk is the confusion and panic caused by not doing so. Providing your procedures and expectations to parents can be accomplished through such media as parent newsletters, handbooks, and Web sites. Not every parent will remember exactly what the expectations are, but for those who do, communicating them will contribute to a smoother process.

Designate staff members as parent liaisons. Using parent liaisons to help calm and manage other parents is a sound and advisable strategy. These individuals should be chosen on the basis of their de-escalation skills and longevity within the district, as well as their ability to relate to and positively work with the parent community.

Ensure that the relocation site is accessible at all times during the school day. Many schools use neighborhood churches for relocation, and in some cases, a church may not be staffed at all times. Work in advance with the staff and management at the relocation site to define the parameters for use so each party has a satisfactory comfort level with the procedures.

Even with the best of plans for relocating students, unforeseen problems will occur. But with thoughtful preplanning and practice, another layer of safety will have been added to the school day. **PL**

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