In the Eye of the Storm

Helping education leaders meet the challenge
of dealing with disasters.

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SCHOOL LEADERS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM such hazards as fires, snowstorms, and tornados. But the Columbine shootings, jetliner attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, anthrax-laced letters, new diseases like SARS and avian influenza, and Hurricane Katrina have led to increased pressure for schools to achieve higher levels of emergency preparedness and heightened school leaders' sense of apprehension.

Dealing with a natural or technological disaster, terrorism, or an emergent infectious disease may seem a daunting prospect to superintendents and principals. How can schools effectively prepare when already hard-pressed by tight budgets, rising public expectations for educational performance, and new accountability mechanisms like No Child Left Behind? Disaster response would surely exceed schools' physical resources and the capabilities of personnel. Is this another assignment in futility akin to "pull down the shades, duck, and cover" as preparation for nuclear attack under the civil-defense program of the 1950s and '60s? Anyway, aren't other agencies supposed to be in charge?

Educational leaders cannot avoid the challenge of disaster preparedness, however, on the grounds that it is too difficult or that schools aren't first-response organizations. Some emergencies may originate in the schools, but many other serious situations will affect the whole community and, thus inevitably, envelop the schools. Most clearly, if a major threat to life or safety occurs suddenly while students are at school, educators and staff—ready or not—will shoulder responsibility for children's lives and well-being, perhaps for an extended period. Parents will inevitably converge on schools to be united with their children, complicating possible community evacuation or potentially creating needs for sheltering adults as well as children; some children may not be readily returned to their families. In a disease outbreak, schools may be both a vector of transmission as well as a network for delivering public-health services. For other kinds of severe emergencies, schools have potentially useful emergency-response assets to mobilize—e.g., buildings to serve as shelters and buses to transport the injured or evacuate endangered children and families.

Though it may not seem like a true "education" responsibility, schools are very likely to be involved in the larger community's emergency response to a serious crisis. This is a serious leadership challenge for superintendents and principals, and not one they would likely seek. But genuine leadership is rarely easy. Indeed, one might more generally conceptualize "leadership" as the process of helping an organization recognize and adapt to a largely unwelcome new reality—roughly consistent with the approach advocated by Ronald Heifetz. In this case, the unwelcome reality is the need to be ready for

major disasters, whether natural or man-made, that could threaten students and the community at large.

What Must School Leaders Do?

First, school leaders need to put the issue of emergency preparedness on the action agendas of school board members, teachers, staff, and, ultimately, students and families. In this widening circle of stakeholders, without being alarmist, they must create a genuine sense of urgency to achieve and maintain readiness. Though schools are already burdened by a long list of priorities,

emergency medical teams—organizations with which schools often have pre-existing relationships—are key players. Many local governments have emergency-management coordinators, and larger ones have emergency-management staffs or agencies. If a school district overlaps several government jurisdictions, the range of institutions may be more complex, but relationships already exist with at least some of the agencies concerned. State education departments and public-safety agencies may have information or technical-assistance programs that will prove useful to school systems starting out to improve emergency plans.

A third step is planning. School leaders need to put

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school leaders must create consensus that disaster preparedness is a core responsibility, worthy of serious attention that goes beyond the "check-off" of required fire drills. They must make this a tangible goal, not just an aspiration, by proposing a feasible series of steps designed to create genuine capacity for response.

Second, school leaders must reach out in advance to those with whom they will have to act in concert during a high-stakes emergency. Educators aren't emergency first responders, nor are schools likely to be in the lead during a catastrophic emergency. In addition to the school community—teachers and staff, students, and parents—it's crucial to communicate with local government officials concerned with emergency response in the town, city, or county. Police and fire departments and

in motion and firmly support a serious planning effort, perhaps aided by professional emergency managers from local government or other institutions, to develop plans for various emergency types.

Confronting this task, planners may find the diverse range of possible disasters—disease, floods, blizzards, ice or wind storms, fires, industrial explosions, plane crashes, terrorist attacks, and more—so broad as to be paralyzing. Indeed, there are too many potential scenarios to develop contingency plans for all, and the results would be so detailed that key personnel would be unlikely to master and retain even their outline. But if school planners focus not on the *sources* of threat but rather on what the schools must be ready to do in response, the problem becomes more manageable. An "all-hazards" planning team can think through what distinct types of disasters might require in resources and response.

For example, take the issues of evacuation and/or sheltering those in danger. In some scenarios, students would be evacuated from the school building and returned to parental custody as quickly as possible. In others, they would be sheltered in the school building. In a few situations, students would be evacuated and taken some distance from the school, where they would remain until reunited with families, perhaps days hence. Though the problem is not simple, the number of distinct *response* possibilities is much smaller than the

number of potential disasters that would require response. Plans can therefore be robust across a set of threats. Concentrating first on the greatest risks and then on lesser ones, a school system over time can develop a set of response plans that will encompass a substantial range of contingencies.

Fourth, the schools need to develop response *systems*. How will school personnel be organized for different emergency responsibilities? How will they communicate? Will key assignments have sufficient redundancy? Again, the task may seem daunting, but no school system or

Surveying the damage in New Orleans' Ninth Ward.

building needs to invent its systems from scratch; adaptable templates exist.

Who should lead disaster response in a particular school building? Given her/his many other responsibilities, the principal of a school building is not necessarily the person who should be in charge. A person's authority in a "day job" does not qualify her/him for leading during a crisis. Training, practice, and (where possible) actual experience do. Whoever is selected as school disaster-response coordinators, it is highly

important that they be identified in advance, given the chance to develop the skills they need to perform effectively, and afforded ample opportunity to become credible in this role to the school community. The superintendent and principal must support this process by treating the function and the people designated as the response leaders seriously. Regarding the task or people with implicit condescension will undermine their ability to implement response measures decisively in the event of a critical emergency.

Practice with a Purpose

Developing emergency-response systems thus requires clear allocation of responsibilities to individual staff members, with provision of adequate backup and appropriate training. But "book learning" is not sufficient.

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Over time, schools should hold regular, facilitated, "table-top" drills in which school staff members have the chance to talk through simulated emergencies. It is not necessary to schedule these sessions very frequently, but a few hours twice a year can make a major difference.

Periodic live-action exercises enhance readiness for staff and students. But schools need to establish a culture that treats these simulations as worthwhile rather than as externally mandated, largely useless interruptions of "real work." It is surely difficult to get middle- and high-school students to treat exercises seriously, but unlike the stereotypical fire drill, school staff members could enhance the value of disaster simulations by actively engaging students, providing context, and reminding them why such exercises are needed.

A necessary complement to exercising is thoughtful post-drill reflection about what went well and where improvements are required. It is natural for organizations to be reluctant to acknowledge or reveal shortcomings. Nonetheless, without a critical examination of performance, exercises will prove less valuable than they could be. Candid "after-action" discussion and recording of information in

Preparing Schools for Severe Emergencies

• **Make disaster preparedness** a serious issue for staff, students, and parents.

• **Reach out** to other organizations in the community with which schools will have to coordinate in disaster response.

• **Develop plans** appropriate for a manageable range of disaster responses, not necessarily the far larger number of sources of emergencies.

• **Organize response systems,** assigning responsibilities to specific people and backups and making sure that these individuals get needed training.

• **Create cultural conditions** in which regular exercises can be purposefully, not perfunctorily, conducted.

• **Assess the results** of drills through after-action discussions.

• **Revise plans** as circumstances change and levels of capability increase.

written form make exercises a genuine learning experience for the school and an opportunity to fine-tune or improve emergency plans.

The apparent need to rehearse *every* potential disaster scenario may be a powerful disincentive for even beginning to treat preparedness seriously. But any serious exercising and debriefing increases the capabilities of the school not only for the scenario that animates the drill but also for others that share some of its features. Indeed, when school personnel and students think seriously about disaster contingencies and the need to be prepared in one context, they will enhance their ability to think clearly and make good decisions in the event of an actual emergency, even if its characteristics are different.

Involving external preparedness "partners" in such

As emergency officials frequently observe, personnel from different agencies are in trouble if they are exchanging business cards while a severe emergency is rapidly unfolding. By contrast, in potentially life-or-death situations, people on both sides benefit tremendously if they have established contact and credibility in advance. Prior personal relationships make it easier to act confidently and quickly when confronting an emergency in which children's and their own lives may be on the line.

The task of preparing schools for crisis may seem difficult. Yet, as reading the headlines reveals, the conditions of our times make readiness for disaster a necessity. Leadership must come from superintendents, principals, and other senior school officials.

Preparedness, however, is not all or nothing. There

safety occurs suddenly while students are at school, educators shoulder responsibility for children's lives and well-being."

drills should be an important parallel objective. As important as coordination of institutional *plans* is, it is equally important for key school personnel to establish *personal relationships* with at least some of the key people in local response organizations. Police, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians on one side, and school officials on the other, have very different operating cultures and vocabularies; they do not automatically understand, trust, and establish rapport with each other.

are start-up costs in time and effort, but once basic plans have been put in place, relatively modest amounts of training, tabletop practice, live-action drills, relationship building with community emergency-response organizations, and thoughtful school-plan revision can help a given school or school system build a reservoir of competence among staff and create a cultural norm that serious disaster preparedness is necessary and feasible. ● ● ●

RESOURCES

Crisis Communication Guide and Toolkit. National Education Association. www.nea.org/crisis

Crisis Management. Minnesota Department of Education. education.state.mn.us/mde/ accountability_programs/compliance_and_ assistance/crisis_management

FEMA for Kids: How Schools Can Become More Disaster Resistant. Federal Emergency Management Agency. www.fema.gov/kids/schdizr.htm

Heifetz, Ronald. *Leadership Without Easy Answers.* Belknap Press, 1994.

Kotter, John P. *Leading Change.* Harvard Business School Press, 1996.

Lead & Manage My School: Emergency Planning. U.S. Department of Education: Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/ emergencyplan

Lead & Manage My School: Practical Information on Crisis Planning Brochure U.S Department of Education: Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2003. www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/ crisisplanning.html

"Model School Crisis Management Plan." Virginia Department of Education. www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/ model.html