

School Safety

Crisis Planning

Taking action now can save lives, prevent injury, and lessen property damage in the moments of a crisis in our schools. If your school does not have a crisis plan in place, it is time to develop one. And, if you have one, make sure you review, practice, and update your plan This course is designated to help schools and communities in either situation. Although every school district is unique, this course provides some general guidelines that can then be changed to fit your school's needs and circumstances.

# Course Introduction

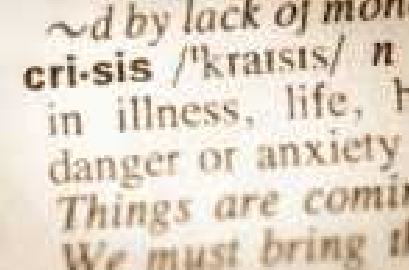


Families trust their schools to keep their children safe during the day. However, many school districts across the United States may be either touched directly or indirectly by any kind of crisis. Natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, fires, and tornados can hit a community with little or even no warning. School shootings are extremely rare, but chilling when they occur. Children depend heavily on their teachers and staff to protect them at school. Knowing what to do in

time of crisis can mean the difference between calm and chaos and courage and fear.

Taking action now can save lives, prevent injury, and lessen property damage in the moments of a crisis in our schools. If your school does not have a crisis plan in place, it is time to develop one. And, if you have one, make sure you review, practice, and update your plan. This course is designated to help schools and communities in either situation. Although every school district is unique, this course provides some general guidelines that can then be changed to fit your school’s needs and circumstances.

# Module 1: Crisis Management



## What is a Crisis?

Webster’s dictionary defines “crisis” as:

*“a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or for worse, is determined; turning point. “*

Crises certainly range in scope and intensity. Some events can directly or indirectly impact the entire community. They can happen both on and off campus, as well as before, during, and after school hours. A crisis can be any situation where schools could face inadequate information, not enough time, and insufficient resources. Leaders must make one or even several crucial decisions. Staff and students can also be indirectly affected by an incident in another city or state. For example, the Columbine high school shooting and September 11th left the entire nation feeling vulnerable.

## Crisis Teams

All districts and schools need a crisis team. One of the key functions of this team is to identify the types of crises that may occur in the district and schools and define what events would activate the plan. The team may consider many factors such as the school’s ability to handle a situation with internal resources and its experience in responding to past events.



Plans need to look at several types of events and hazards, caused by both people and nature, such as:

* natural disasters (i.e., earthquake, tornado, hurricane, flood)
* severe weather
* fires
* chemical or hazardous material spills
* bus crashes
* school shootings
* bomb threats
* medical emergencies
* student or staff death
* acts of terror or war
* outbreak of disease or infections

## Sequence of Crisis Management

Recent research shows experts employ four phases of crisis management, which include the following:

* **Mitigation/prevention** looks at how schools and districts can reduce or eliminate the the risk to life and property.
* **Preparedness** focuses on the process of planning for the worst-case scenario.
* **Response** deals with the steps to take during a crisis.
* **Recovery** deals with how to restore the learning and teaching environment after a crisis.

It is important to remember that crisis management is a continual process. All the plans and procedures are constantly reviewed and revised if needed. Plans can always be updated based on research, experiences, and changing vulnerabilities.

## Key Principles for Effective Crisis Planning

You may be thinking that crisis planning can be a bit overwhelming. It does take time, but it is manageable. Let’s take a closer look at some practical tips on how to develop your plans.

**Effective crisis planning begins with leadership at the top**. Every governor, legislator, superintendent, and principal should work together to make school crisis planning a priority.

**Administrators should not develop crisis plans for just one section of the school.** Good planning can enhance all school functions. In other words, crisis plans should address incidents that could happen inside school buildings, on school grounds, and in the community.

**Schools and districts need to open up lines of communication before a crisis.** For example, school leaders should have a relationship with emergency responders well before they are needed in a crisis. Enhance the relationship with city emergency managers, public works officials, and health and medical health professionals.

**Schools should tailor district crisis plans to meet individual school needs.** A plan should be a series of documents targeted to various audiences. For example, a school could use detailed response guides for planners, a crisis response toolbox for administrators, and wallet cards with evacuation routes for bus drivers.

**Plan for diverse needs of children and staff.** Make sure to address children or staff members with physical, sensory, motor, developmental, or mental challenges. You will also need to remember that children with limited English proficiency may need special attention.

Training and practice are important components of a crisis plan. Most students and staff know what to do in case of a fire because the law requires them to take part in routine fire drills.

However, how many of them know how to deal with another type of crisis? Many districts now require evacuation and lockdown drills as well. These drills also allow school districts to evaluate what works and what needs to be improved.

# Module 2: Mitigation and Prevention

Schools do not have any control over some of the hazards that may impact them, such as an earthquake or plane crashes. However, they can take precautions to either minimize or even eliminate such hazards. For example, schools in earthquake-prone areas can secure bookshelves and train students and staff on what to do during a tremor.

School safety and emergency management experts often use the terms mitigation and prevention differently. Crises experts suggest schools should consider the full range of what they can do to avoid or lessen the impact of crises. Here are

a few important ideas:

* assessing and addressing the safety and integrity of a facility (window seals, HVAC systems, building structure)
* security (functioning locks and controlled access to the school)
* culture and climate of the schools (policies and curricula)

Mitigation and prevention require school administrators to take inventory of the dangers in the school and community. It also means they will need to identify how to prevent and reduce injury and property damage. For example:

* Establishing access control procedures and providing IDs for students and staff may prevent an intruder from coming onto school grounds.
* Conducting hurricane drills can reduce the likelihood of student and staff injuries because they’ll know what to do beforehand.
* Planning responses to and training for incidents involving hazardous materials is important for schools near highways.

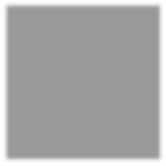
Administrators can use community resources to help in the processes above. Firefighters, police, public works staff, facilities managers, and the district’s insurance manager can all help conduct a hazard assessment. You will be able to use the information in the assessment to help identify problems to address in the preparedness process.

## Mitigation Planning

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) says, “The goal of mitigation is to decrease the need for a response as opposed to simply increasing response capability.” Mitigating emergencies is also important from a legal perspective. For example, if a school, district, or state does not take all the necessary actions to prevent an emergency, it could be vulnerable to a negligence suit. It is important to make sure the building is up to local, state, and federal codes.

## Prevention Planning

Creating a safe learning environment should not be new to any school district. Identifying students, and sometimes staff, who may pose a danger to either themselves or each other is called “threat assessment.”



Many schools and have programs in place that are aimed to prevent children from initiating harmful behaviors. Social problem-solving for life skills programs, anti-bullying programs,

and school-wide discipline efforts are common throughout the United States. The staff in charge of prevention in a school, such as counselors, teachers, health professionals, and administrators, should be part of the crisis planning team.

## Action Steps

There are few things to be aware of when looking at mitigation and prevention programs at your school. Below are some suggestions.



**Know the school building.** Look at potential hazards on campus and conduct regular safety audits of the building. Be sure to include driveways, parking lots, playgrounds, outside structures, and even fencing.

**Know the community.** Mitigation requires assessment of local threats. Make sure you work with the local emergency management director to assess the surrounding hazards. This assessment includes the identification and assessment of the probability of natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornados, or earthquakes, and industrial and/or chemical accidents. Make sure you know the location of major transportation routes and installations. For example, is the school near an airport?

**Bring together regional, local, and school leaders.** Since mitigation and prevention are community activities, leadership and support of these activities are necessary to make sure the right people are planning.

**Make regular school safety and security efforts a normal part of mitigation and prevention practices.** Look at the comprehensive school safety plan and its needs to identify what types of accidents are common in the school.

**Establish clear lines of communication.** Mitigation and prevention planning requires agencies and organizations to work closely together and share important information. In addition to communications within the planning team, outside communications with families and the larger community are important as well. This conveys a visible message that schools and local governments are working together to ensure public safety. Press releases from the governor and chief state school officer that discuss the importance of crisis planning can help open the channels of communication with the public.

# Module 3: Preparedness

Crises can affect every student and staff member in a school facility. Despite the fact of everyone’s efforts at crisis prevention, they still will happen. However, good planning will facilitate a rapid, coordinated, and effective response when the crisis occurs. Being well-prepared does require an investment of time and resources, but the chance to reduce injury and save lives outweighs the negatives.

It is impractical for all schools to work individually with emergency responders and other local agencies. It is then necessary to find the right balance and to assign district and school roles early.

## Action Steps

Set a realistic timetable for the preparation process. You will not be able to create a comprehensive crisis plan overnight. Make sure to take the time to collect essential information, develop the plan, and involve the appropriate people. You should also start by identifying who should be involved in developing the crisis plan. Delegating responsibilities and putting the process down in manageable steps will help planners develop the plan.

Here are a few other steps to take when creating a crisis plan:

Identify and Involve Stakeholders

It's important to identify your "stakeholders" because they each perform the role of planner in the crisis management process. They are the people who are concerned about the safety of everyone at the school and they are the people you will call for help when a crisis happens.

Stakeholders include:

* families and students
* key community/state leaders such as school board members, elected officials, and clergy
* local police, emergency responders, and county emergency planners
* district/school administrators and staff
* local media

It's equally important to involve all stakeholders in the emergency planning process. Here are some ideas:

* Ask stakeholders to provide feedback on sections of the plan that pertain to them.
* Create working relationships with emergency responders. Learn how they function and how you will work with them during a crisis.
* Work closely with city and county emergency planners. You will need to know the kinds of support your school can provide them during a crisis. For example, city and county planners may want to use a school as an emergency shelter or a supply depot.

Look at Existing Efforts

Before starting to develop your crisis plan, look at existing plans, such as those of the district and local government. Ask the following questions:

1. How do other agencies’ plans compare with the schools?
2. What conflicts, if any, are present?
3. Does the comprehensive school safety plan include a crisis plan?
4. Can the school’s crisis plan include information from the district’s plan?

Define Crises

Take a look at your schools vulnerabilities, needs, and assets to determine what defines a crisis for your school. Do this before assigning roles and responsibilities or collecting supplies needed during a crisis.

Also, describe the ***types*** of crises the plan addresses. This includes local hazards and problems identified from safety audits, evaluations, and assessments conducted during the mitigation/prevention phase (See Module 2). Also, make sure you prepare for incidents that occur while students are off-site, such as during a field trip.

Roles and Responsibilities

How will the school operate during a crisis? Create an organizational system. In other words, define what will happen, when, and at whose direction.

School staff should be assigned the following roles:

* school commander
* liaison to emergency responders
* student caregivers
* security officers
* medical staff
* spokesperson

During the planning process, administrators need to assign both individuals and backups to fill the above

roles. Also, if the district has not appointed a public information officer (PIO), it should do so right away. Larger school districts have staff who are only dedicated to this function. However, small districts use the superintendent, school security officers, or principal as their PIO.

Communication

Make sure you address how to get crisis information out in the most effective way to those who are directly or indirectly involved. One of the first steps for communication is to develop a mechanism to notify students and staff that an incident is occurring and then to instruct them on what to do. It is also important to determine how to best give information to them by using codes for evacuation and lockdown.

Figure out the best way to communicate with families, community members, and the media during a crisis. You may want to write template letters and press releases in advance. This will prevent staff members from doing this during the chaos and confusion of a crisis.

Necessary Equipment and Supplies

Staff members need to have all the necessary equipment readily available to respond to a crisis. Make sure there are enough master keys for emergency responders so that they can have immediate access to the school.



Prepare response kits for secretaries, nurses, and teachers. For example, a nurse’s kit might include student and emergency medicines (“anaphylaxis

kits,” which may require physician’s orders, for use in breathing emergencies such as severe,

sudden allergic reactions), as well as first aid supplies. A teacher’s kit might include a crisis management reference guide, as well as an updated student roster.

When a crisis occurs, quickly determine whether students and staff need to be evacuated from the building, returned to the building, or locked



down in the building. Plan action steps for each of these scenarios.

Evacuation

Evacuation requires ALL students and staff to leave the building. Although evacuating to the school’s field may be the most logical for shorter time frames, it might not be the best location for longer

periods of time. The evacuation plan should include backup buildings to serve as emergency shelters, such as nearby community centers, churches, businesses, or other schools. The evacuation plan should take into account weather conditions, such as rain, snow, and extreme cold and heat. Your plan should also include transportation options for students who are disabled or unable to walk to the shelter.

*Reverse Evacuation*

If an incident occurs while students are outside, make sure to get them safely back in the building. You may find you need to lockdown the facility.

Lockdown

Lockdowns are called for when a crisis happens outside of the school, and an evacuation would be dangerous. Emergency responders may call for a lockdown when there is a crisis inside the school and movement would endanger students and staff members. During a lockdown, all exterior doors are locked. Students and staff must stay in their classrooms and windows may also need to be covered.

Shelter-in Place

A shelter-in place is used when there is not enough time to evacuate or when it would be harmful to leave the building, such as during hazardous material spills. Students and staff stay in the building, and windows and doors are sealed. There can be limited movement throughout the building.

Accountability and Student Release Procedures

When there is a crisis, make sure to account for all students, staff, and visitors. Emergency responders treat a situation very differently if someone is missing. For example, when a bomb threat occurs, the stakes are a lot higher if firefighters do not know whether there are students in the school while they are trying to locate or disarm a bomb.

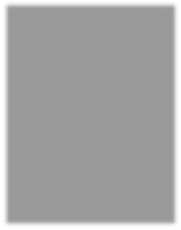
Be sure to communicate with family members about release procedures before a crisis occurs. Many times, families flock to the school and want to collect their children immediately. A method should be in place for tracking student release.

Practice

Preparedness includes emergency drills and crisis exercises for both students and staff members. Many times, training and practice identify issues that need to be addressed ***before*** a crisis occurs. Teachers also need to be trained on how to deal and manage students during a crisis, especially those experiencing panic reactions.

Watch how law enforcement officers worked closely with a school in West Palm Beach, Florida to simulate a school shooting.

# Module 4: Crisis Response



A crisis is a time to actually follow the crisis plan and not a time to make a plan from scratch. This module will take a look at some of the major recommendations about things to remember when you are called upon to implement your crisis plan.

## Element of Surprise

Regardless of how much time and energy you put forth to create the crisis plan, there is always an element of surprise and accompanying confusion when a school deals with a crisis. Following the plan requires a very quick, but careful, assessment of the situation.

Decide if a crisis really does exist and, if so, the type of crisis, location, and the magnitude. Since the team has already practiced the plan, leaders are aware and ready to make the decisions.

## Respond to Crisis Immediately

When a crisis occurs, look at what the best type of action is necessary and respond within seconds. An immediate and appropriate response depends on a plan with clearly laid-out roles and responsibilities, as well as training and practice. With this proper training, staff members and students will respond appropriately within seconds.

## Notify Emergency Responders and the School Crisis Response Team

Many times, school leaders tend to delay calling emergency responders, such as the police or fire departments. In the midst of a crisis, many people believe they can handle the situation in- house. However, it is better to have emergency responders on scene as soon as possible, even if administrators resolved the situation when they arrive. If you delay calling, you could potentially have further risk, injury, or damage.

Also, notifying a district’s or school’s crisis team allows them to start the necessary measures to protect the safety of everyone involved. Remember to evacuate or lockdown the school, if necessary, as soon as possible.

## Triage Injuries



Remember to triage injuries and give emergency first aid to those who need it during the crisis. The plan should assign emergency medical services (EMS) personnel and school staff with relevant qualifications to determine who

needs first aid. Find a location for EMS to treat the seriously injured on the scene, if necessary.

Remember to keep your supplies nearby and organized at all times. If you have to move to another location for safety reasons, remember to take the supplies with you. Monitor how many supplies you have and make sure to replace them as needed.

## Trust Leadership

Trust the internal crisis team members, as well as the external emergency responders who have been trained to deal with a crisis. When you trust them, it will help calm the situation and minimize the chaos that can happen during a crisis.

During a crisis, leaders must portray a calm, confident, and serious demeanor to assure people the seriousness of the situation and their wisdom of the directions given at the time. This leadership style will help everyone involved to respond in a calm and confident manner as well.

## Communicate Accurate & Appropriate Information

During a crisis, school leaders must communicate both with the school community and the community at large. Use the channels of communication laid out in your plan. For example, all information released to the media should come directly from a public information officer or an appointed spokesperson.

The crisis team should communicate on a regular basis with staff who are managing students during a crisis. A school’s most important responsibility is the safety of the students. It cannot be fulfilled during a crisis without timely and accurate information to those caring for them.

Families need to know that a crisis has occurred, and all the possible steps are being taken to protect the safety of their children. At some point, families will also need to know when and where they can pick up their kids.

## Allow For Flexibility

It is impossible for any crisis plan to address each and every situation that can happen during a real crisis. With proper training and practice, emergency responders and staff will be able to respond appropriately and timely and to adapt the school crisis plans to the specific situation.

## Document, Document, Document



This is a very important step. Make sure you write down every action taken during the response. This will provide a clear record of appropriate implementation of the crisis plan. You also need to record any damage for insurance

purposes and track financial expenditures related to the incident. Keep all original notes and records, as they are legal documents.

# Module 5: Crisis Recovery

The goal of recovery is to return to “normalcy” and restore infrastructure as soon as possible after a crisis occurs. Focus on students and the physical building, and make sure to take as much time as needed for recovery. School staff should be trained on how to deal with the emotional impact of the crisis, as well as to assess the emotional needs of everyone involved, including staff members, students, and emergency responders. One of the major goals of recovery is to provide a caring and supportive environment.

## Recovery

After a crisis, look at the roles and responsibilities of school staff and others who will assist in recovery. District-level counselors may want to train the school staff to deal with the emotional impact to determine specific intervention needs. You may even want to use outside service providers. But, make sure you review the credentials of those providers and certify those who will be used during recovery.



## Intervention

A crisis intervention team (CIT) is made up of individuals, at either the district or school level, involved in recovery. There are many different ways to assemble and organize a CIT. For example, use a centralized CIT at the district level, which serves all schools in the district or have the district train school-specific CITs. Even when crisis intervention teams exist at individual schools, you may find it necessary to have the superintendent allocate additional resources on an as-needed basis.

## Business of Learning



The first order of business after a crisis is to get the students back to learning as soon as possible. Reopening a school after a crisis can help students and families cope with separations from one another.

## Communicate with Student Families

Schools and districts need to keep students, families, and

the media informed and must be clear about what steps have been taken to deal with student safety. Let families and other community members know what support services the school and district are providing or what other community resources are available to them. It might be good to translate letters and other forms of communication into languages other than English,

depending on the composition of the communities feeding the affected school(s). Be sure to consider cultural differences when preparing these materials.

## Emotional Needs



Provide an assessment of the emotional needs of staff, students, families, and responders. The assessment will determine those who might need intervention by a school counselor, social worker, school psychologist, or another mental health professional. Appropriate group interventions may work for staff and students who are experiencing less severe emotions after a crisis.

## Provide Stress Management During Class Time

Trauma experts believe it is necessary to create a caring, warm, and trusting environment for students after a crisis. Provide ways for students to talk about what they felt and experienced during the event. Younger children may not be able to fully express their feelings verbally.

Therefore, they may benefit from creative activities, including drawing, painting, or writing stories. Young adolescents benefit from group discussions where they are encouraged to talk about their feelings. You can engage older adolescents in group discussions as well and address any issues of guilt, such as, “I could have taken some action to change the outcome.”

## Conduct Daily Debriefings

These necessary debriefings should be for staff, responders, and others assisting in the recovery. Mental health professionals who have provided services after crises stress the importance of making sure those who are providing the “psychological first aid” are supported as well. Debriefings help staff cope with their feelings of vulnerability.

Also, remember that each person recovers from a crisis at their own pace. After a crisis, healing is a process that has its ups and downs. Depending on the traumatic event and the individual, recovery may take months, or even years.

## Evaluate

Evaluating recovery efforts will help prepare for the next crisis. Make sure to use several methods to evaluate recovery efforts. Conduct brief interviews with emergency responders, families, teachers, students, and staff. Focus groups may also be helpful to get important information about recovery efforts. Here are a few questions to ask:

1. Which classroom-based interventions were the most successful? Why?
2. Which assessment and referral strategies were the most successful? Why?
3. Which recovery strategies would you change and why?
4. What additional training is needed to enable the school community and the community at large to prepare for future crises?
5. What other planning actions will facilitate future recovery efforts?