

Car Crash Resulting in Student Deaths: A Local Case Study



READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

The Incident

In the early hours of a Sunday morning in the suburb of a large southern city, seven middle school students riding in a car taken without permission from the driver's home were killed instantly when the unlicensed driver lost control of the speeding vehicle and crashed into a tree. None of the seven students involved in the car accident was of legal driving age or carrying identification. While on the scene, police heard a cell phone ringing; the phone call was from the parent of one student inquiring about his whereabouts. This call was the first step in finding the identity of the seven teens killed in the accident. The accident had a profound effect on the students' families, friends, peers, and school community. Although the incident was managed effectively, some aspects of the response could have been strengthened if the district had an emergency operations plan (EOP) in place prior to the accident. The event underscored the school's need to have a high-quality plan to serve the immediate, intermediate, and long-term needs of the entire school community when faced with emergencies or other threats and hazards.

The principal of the school all seven students attended was notified of the accident at approximately 7 a.m. that Sunday. By 9 a.m., she had contacted the school district's director of Counseling Services, and the two met at 12:30 p.m. During their 5-hour meeting, they notified school faculty and staff about the accident, established an incident response team, selected locations for counseling students and the victims' families, determined how and when to remove personal items from lockers and classrooms, discussed working with the media, and created procedures for handling volunteers. By 5 p.m., the sheriff's department had verified the names of the students, and a 1/2-hour later, the public information officer from the sheriff's department met with the director of Counseling Services.

Prior to the incident, the school district did not have a formal Incident Command System (ICS) in place. The response was instead prepared and implemented by the principal, director of Counseling Services, and the newly established incident response team, whose members arrived at the middle school on Monday morning, meeting as a group for the first time. The team was composed of 25 professionals—school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers—who had been selected by the district's director of Counseling Services. Only two of the incident response team members had prior training in assisting victims of traumatic experiences. The team had a limited amount of resources to prepare them for dealing with the mental and emotional challenges now facing the school community as a result of the multiple deaths caused by the accident.



What Worked Well

An incident response team was dispatched.

On Sunday evening, the director of Counseling Services contacted the members of the school district's incident response team, instructing them to report to the middle school no later than 6:30 a.m. Monday to discuss and launch a response to the tragedy. The immediate goals for the team were discussed, and the team was briefed about activities it could initiate to support the school's 650 students and 60 staff members. The incident response team was organized into several small groups and directed to

- Dispel rumors about the accident and the students involved;
- Support the main office in responding to calls from families and media;
- Offer teachers and families tools and resources to help them address student needs;
- Provide short-term counseling for students and identify students who might need more extensive assistance to meet their emotional, spiritual, and mental health needs;
- Coordinate volunteers; and
- Ensure the continuity of teaching and learning.

Also on Monday morning, the principal and director of Counseling Services attempted to obtain the deceased students' class schedules and bus routes via the school's computers; however, the network was out of service. Instead, they accessed the information via district headquarters with assistance from the deputy superintendent. The director of Counseling Services then contacted the counselors of the schools the siblings of the accident victims attended, as well as the district's director of transportation. Transportation staff alerted the bus drivers of the accident victims, asking them to keep a watchful eye on students and look for signs of extreme stress or sadness. School staff members were asked to report any concerns to the assistant principal. Incident response team members were also prepared to ride the buses home with students in the afternoon.

Structure was maintained and the school environment was kept free of reminders of the tragedy.

With the deceased students' schedules in hand, incident response team members visited classrooms to collect their papers, projects, and personal items and remove any seats or desks assigned to them. Team members placed the deceased students' personal items in bags and secured them in an office the principal designated for the team. At the end of each day, the incident response team removed the teddy bears, balloons, flowers, and other tokens of remembrance left at the makeshift memorials by their friends.

A short-term counseling center for students was established.

The incident response team worked with school administrators to use the school library as a counseling center for students. Manned by members of the incident response team and middle school counselors, the center featured a sign-in sheet for students and was equipped with tissues, stuffed animals, cards, water, information on community counseling resources, CDs, art supplies for creating a wall of remembrance, and paper for writing letters to the deceased students' families. The team reviewed all letters to help identify students who might require additional or long-term counseling and screened the letters for inappropriate content, such as drawings depicting car crashes, before sending them to the families. Parents and guardians were also contacted and allowed to take home students who exhibited intense reactions such as uncontrollable crying. Each parent or guardian who came to the school to take their child home was counseled by an incident response team member, given information about community resources, and advised not to leave their child home alone. The team also attended memorials and funeral services to support students.

Resources were made available to teachers.

Recognizing that not all teachers would be comfortable speaking to students about the deaths,

the incident response team prepared a simple script teachers could read to their classes, developed a fact sheet about the accident to help thwart rumors, and advised teachers about the process for sending students to the counseling center. Several teachers requested that an incident response team member present the information and answer student questions. Other teachers reported being conflicted about using the script to spark a class discussion while trying to respect the feelings of grieving students. **Beginning the day after the accident and continuing through the day of the last funeral service, the incident response team produced a daily newsletter for teachers that contained details about planned viewings and funerals and discussion points for what students might expect to see and experience at the services.** Team members visited classrooms as needed to observe student reactions and offer teachers a brief break. They also placed food and flowers in the faculty room, which was greatly appreciated by teachers. They also monitored the hallways to discourage students from congregating in inappropriate locations, assessed the students' needs, and determined if specific students could benefit from additional counseling.

Information was distributed and meetings were conducted for families.

A letter from the principal was sent home with each student that Monday to assist families in helping their children deal with the trauma and loss. The letter described the school-based services being provided and invited students and families to a parent information and support meeting at 6:30 p.m. the following evening. At the meeting, counselors and incident response team members delivered a PowerPoint presentation and distributed tip sheets that contained strategies for supporting children who were coping with the death of peers as well as information about pertinent community resources. At times, emotions flared, and incident response team members helped defuse the blame and animosity expressed toward the driver of the car and his parents.

The school also provided support to the families of the deceased students. The principal called each family to convey the sympathies of the entire school community and inquire as to whether they needed financial assistance for funerals and burials. If financial assistance was needed, the school worked with the

local community to secure the funds. The school also sent flowers to the families. **Several parents of the deceased students arrived at the school on Monday morning—some to retrieve their child's possessions and others to talk with their child's friends—and administrators designated a room for them to use while on campus. There, counselors met with the parents to provide emotional support for them.** The administration and the incident response team had already predetermined that the victims' families should not talk with other students during the school day, and this was expressed to the parents on their arrival. Counselors contacted the families after each student's funeral to offer additional support.

School administrative staff received help.

To help school office staff handle additional responsibilities after the accident, a member of the incident response team was assigned to the main office as a liaison to parents and others with inquiries or concerns. The team member coordinated procedures and offered support for grieving students who arrived late or wanted to leave school early. For example, the day after the accident, a parent took several girls to the accident scene before dropping them off at school midmorning. Several of the girls were crying hysterically, and the incident response team member calmed them before they went to class.

An incident response team member also monitored absenteeism and called the parents of absent students each day to identify those who were missing school due to the trauma-related distress. Parents were encouraged to send their children to school to participate in healing activities and to review resources about the signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress and when treatment might be warranted.

A media-relations plan was established and implemented.

Due to the nature of this emergency event, the district's supervisor of Counseling Services—with the support of the district's spokesperson—assumed the primary responsibility for media relations. The school counselor assigned to the middle school also interacted with the media when necessary. Both the district's public information officer and the supervisor of Counseling Services intercepted members of the

media who attempted to speak with students as they arrived at school.

Caregivers were cared for.

The superintendent of schools, the deputy to the superintendent, and the assistant superintendent of instruction made visits to the middle school to demonstrate the district's support for school administration, faculty, staff, and incident response team members. In addition, the director of Counseling Services recommended several ways to help members of the incident response team cope with the depression, fatigue, stress, and other mental health issues that arose as they delivered assistance. Food was provided, and frequent breaks were proposed. Informal debriefings were also offered to incident response team members, although some were too tired at the end of the school day to attend a group debriefing. Despite having taken every precaution to help team members guard against feeling run down, one member of the team did not return after the first day, citing the overwhelming stress of working with traumatized students and teachers.

Appropriate anniversary activities were planned.

Working with school administrators, the incident response team developed a plan to manage memorials and anniversaries as a part of their overall school safety planning process. The plan included a scheduled moment of silence, rather than a permanent marker or structure, to commemorate the first anniversary of the students' deaths. Following the remembrance activity, the team distributed a handout to teachers that detailed possible warning signs of post-traumatic stress in students, suggested topics for group or individual discussions, and listed available resources.

Lessons Learned: Responding More Effectively to Emergencies

Strong leadership at the school and district levels facilitated a quick, effective, and thoughtful response; however, having a high-quality EOP in place prior to the incident would have ensured a coordinated

response. In the absence of an EOP, designated roles and responsibilities for an emergency event are unclear, forcing the school and district to establish procedures, manage staff, and develop communication methods all within hours of an incident. The experience proved valuable for increasing understanding and the aptitude for responding to both future single- and mass-casualty incidents.

School and district staff developed an EOP that could be replicated for a variety of incidents and featured several essential steps:

Develop a Bereavement and Loss Annex within the emergency operations plan.

To build the incident response team and school administrators' capacity to respond to the diverse needs of students, families, and staff members in emergency events, the district developed an emergency handbook the summer after the accident. It is recommended that the handbook contains a [Bereavement and Loss Annex](#) along with an operational plan that clarifies the team's goals, objectives, and courses of action. The [Responding to Bereavement and Loss Training](#) module, provided by the REMS TA Center, addresses the importance of including plans for responding to bereavement and loss in high-quality school EOPs and outlines the common manifestations of bereavement and loss.

Schedule training for the incident response team.

Select members of the incident response team previously received training through the National Organization for Victim Assistance, which gave them the knowledge and skills necessary to assist with the production of the emergency handbook that covered strategies for responding to and recovering from traumatic events. To improve response efforts, the district should provide training to all team members to assist students, staff, and families in the immediate aftermath of an emergency event. The [Psychological First Aid train-the-trainer Model](#) is a school emergency management training designed to reduce the initial distress and trauma caused by emergencies, and to help students return to their usual school-based activities after such an event.

Create memoranda of understanding.

The coordination of resources can have a tremendous impact on a school and district's ability to provide cohesive and comprehensive services in response to an emergency. A meticulous plan should include broad, written procedural guidelines or models for response and required policies; procedures and protocols; and instructions for implementing them. [Developing and enhancing memoranda of understanding \(MOUs\) with your community partners](#) in advance of an emergency event provides formal mechanisms for communicating with and directing teams of incident response professionals and volunteers.

For example, many school districts do not have the capacity or facilities to accept and dispense donations of money, goods, or services received following a death within their communities. An MOU with a local agency or organization might specify responsibilities for developing a screening process for volunteers, tracking contributions, communicating with district staff, supervising and debriefing volunteers, and other tasks associated with handling donations.

The district in this case study had not established systems for accepting and distributing donations or coordinating volunteers. As donations of food, flowers, and money began to pour in, incident response team members had to develop a database to monitor



donations. They also had to screen offers from area churches to provide individual and group counseling, and work with volunteers to arrange sessions convenient to student and staff schedules.

Document needs, tasks, and responses.

No member of the incident response team was assigned to record the processes, timelines, and activities comparing the response to the incident. Team members did, however, maintain a list of students referred for additional counseling and evaluations at school; but, records of students who met with a local psychologist were not kept. **When completed in a timely manner, these records assist officials in gleaning the lessons learned that can be used to improve procedures and protocols.**

Establish processes for communicating with families, teachers, and the public.

Customary communication strategies and procedures often are inadequate during an emergency event, especially in the early phases of notification and response. A thorough [Communications and Warning Annex](#) plans for the communication and coordination during emergencies and disasters (both internal communication and communication with external stakeholders), as well as the communication of emergency protocols before and after an emergency. The annex includes how the school's communications system integrates into the local disaster and response law enforcement communication networks; how the school will communicate with students, families, and the broader community before, during, and after an emergency; and how the school will handle the media (e.g., district or school Public Information Officer). The National Incident Management System (NIMS), which is part of the National Preparedness System, also supports the National Response Framework. [NIMS](#) puts forth a systematic approach to collaborating across disciplines and all levels of government to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from threats and hazards that impact the community.

ICS is a component of NIMS and provides guidance for organizing assets and processes to manage emergency events. Public information and crisis communications are an integral part of the ICS structure; therefore, it's imperative to identify an

incident response team member to communicate with the media and other external stakeholders. This individual also sets parameters for media contact with students and staff and stipulates a central location where such contact may take place. (For more information on the ICS, visit www.rems.ed.gov.)

Advance planning should also include the development of communication materials and resources in diverse, culturally appropriate, and age-specific formats to reach multiple audiences. For example, teachers should receive guidelines tailored to their needs to help them assess when students who are experiencing emotional distress should be allowed to leave the classroom.

When appropriate, communication materials should be created in other languages or in Braille. An annual audit of all communication materials should be conducted to ensure they remain current, valuable, and reflective of the community's demographics.

Organize support for school personnel.

During and following an emergency event in the school community, administrators, teachers, administrative support staff, and facilities staff are challenged to maintain a sense of normalcy that can be particularly comforting to students. In some cases, the stress and anxiety of an emergency event may cause compassion fatigue in school personnel. Through [training](#) and other [resources](#), staff can be more effective in addressing the needs of students affected by stress, loss, and trauma, promoting a caring environment and restoring a productive learning environment. Personnel from other schools and district administrators can be recruited to perform some functions at the affected school to ensure continuity of learning. In addition, offerings such as food and refreshments may help to offset the depression and fatigue that can emerge as school staff withstand—and often internalize—the force of student and colleague emotions.

Conduct mandatory debriefings with caregivers.

Daily debriefings should be required for the incident response team to prevent emotional burnout caused

by prolonged exposure to sadness, anger, and other sentiments. The debriefing facilitator should pose several key questions to the group:

- Overall, how was the day?
- What new circumstances or considerations emerged?
- How would you assess your role in the day's events or activities?
- What were students' needs and reactions?
- What would you do differently?
- What stress management or psychological care techniques will you follow to help you take care of yourself in the next 24 hours?

Establish a policy for memorial activities.

In addition to offering counseling pertaining to the birthdays of victims, holidays, and the first anniversary of a violent death, a school may integrate plans to [manage memorials and anniversaries](#) into their EOP, as well as provide information specific to managing donations and volunteers. **Activities such as engaging in a moment of silence, donating books to a library, community picnics, races, or performing charitable works in the community are often more appropriate actions than the building of a commemorative display or structure. Mental health experts recommend that public memorial activities not be carried out when the death was a suicide.**

Conclusion

The experiences of the specific district, middle school, and community mentioned in this case study highlight the critical need for emergency operations planning, despite the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of any emergency event. By developing a step-by-step plan that clarifies tasks to be performed before, during, and after an emergency, schools and school districts can capitalize on the strengths of both professionals and volunteers rather than spending time directly after an incident creating protocols and procedures from scratch.