Duplication and Copyright

Dedication

To the schools, families, and communities that have walked through the storm of crisis together—your resilience, courage, and unwavering hope are a testament to the strength found in unity.

To the professionals who stood in the gap, offering comfort and unwavering support, holding space for healing, restoring hope, and reminding us all that even in our darkest moments, we are never alone. This book is for you.

Disclaimer

This book is not a replacement for comprehensive prevention training. It is designed to supplement such training and serve as a quick reference guide for school communities when they experience crisis events. While this guide provides valuable information and strategies for responding to crises, it is essential to undergo proper prevention and preparedness training through certified programs. Use this guide as a supplemental resource to enhance—not replace—formal training. The resource section of this guide includes training programs schools can consider.

It's also important for me to acknowledge the significant impact that my crisis-response training has had on my professional life and on how I approach managing crises. Over the course of leading responses to over 450 school-based crises, I've consistently drawn on my training in the **PREPaRE model**.[1] PREPaRE stands for:

- **P**revent and prepare for psychological trauma
- **R**eaffirm physical health and perceptions of safety and security
- **E**valuate psychological trauma risk
- **P**rovide interventions
- **a**nd
- **R**espond to psychological needs
- **E**xamine the effectiveness of crisis prevention and intervention

While the PREPaRE model heavily influenced my experience and approach, this guide is not strictly based on the PREPaRE model. Instead, it offers a broader framework that draws from various experiences and strategies in crisis response. If you're interested in learning more about the PREPaRE model and how to get training, please see the resource section at the back of this book.

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Introduction

In today's educational landscape, effective crisis response in schools is more crucial than ever. Schools are meant to be safe havens for students, but unfortunately, crises—ranging from natural disasters to acts of violence—can and do occur. How a school community responds to these events can significantly affect the recovery and well-being of its students, staff, and families.

I have led over 450 school-based crisis response events as a district crisis lead in a large urban school district. I recall many situations where a quick reference guide would have been invaluable. Amid the initial shock and chaos of a crisis, the urgent need for a well-structured, organized, and swift response can be overwhelming, often making it difficult to recall one's training. In those moments, accessible, practical resources can guide school leaders through the development of comprehensive crisis support. The need for this type of resource drove my commitment to develop a guide that serves as a lifeline for school and district leaders during challenging times.

This guide is structured to provide clear, actionable steps for school crisis response. It is divided into several sections:

- Preparation and Prevention
- Immediate Response
- Recovery
- Long-term Support

Each section includes detailed checklists, practical tips, and case studies to illustrate effective strategies and common pitfalls. The purpose of this guide is to empower school communities with the knowledge and tools they need to navigate the aftermath of a crisis, ensuring that every member of the school community receives the support they need.

This guide offers a reliable companion for those difficult moments when quick, thoughtful, and effective action is needed the most.

1 Understanding School Crises

Scenario: Severe Weather

Imagine a typical school day suddenly disrupted by a severe weather alert. The skies darken, and a tornado warning is issued. Teachers quickly usher students to designated safe areas while the administration coordinates with emergency services. Thankfully, the school is not hit by the tornado, but a neighborhood where several of your students and staff live is affected. Students start to share images of the damage on social media. Worry and chaos quickly erupt.

Schools must be prepared to handle a wide variety of crises that can impact them directly or indirectly. Since schools are direct reflections of the communities they serve, school and district leaders must be able to respond quickly and efficiently to a multitude of situations. To be able to respond to everything from natural disasters and student or staff deaths to community violence and bus accidents is a tall order for school and district leaders. Although comprehensive training and planning may, and should, be in place, it can be a challenge in the midst of a crisis to recall exactly what should take place to serve the students, staff, and families we serve.

Before we can start talking about strategies for addressing crisis events, we must understand the different types of crises that school leaders may face. While it's impossible to create an exhaustive list of potential crises—new situations can arise daily (consider the unforeseen global pandemic)—we can focus on the most common ones. This knowledge not only helps us prepare for anticipated situations but also equips us to better handle unexpected events. **By learning about the typical crises schools encounter, we can build a foundation that enhances our ability to respond effectively to the unknown.**

Let's consider the scenario above. Schools regularly conduct tornado drills, ensuring that students and staff know how to move quickly to take cover and prepare for tornadoes or other natural disasters. However, the critical question is: do school leaders and staff know what to do if a tornado strikes the school or the surrounding community? Are they equipped to activate the school or district crisis-response plan (i.e., the emergency operations plan, EOP) and address student needs until additional support arrives? From my experience, while schools are proficient in taking shelter, practice and training for the steps that follow—those that are crucial for effective crisis management and support—are often inadequate. This gap highlights the need for comprehensive crisis-response training that goes beyond initial emergency procedures.

Types of School Crises

It's impossible to create an exhaustive list of the types of crises a school can face. However, in this section, we will examine the most common ones. By exploring various crisis events that may affect schools, we can better prepare for unforeseen. We will examine the following categories: Natural Disasters, Violence, Accidents, Health Emergencies, and Community Crises.

Natural Disasters

- **Tornadoes:** Sudden, severe weather events causing extensive damage and posing significant risks to student and staff safety.
- **Earthquakes:** Unpredictable natural events causing structural damage and potential injuries.
- **Floods:** Water-related disasters affecting school infrastructure and accessibility.

- **Hurricanes:** Large-scale weather events with extensive warning, but severe potential damage and disruption.
- **Wildfires:** Large, destructive fires that spread quickly.
- **Blizzards:** Severe snowstorms with high winds and low visibility.

Violence

- **School Shootings:** Tragically, these have become more frequent, requiring immediate lockdown and reunification procedures, as well as long-term emotional support.
- **Physical Fights:** Conflicts between students or between students and staff, needing de-escalation and conflict resolution.
- **Assaults:** Incidents of physical or sexual violence requiring immediate intervention and support services.
- **Racism:** Discrimination, prejudice, or bias based on race or ethnicity, which can manifest in various forms, such as verbal abuse, physical violence, exclusion, or systemic inequalities.
- **Hate Crimes:** Criminal acts motivated by bias or prejudice toward a particular group based on race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or other characteristics.
- **Swatting:** False reports made to emergency services, often resulting in a heavy police response to a non-existent threat, causing disruption, fear, and potential harm to the school community.

Accidents

- **Bus Crashes:** Incidents during school transportation requiring immediate medical response and coordination with families.
- **Student/Staff Hit by a Vehicle:** Accidents in which a student or staff member is struck by a vehicle with or without injury.
- **Student/Staff Involved in Car Accident:** Car accidents in which a student or staff member was involved, with an injury reported.
- **Playground Injuries:** Common yet serious accidents occurring during recess or physical education.
- **Fire:** Fire that is either naturally caused, or intentionally set, to the school building or campus.

Health/Mental Health Emergencies

- **Infectious Disease Outbreaks:** Situations like flu epidemics or, more recently, COVID-19, requiring comprehensive health measures and possible school closures.
- **Student or Staff Medical Emergencies:** Sudden health crises like heart attacks, severe allergic reactions, or asthma attacks requiring quick medical response.
- **Student or Staff with Terminal Illness:** A member of the school family has been diagnosed with a terminal illness.
- **Mental Health Emergency (Student or Staff):** A mental health crisis that requires intervention from a mental health professional.
- **Non-Suicidal Self-Injurious Harm:** Incidents where a student or staff member engages in self-harm without suicidal intent.
- **Student or Staff Suicide:** A member of the school family has died by suicide.

Community Crises

- **Community Violence:** Incidents of violence in the community, which impact students and staff emotionally and sometimes physically.
- **Nearby Industrial Accidents:** Events such as chemical spills or explosions in nearby industrial areas affecting the school environment.
- **Acts of Hate and Violence:** Acts of hate and violence may be associated with a person's race, gender, sex, sexual orientation, religious practices, or gang affiliation. It may also be random but it has caused fear within the community.

Five Mission Areas of Crisis Preparedness

Schools face a wide range of potential emergencies, from natural disasters and accidents to acts of violence and public health crises. Effective crisis preparedness requires a comprehensive approach that addresses every stage of an emergency, from prevention to recovery. According to FEMA, the Five Mission Areas of Crisis Preparedness—Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery—offer a structured framework to

guide schools in building resilience and ensuring the safety of their students, staff, and communities.[2]
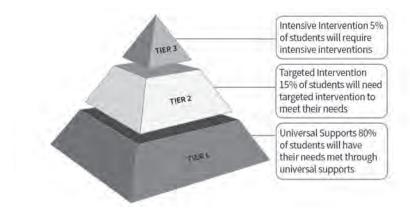
The Five Mission Areas of Crisis Preparedness provide a structured approach to emergency management, as outlined by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). These mission areas are integral to frameworks such as the PREPaRE model and the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs), aligning with standards set by the US Departments of Education, Homeland Security, and FEMA.

- **Prevention** involves proactive steps like establishing social-emotional learning programs to build a positive school culture or conducting routine safety audits to identify potential risks.
- **Protection** focuses on safeguarding students and staff through measures like implementing secure entry systems or maintaining up-to-date emergency contact protocols. Together, these actions reduce the likelihood of emergencies and enhance the school's overall preparedness.
- **Mitigation** involves minimizing the potential effects of crises by creating detailed evacuation plans or securing hazardous materials on campus.
- **Response** ensures swift action during an emergency, such as coordinating with first responders or activating reunification processes for families.
- **Recovery** helps the school community rebuild and heal, incorporating strategies like providing trauma-informed support for students and conducting post-incident evaluations to improve future preparedness.

By embracing the Five Mission Areas—Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery—schools can create a cohesive and proactive approach to crisis preparedness. These mission areas are not stand-alone steps but interconnected parts of a continuous process aimed at fostering safety, resilience, and recovery. We will discuss these themes throughout the book.

Impact of Crises on Students, Staff, and the School Community

Every person is impacted by crises differently based on their own traumatic experiences, coping skills, current mental health, and personal support system. With this in mind, school leaders must plan a tiered system of support that will meet the varied needs of the school community. Tiered systems for crisis support follow the structure of other school-wide support models such as Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).

Intensive Intervention 5% of students will require intensive interventions

Targeted Intervention 15% of students will need targeted intervention to meet their needs

Universal Supports 80% of students will have their needs met through universal supports

Tier 1 (Universal)

Tier 1 (Universal) meets the needs of 80–90 percent of the school community by providing interventions that everyone receives. Examples of Tier 1 crisis support include whole-class instruction, teaching students coping strategies, and leading mindfulness exercises. School leaders and school-based mental health professionals will also triage student needs at this level and make referrals for Tier 2 services as necessary. The primary focus is on creating an environment where students feel cared for and have a strong sense of belonging and safety.

Tier 2 (Targeted Intervention)

Tier 2 (Targeted Intervention) meets the needs of 5–15 percent of the school community through short-term interventions for targeted groups

identified based on data. Examples of Tier 2 crisis support include strength-based small-group counseling, brief individual counseling, and conducting risk assessments. The primary focus is on early intervention to promote mental health and well-being, while also identifying students who may need more intensive, long-term support and making appropriate referrals for Tier 3 services.

Tier 3 (Intensive Intervention)

Tier 3 (Intensive Intervention) meets the needs of 1–5 percent of the school community. This level provides targeted referrals and services for individuals with intensive health needs requiring intensive support and follow-up. Based on the data, long-term interventions are needed for a targeted group of people impacted. Examples of Tier 3 crisis support include long-term therapeutic counseling and outpatient or inpatient treatment.

We will use the tiered support model throughout this book to examine intervention levels that may benefit the school community. The most important factor that school leaders need to be mindful of is that there is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach to school crisis response. Each school should use a cross-disciplinary professional team to closely examine resources that can be used within the school and the community during times of crisis.

It is important to highlight that, immediately following a crisis event, individuals are not ready to process their feelings or emotions. **There is a distinct difference between counseling services (provided over time with the goal of problem resolution) versus crisis-intervention services (provided in the short term with the goal of helping the individual and community take steps toward adaptive coping).** Some individuals may need more formal counseling services following exposure to a traumatic event, and for others the crisis-intervention services paired with social supports will be enough.

While school leaders and school-based mental health professionals may want to initiate counseling services immediately following a crisis event, those impacted are not psychologically ready to process their feelings and emotions in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. The primary goal in the immediate aftermath of crisis exposure is to provide crisis-intervention

services that create an environment in which students and staff feel safe and understand basic strategies to manage anxiety and grief. Such services should also ensure effective triaging so those needing long-term support are identified and referred for appropriate mental health services. Formal counseling services are only recommended for those whose needs exceed what the crisis-intervention services can provide.

Importance of a Coordinated Crisis-Response Plan

A well-structured crisis plan provides a clear framework for responding to various types of emergencies, enabling school leaders and staff to act quickly and effectively. When I train new school counselors or teach counselor preparation courses, crisis response is the number one source of anxiety for them. Other school and district leaders share the same concern about school-based crisis preparedness and the intense desire to respond effectively without causing additional harm to their communities.

Having a coordinated crisis-response plan created by a comprehensive cross-disciplinary team alleviates the burden on individual school leaders. It allows a group of professionals to collaboratively develop a plan that will guide the school during a crisis. Let's examine a few of the benefits of having a coordinated response plan.

Ensures Rapid Response

A coordinated crisis plan enables swift and organized action, reducing chaos and confusion during an emergency. This rapid response can significantly mitigate the impact of the crisis on students, staff, and the broader community.

Defines Roles and Responsibilities

Clearly outlined roles and responsibilities ensure that everyone knows what to do during a crisis. This clarity helps responders prevent overlap, omissions, and delays and handle critical tasks promptly and efficiently.

Promotes Consistent Communication

Effective communication is vital during a crisis. A coordinated plan includes established communication protocols for disseminating information to students, staff, families, and the media, ensuring accurate and timely updates.

Provides Comprehensive Support

A crisis plan encompasses a tiered structure of support. This approach ensures that all members of the school community receive the appropriate level of care and support, tailored to their specific needs.

Facilitates Collaboration

A coordinated crisis plan fosters collaboration between school personnel, mental health professionals, emergency responders, state and federal response agencies, and community organizations. This teamwork enhances the overall response and ensures that responders utilize a wide range of resources and expertise.

Addresses Legal and Ethical Considerations

Adhering to legal and ethical standards is crucial during a crisis. A well-developed plan ensures compliance with relevant laws and regulations, such as reporting requirements and confidentiality protections, safeguarding the rights and well-being of all involved.

Enhances Preparedness and Resilience

Regularly practicing and updating the crisis plan helps build a culture of preparedness and resilience within the school community. This proactive approach equips individuals with the skills and confidence needed to handle crises effectively.

Supports Recovery and Continuous Improvement:

A comprehensive crisis plan includes strategies for post-crisis recovery and continuous improvement. By evaluating the response to each crisis, schools can identify lessons learned and make necessary adjustments to improve future preparedness.

Think back to the scenario at the beginning of this chapter. If the school leaders had a plan not only for warning drills but also for how the school would respond in the event of a natural disaster, they would have been better equipped to address the needs of the school community immediately. Key partners within the community would have been identified, tiered support structures would have been established, and each member of the school would have known their role in the response.

Developing a support plan during a crisis, when emotions are high, is not ideal. It's difficult to think systematically through all the components of a thorough and effective support system under such pressure. A coordinated crisis plan guides a structured and efficient response, promotes safety and well-being, and supports the recovery and resilience of the entire school community.

Legal and Ethical Considerations in Crisis Response

Legal and ethical considerations are vital in any crisis response, guiding the actions of school leaders and staff to ensure the safety, well-being, and rights of all individuals involved. Each school district should have policies and procedures that schools must follow in the event of a crisis. However, there are additional, broader areas of concern that should be considered as well. We will explore a few of those here.

Confidentiality is always at the forefront of the minds of school leaders. Schools must adhere to laws such as the **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)** and, at times, the **Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)** when handling confidential student and staff information. Respecting individuals' privacy and confidentiality is

essential for building trust and maintaining ethical standards. Even during times of crisis, school leaders must ensure they are closely adhering to confidentiality practices and protecting student information. This is a point of consideration when outside agencies are utilized during a crisis response.

Under FERPA, schools can share student information without permission during emergencies to keep people safe from immediate threats. These disclosures should only happen while the emergency is ongoing, be shared with those who need the information (like law enforcement or health officials), and be properly recorded with details about the situation. This exception is meant for urgent situations where quick action is needed. Schools should carefully decide if sharing the information is truly necessary and appropriate. For more information about the FERPA emergency exception, school leaders can visit their website.[3]

In addition to confidentiality, schools also have a duty to care, meaning they have a legal duty to provide a safe and secure environment for students and staff. Failure to do so may result in legal liability. For example, schools operate in loco parentis, a Latin phrase that means "in the place of a parent." This grants schools certain parental rights, responsibilities, and authority to act in the best interests of the students while they are under the school's care.

Under *in loco parentis*, schools are required to implement measures that protect students' physical and emotional safety. This involves creating a nurturing environment that supports the student's ability to learn and thrive within the school setting. This duty becomes even more prominent in times of crisis as schools must rapidly adapt to protect and support their students. The obligation extends to ensuring that comprehensive crisis-response plans are in place that are proactive, thorough, and sensitive to the needs of all students, recognizing that each student's needs may vary significantly based on their personal experiences and existing vulnerabilities.

Last, an essential element of any crisis-response plan is the fair and equitable allocation of resources. Schools must ensure that all individuals receive the support they need during a crisis response, using resources effectively and efficiently to maximize support for those in need. Additionally, school leaders must ensure that their crisis-response efforts are culturally sensitive and inclusive, complying with laws such

as **Title VI of the Civil Rights Act** and the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**. Recognizing and respecting cultural differences and diversity is crucial for providing equitable and effective crisis support. When developing the crisis-response plan, the team should be mindful of varying cultural differences that exist within the school, especially around death, burial rituals, and views on mental health.

For school leaders interested in researching **court cases involving schools**, several reliable sources can provide detailed case information, legal analyses, outcomes, and implications.

- **FindLaw** provides free access to a wide selection of case law and statutes. It includes a section specifically dedicated to education law, which covers various issues related to schools.[4]
  https://www.findlaw.com

- **Justia** offers free access to federal and state court decisions, including those involving school districts and educational issues. It is a useful tool for preliminary legal research.[5]
  https://www.justia.com

- **National School Boards Association (NSBA)** provides resources and publications discussing significant legal cases involving education policy and school administration. This resource helps leaders to understand the broader implications of legal decisions on schools.[6]
  https://www.nsba.org

- **Education Law Association (ELA)** offers resources and publications on a range of legal issues affecting education. They also summarize key court cases and legal trends that impact school governance and policy.[7]
  https://www.educationlaw.org

WRAP-UP

Schools must be prepared to handle a wide array of crises, reflecting the diverse challenges faced by the communities they serve. These crises can range from natural disasters, such as tornadoes and earthquakes, to incidents of violence, including school shootings and physical assaults. Accidents, health emergencies, and community crises further complicate the landscape of potential impactful occurrences. Understanding these **common types of crises** is essential for school leaders, as it enables them to build a foundation for effective response strategies and better manage unexpected events.

School responders require a **comprehensive crisis-response plan** to ensure the safety and well-being of students, staff, and the broader school community. This plan should include a tiered support system, similar to Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), to address the varying needs of individuals affected by a crisis. Tier 1 interventions provide universal support, Tier 2 offers targeted help for those needing more focused assistance, and Tier 3 delivers intensive support and referral for trauma-informed therapeutic supports for those with the most severe needs. Such a model ensures that the school community receives appropriate care and support during and after a crisis.

Legal and ethical considerations are critical components of any crisis-response plan. Schools must adhere to laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and at times the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) to protect the confidentiality and privacy of students and staff. Additionally, school leaders have a duty of care to provide a safe environment and must ensure equitable resource allocation and culturally sensitive support. Schools can create a structured and efficient approach to responding to crises, promoting safety, and fostering resilience within their communities by developing a coordinated crisis-response plan that addresses these legal and ethical issues.

QUESTIONS to CONSIDER

1. Does your school's crisis-response plan include response protocols to address a variety of crisis situations?

2. Does your school/district engage a multidisciplinary team to plan and prepare for a crisis response should a situation impact your school? If not, who on your staff could you collaborate with to develop a multidisciplinary team to create a tiered-support model?

3. Do you currently have a support structure in place to meet your students' and staff's emotional, mental, and physical health needs?

4. How can schools ensure that their crisis-response efforts are equitable and culturally sensitive?

5. What steps can leaders take to ensure that all school staff are adequately trained and confident in their roles during a crisis vs. simply knowing how to run a proper drill?