

# It CAN Happen Here: A Proactive Approach to Violence Prevention in Schools

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As horrifying and unthinkable as violence in schools may be, we are tragically reminded far too often that it is a possibility every community must take seriously.

Preparing for crisis is certainly no promise of prevention, and from the vantage of hindsight the diligent course may seem obvious. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that while awareness is the most basic tool of crisis prevention, its importance is often overlooked.

“Behaviors rarely happen in a vacuum,” says Dr. Vivian Marinelli, Senior Director of Crisis Management with FEI Behavioral Health. “Particularly in adolescents, there tend to be signals and precursors to violent behaviors. Increasingly, these signals are in plain view, thanks to the various forms of social media. It is crucial for all stakeholders in our communities to take these signals seriously. Oftentimes the ability to do that comes from simple awareness.”

## Awareness

An increased awareness of the types of behaviors that can be precursors to violent behavior in students can provide an opportunity for threats to be identified and addressed before behavior reaches crisis levels.

If a threat of potential violence is identified, it is critical to attempt to mitigate the situation and de-escalate the individual. Mitigation can occur very early on in a chain of an event if we increase our awareness of those around us. General changes in behavior can be a tip-off that someone is experiencing some difficulty in their lives. Withdrawal and isolation, although commonly reported by parents and teachers dealing with adolescents, should be addressed as these actions may be their way of trying to deal with a difficult situation in their lives. At times, the individual may be expressing their emotions more directly through artwork or writings. Many times we have heard after an incident that these “red-flags” were there but no one took the next step to bring it to someone’s attention.

If the potential threat has escalated to a crisis situation, having the ability to quickly assess the threat will enable you to respond as needed. Although there may not always be the opportunity for this to occur, being aware of your surroundings and those around you can increase your ability to stay safe. Using both non-verbal and quasi-verbal behaviors such as non-threatening posture and slowing a conversation down can help

calm an agitated individual. Directing neutral, open-ended questions to the confrontational individual can help shed some light on why the situation is occurring and possibly identify some solutions.

“The simple fact is that these situations are not always pleasant to deal with,” says Marinelli, “and it’s often easier to look the other way. But addressing these behaviors sooner rather than later can prevent the sort of escalation that allowing emotions to ‘simmer’ can lead to.”

## Embarking On a Crisis Preparedness Program

While tightening budgets and perpetual under-staffing may make it easy to dismiss a formal crisis preparedness program as an unaffordable luxury, crisis planning can be undertaken one step at a time. And even the simplest steps can pay dividends in the form of a school that is safer and better able to manage crisis.

“The important thing is to start the process,” says Terri Howard, Senior Director of Corporate Preparedness at FEI. “Don’t become overwhelmed. Build on each step, taking lessons along the way. You will benefit from the smallest increments of improvement.”

### *Assessment*

Assessment is the first and most basic step toward crisis preparedness. Often, the simple process of asking the right questions of school faculty, staff and students can raise awareness and encourage vigilance. Assessments consider the broadest possible range of applicable threats, and the impact of those threats on the school. These assessments will become the baseline for evaluating school preparedness, and allow the creation of action plans for improvement and tracking changes within and without the school.

### *Crisis Checklists*

After threats have been assessed, a very simple next step should be the creation of crisis checklists. In a disruptive event, the simplest tools can save time, prevent confusion, and ultimately, minimize negative impact on health and well-being. A Crisis Checklist can provide clear, concrete steps that individuals can take in event of a crisis. Such checklists can reflect both the type of the crisis likely to occur, as well as an individual’s role and responsibilities, and the necessary contact information for responding to a crisis.

Crisis Checklists should be widely available in locations where faculty or staff is likely to be during a critical incident and where they are likely to look during a time of such need.

Even more importantly, Crisis Checklists should not be seen for the first time when they are needed. Staff should become familiar with the location and use of Crisis Checklists as part of your preparedness planning.

### *Crisis Management Policies*

Assessment is an important first step, and should be followed with the development of Crisis Management Policies. Crisis Management Policies provide clear statements about how crisis situations will be addressed in your school. Policies become the focal point through which standard operating procedures can be developed and practiced.

Crisis Management Policies also establish behavioral standards and training guidelines that can directly impact the creation of a safer school. At minimum, policies should directly address:

- Weapons in the school
- Violence
- Bullying
- Verbal altercations

### *Crisis Response Team*

Part of a school's crisis management policy should be the development of a Crisis Response Team. If a crisis occurs in your school or district, a properly prepared Crisis Response Team can help you react appropriately. One critical task for the Crisis Response Team is to manage communications with external stakeholders such as family members, law enforcement, first responders, the community at large, and members of the media. These responsibilities will make the Crisis Response Team the public face of your organization, as well as the source of coordinated response activities.

"Paralysis and confusion are the worst enemies of managing crisis," says Howard. "Assembling a team of people who understand that the responsibility to act is theirs, along with an understanding of what those actions should be is essential."

### *Crisis Response Training*

Training in crisis response methods may not guarantee that every contingency has been anticipated, but it can help ensure that a Crisis Response Team is better prepared to deal with the shifting and unpredictable landscape of a crisis. In addition, training in areas such as crisis communications can assist your Crisis Response Team members in handling situations and duties which may be outside of their day-to-day experience or job responsibilities.

“Even if training goes no further than ensuring a basic familiarity with polices and crisis checklists,” says Marinelli, “there can be enormous benefit to responders that have only walked through the basic steps ahead of time.”

### *Crisis Communications*

Efficient and thorough communication during a crisis impacts not only your ability to directly manage the crisis, but also your long-term relationships with students, staff and the community. This includes the ability of your Crisis Response Team to communicate with one another, with law enforcement, with students, and with parents. It will also be necessary to field requests and inquiries from family, friends and media—a need that grows exponentially with the size of a school and the number of people affected by the crisis.

“Time and again we hear the same thing in the wake of incidents in schools,” says Howard. “Faculty, staff and students were unable to communicate with one another. Communication with first responders didn’t happen fast enough. Parents were without information or even anybody to ask.”

The best crisis communications plan will include alternate and redundant paths for crisis communication which will provide multiple methods for information to be received and provided. This may include telephone, web-based or perhaps even social media channels.

### *The Role of Social Media*

Now more than ever, social media plays an integral role in the lives of students, staff, and faculty across the country. Recent school events have made it apparent that social media must also play a role in all plans for crisis communications. Monitoring of social media outlets should be considered before, during, and after a crisis occurs.

Before a crisis, signs may surface through social media channels which, if leading to intervention, could help prevent escalation.

During a crisis, social media must be carefully monitored to ensure that information provided within and without the school can take into account any inaccuracies that may be surfacing through social media.

After a crisis, social media can provide an opportunity for people to voice their feelings about the crisis event to aid in their recovery.

### *Evacuation Plans*

Providing for the safety of the people in your school begins with, and often depends on, the development of evacuation plans. These evacuation plans should be posted in readily visible positions. The plans should be clear, concise and explicit. A visual presentation is preferable.

Evacuation plans should be tested ahead of time and should take into consideration the variety of threats a given location is likely to face. The plans may also provide alternate routes in the event that a given threat might block a primary evacuation path.

### *Psychological Support*

A critical event of any duration or scale has an extraordinary psychological impact on all those involved, from your Crisis Response Teams to immediate victims. Providing psychological support as a crisis unfolds is essential. It helps people continue to function in the midst of crisis.

Psychological first aid goes beyond those directly impacted by the event. Like ripples in a pond, this impact may travel widely outside the walls of your school and continue to be felt long after the crisis itself. Faculty, staff, parents and particularly students may struggle in the aftermath of a crisis.

These lingering psychological effects can manifest themselves in many forms, and if left unaddressed, can have a significant impact on your school. Your crisis response plan should identify providers of psychological support during and after a crisis event.

### *Exercises/Drills*

A crisis response plan will only be effective if all stakeholders understand the plan as more than a document occupying shelf space. The best way to ensure effective crisis response is to engage in periodic drills and exercises. These can range from table-top simulations to organization-wide exercises fully testing all response systems and procedures.

In any case, infrastructure for control and communication should be tested. Local response authorities should be alerted, and processes for engaging mutual aid partners should also be tested.

“While practice may not always make perfect, practice does begin to make permanent,” says Howard. “The more broadly you can put your plan into action ahead of time, the more likely it will be effective in a crisis event.”

## *Debriefing*

It is very important to remember that a crisis incident often has impacts within a student population or community that can be broad and long-lasting. The end of an incident does not signal the end of its impact or the end of our need to address its effects. Group meetings in which information is provided to normalize the individual experiences is considered to be “psychological first aid” and critical in the resiliency of those affected by the crisis. These meetings should be held for students, faculty, families and the community at large.

Providing information about upcoming events, as it becomes known, will also provide the opportunity for people to feel connected and support one another. Awareness of others who may be in need of additional support is also important following a tragic incident. Anyone can become a secondary victim of the event whether or not they were in immediate danger. Students who were not hurt or even present could experience “survivor guilt” and need some additional help to cope with their feelings.

Effective crisis management will use the aftermath of an incident as an opportunity to

- address the long-term psychological impact
- evaluate the crisis response
- evaluate the crisis plan

This evaluation phase might include interviews, discussion, focus groups or surveys. Based on feedback, it is important to revise and make improvements where needed.

Risk assessment and crisis plans are not one-time events. To remain relevant and effective, plans and preparedness must continue to evolve with changing circumstances in your organization and in your community.

## Summary

It is far too easy, when considering the potential for violence within a school, to take a statistical view and conclude that the likelihood of violence befalling any particular school is small. While that view may be factual, most would agree that any degree of risk to students warrants, at the very least, the basic steps of crisis preparation.

Crises are, by their very nature, chaotic, confusing and debilitating. Planning ahead at even the most basic level may not be able to prevent crisis in all cases, but it can strengthen our response and recovery.

“It is impossible to overstate the fact that when tragedies befall our schools,” says Marinelli, “our ability to survive and recover from a crisis will be determined by the sum of our efforts before, during and after the event.”

## About FEI

*FEI Behavioral Health, a Milwaukee-based organization with an over 30-year history, is a nationally respected, trusted partner in providing organizational resiliency solutions. FEI is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Families International, Inc. Families International Inc. is the nonprofit parent organization of four organizations, including two national nonprofit membership associations consisting of nearly 500 community- and neighborhood-based human service providers that offer an array of programs and services to all generations. Other organizations under the FII umbrella include: The Alliance for Children and Families, Ways-to-Work, Inc. and United Neighborhood Centers of America.*

*FEI established the first national employee assistance program (EAP) network in the United States and is one of the nation’s leading behavioral health providers today. In addition, FEI integrates its mental health expertise and critical incident experience to provide industry-leading crisis management services that have supported more than 100,000 people during their moments of greatest need.*

*FEI partners with you to protect and enhance your workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency. We offer flexible solutions for the full spectrum of your workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. We leverage our proven resources, compassionate experts and robust network to improve your employees’ focus, empower your managers and prepare you to handle the unthinkable crisis, so that you can maintain a healthy, resilient organization.*

More information about FEI Behavioral Health is available at [www.feinet.com](http://www.feinet.com).