

Chapter 1

Managing Risk in School Crisis Intervention: A Call for Authentic and Inclusive Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports findings from a study of school leader perspectives on crisis preparedness. The context for the study is a sample of school superintendents in the southwest region of the United States. Interviews were conducted with four school superintendents to gather insights into mainly organizational norms, policy, and planning related to crisis preparation. This chapter seeks to add insight into what leaders perceive as preparation for potential crises and to critically assess the demands and obligations set forth through state legislative policy. Furthermore, the authors explore myriad leadership challenges to maintaining public confidence and maximizing the safety of children. Recommendations for leaders to engage in reframing of their positionality with respect to crises and a model for engaging parents and community in assessing risks and threats are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers examined perceptions of public school leaders on their preparedness for life threatening situations. Despite extensive efforts to minimize the risk of mass school shootings like those at Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School, concerns remain as to whether school leaders are fully capable of executing appropriately when active shooter crisis situations arise. Ensuring safety for elementary and secondary school students, educators, administrators, and others is a top domestic priority (United States Department of Justice, 2013). Chris Murphy, Democratic Senator for the State

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of Connecticut, the State in which Sandy Hook Elementary School is located, said in a statement on the U.S. Senate floor, “No parent should have to fear for the life of their child when they drop them off at school.” The lack of inquiry into leadership preparation for crises is surprising in light of 160 school shootings since 2013. Add to this the countless other incidents that elude massive media attention like Sandy Hook or Columbine reveals an enduring and serious problem (Zadrozny, 2013).

While there is much research about the psychological patterns of perpetrators, school leader perceptions of crisis preparation has received scant attention comparatively. The U.S. Department of Education published a report entitled the Cycle of Crisis Planning (2007), which pointed to deficits in preparation and readiness in addressing active shooters in schools. Findings from one national survey (Graham, Shirm, Liggin, Aitken, & Dick, 2006) suggested a lack of crisis preparedness for incidents involving mass casualties, seven years following the Columbine shooting in Colorado. Subsequent studies have cited problems with school safety, lack of preparation, and overall management of a crisis for specific districts including Los Angeles County (Kano, Ramirez, Ybarra, Frias & Bourque, 2007), Massachusetts (Goldman, 2008), and Idaho (Safe and secure schools, 2008). In response, policymakers across the country have afforded much greater attention to the problem. Several states require schools to administer preparation drills and routines for disasters and shootings. According to a survey of school administrators funded by the American Association of School Administrators, drills are now practiced routinely in nearly three-quarters of schools (Associated Press, 2005).

The lack of research in crisis preparation policy and school leader perceptions of their school system’s readiness is especially surprising based on what is known about state and local control (i.e., no centralized education system at the federal level) and bureaucratic norms in U.S. public school systems. For this reason, the following chapter probes what leaders perceive as preparation for potential crises and the demands and the obligations imposed by state legislative policy. Furthermore, the authors attempt to capture the myriad of leadership challenges that arise in maintaining public confidence and maximizing the safety of children.

The context for the study is a sample of school superintendents in the southwest region of the United States. Researchers interviewed four school superintendents to collect insights into organizational norms, policy, and planning related to crisis preparation and applied institutional theory to interpret the findings. Institutional theory is useful in critiques of “homogenous” and anticipated organizational action and response to crises as well as the necessity to maintain public legitimacy over broader collective interests (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, p. 9). To more fully understand the nexus between leadership behavior and the political pressure to maintain legitimacy, the authors give a brief description of the current context with respect to elementary and secondary school crises in the United States, specifically school shootings, and report practitioner perspectives on readiness and preparation. The chapter closes with recommendations for leaders to engage in reframing of their positionality with respect to crises and a model for engaging parents and community in assessing risks and threats is suggested.

Background

In the United States, approximately 55 million students attend public and private schools, and a primary expectation is for school districts to keep these students safe (Zhang, Musu-Gillette, & Oudekerk, 2016). Ensuring safety for elementary and secondary school students, educators, administrators, and others is essential (United States Department of Justice, 2013). In the aftermath of mass school shootings, thorough investigations take place and commissions are constituted to alert the public to the gravity

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