



# F O C U S O N ISSUES

*Critical*



*Could a violent tragedy strike a well-secured campus?*

*Could even a small earthquake ruin an old school in seconds resulting in a bureaucratic nightmare that lasts for years?*

*Could fires, floods and landslides create havoc and displace students for months?*

*Yes, these questions are simply rhetorical ... because each crisis has hit Oregon recently. More are surely on the way.*

Oregon schools have weathered their share of natural and man-made disasters.

The great flood of '96 left Vernonia students homeless for weeks and attending class in portables. A fire this March destroyed Sheridan's elementary school. Then McMinnville scrambled to correct the misfortune of a poorly conducted student "strip" search and the resulting public frenzy.

Just last month, the dust finally settled – literally – after the 1993 earthquake that destroyed Molalla High School and divided the community.

### **And now the shootings at Thurston High School ...**

Don't think we're safe just because we've had "our share." Mother Nature doesn't grant quotas or play favorites. Nor does she attend school board meetings. Seismologists have confirmed that Western Oregon is at risk of "the big one" any time. With growing development, floods and landslides will always threaten our scenic landscape. Fires, accidents and criminal incidences can and do happen anywhere.

And the debate over guns, violence and schools will rage long into the next century.

"As stewards of public education, school boards must guide their districts in leadership, inter-agency cooperation – and most important, public trust and planning," says Chris Dudley, OSBA executive director. "At no other time in our history has this leadership been more important."

In light of the recent misfortunes, this edition of *Critical Issues* is dedicated to helping school boards and districts plan for a crisis.

### **What we've learned**

Common themes surfaced among the districts facing recent tragedy and disaster. "Our community responded and rallied as an entire force. It was nothing short of phenomenal," says Springfield Superintendent Jamon Kent.

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**SUMMER  
1998**



# WHEN ALL THE WORLD IS WATCHING

A late May issue of the *New York Times* listed Thurston High's shooting as the most followed news story in the country.

That wasn't news to Cherie Kistner. The Springfield School District communications specialist helped set up the media welcoming committee, so to speak, on that tragic morning when Kip Kinkel opened fire on his classmates at 7:57 a.m. after allegedly murdering his parents the night before.

The lessons she and her team learned are passed along in this story.

**T**he line Cherie Kistner walked the week starting May 21 was thin: Protecting district operations, staff and students by controlling media access inside school property – while helping the media get first-hand information. Both were legitimate roles.

Kistner teamed with Rosemary Pryor, City of Springfield's information officer, hospital and other public relations staff and volunteers to handle the 100-plus teams of national networks, state and local media responding to the Thurston shooting. The *Eugene Register-Guard* alone assigned 20 journalists and has published 187 stories... so far.

Satellite trucks arrived throughout the day and night to set up the carnival of tents outside the school fence. While callers jammed the phones, helicopters buzzed over once quiet neighborhoods.

Media relations went well because Kistner and Pryor anticipated "the swarm." Some unethical behavior surfaced (media posing as counselors), but the odds of that happening in a tragedy that draws the President are high.

"Most reporters were professional and compassionate," Kistner said. "They were just doing their job."

## When mayhem reigns

When crisis hits, mayhem reigns for a while. The urge to know "what happened" can overwhelm while the immediate need is to get emergency help to control the situation.

"I pulled a U-turn and drove straight to the school after hearing the news on the radio," says Kistner, recalling her first reaction. Public information staff from surrounding communities soon joined her.

She and the fire department handled updates at the scene during the emergency, but by 10 a.m. when it was clear this was a community crisis, they moved communications to city hall.

## Central post is key

The most important media tool in any crisis situation is to establish one clearinghouse and regular updates from reliable sources. Pryor was appointed spokesperson to plan briefings while others compiled updates, coordinated phone calls and rounded up police, hospital and school officials to release statements at briefings.

With PR staff coordinating the media, police could investigate, rescuers could aid victims and school officials could help staff secure the campus and console the onslaught of parents.

Calls poured in to offer help, scholarship funds and counseling. The author of *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* even called to donate 3,000 books, Pryor says. "We returned 4,000 calls."

Springfield council chambers became the hub where school board members, police, local officials, media and others met for updates and to release statements.

## Don't chase rumors

"I firmly believed we thwarted the media frenzy and rumors by quickly establishing one accurate information source," Kistner says. "We also listed one phone number for everyone to use." (A good idea since the local 911 line was jammed.)

Kistner and Pryor feel strongly about rumor control. "Don't chase rumors or you'll burn precious time," Pryor warns. "Ignore them, build on what you know and become the source. People learned to rely on us."

The PR team's good reputation spread. Families of injured and killed students asked them for help in releasing statements. They helped people talk to reporters, reminding students and others it was a personal choice – that they don't *have* to talk. But they also worked hard to help national media, like arranging a 3 a.m. interview for *Good Morning America* and coaching the police chief to appear on *Face The Nation*.

## The School Board role

Springfield School Board Chairman Alan Petersen called an emergency meeting by 10 a.m. the first day to update his board and to assure his district could have "whatever they need."

He recommends that school boards facing a crisis assign one spokesperson from the district, as Springfield did. "People closest to the situation are the most credible sources, and that isn't always the board," he says. "Our role is to be part of the healing – and now to join the solution by becoming advocates for early intervention, stricter juvenile laws, or whatever we need to prevent this from happening again."



## WHEN ALL THE WORLD IS WATCHING

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Board members can expect immediate calls from insurance and legal representatives to counsel them on liability issues and talking to the media, notes OSBA's legal counsel David Turner. Board members should not speculate about the "why" or "how" of an incident. "Leave that up to the investigators and stick to the facts," he says.

### Media planning tips

- Have a crisis communication plan in place and make sure staff knows what information is appropriate to release. Politeness is essential. Refer to Oregon's public records laws for details that can be released.
- Create a master media list with phone/fax numbers and contacts. Add to this list as other media call.
- Create a list of neighboring PR experts to call for help.
- Use technology. Establish an e-mail group for updates to staff, board members and media. List news updates on Web sites.
- Have media kits on hand, including district facts, names of administrators and board, school floor plans, community description, and if applicable, photos of schools and staff. Include a clear statement explaining your district policy on access to students, records, staff and facilities and make sure staff understand the policy.

### When reporters are coming

- Create a central communication post for news briefings and assign a spokesperson.
- Anticipate reporters needing to use phones, workspace, electrical outlets. Don't forget about restrooms.
- Plan regular briefings and announce them as far in advance as possible. Thurston's briefings included hospital, police, city and school officials, and later the governor. Ask reporters to refrain from questions until all designated speakers have released statements.
- Assign one phone number, releasing it to the media to publish and broadcast.
- Don't play "favorites" with the media. Release news to all at the same time. However, remember your local media have the added role of helping the community work through the grief and healing process.
- Not returning *all* media calls is okay if you're planning to release an update soon to all of them. In Thurston's case, it was common to receive 20-plus calls from one team a day.

Effective media relations is just one part of a district's over-all communication needs. Contact OSBA for help in creating a plan that targets all your school audiences.

## Now a word from the media...

OSBA surveyed a sample of local, state and national media to get their views on how the Thurston tragedy was handled. Of those who returned our calls (we're still waiting on CNN), all had positive impressions and a few suggestions.

"We were very impressed on the regular updates and 24-hour access," says Maryhelen Campa of Fox Broadcasting. "They were on the ball, having everyone available in one room and allowing pool situations." (Pools are used in situations when only a few media are allowed such as in courtrooms or when grieving families will talk, but only to a small group. The "pool" then shares its footage and story with other media.)

Brad Cain of the Associated Press says Springfield "handled it well under bad circumstances." However, "certain school officials didn't seem to understand the media can get intrusive at times," he adds, "and they shouldn't take it personally. Sometimes I noticed a counter-productive bunker mentality."

It's an extremely competitive field, he adds. "Network reporters can lose their jobs if they return with just the podium shots," he says. "Viewers are interested in the human angle, the emotions that touch us. Journalism is literature under pressure."

Susan Gage, who coordinated the *Oregonian's* team, aimed to "strike a delicate balance of being competitive but accurate and sensitive," she says. "We help our readers find order in the chaos, we provide context and relevancy, which helps you get your message across. People tend to think we're cynical but that myth is perpetuated by tabloid journalists."

Gage adds, "Our public editor has been a leader in pushing credibility to regain the public trust, so we were horrified to hear the stories about so-called reporters lying to get information."

Jim Godbold, Eugene *Register-Guard* managing editor, applauds the "incredible performances" of Springfield's PR staff. He understands the need to protect privacy, but adds a caution:

"When a school is violated, the natural tendency is to lock up tight," he says. "But that's not always the best approach. Many people also have a need to share their experiences; those stories are important to the community."

Godbold feels there's also a danger in treating all media alike. "We don't stick the microphone in somebody's tear-streaked face to ask how they feel. I urge public information people to recognize the national media will be gone and the local media will be there after the shouting dies down. Preserve those relationships."



# The First 30 Minutes

What is done in the first 30 minutes of a crisis is crucial in controlling rumors and determining people's perceptions of the crisis and how it was handled.

- The crisis team leader should take charge.
- Gather the facts. (Your plan should include Crisis Assessment and Information Sheet used to gather needed information.)
- Define the problems.
- Consider options. Act to ensure the safety of students and staff.
- Communicate with staff and students.
- Brief the news media.
- Prepare for phone calls and volunteers (for major disasters).
- Decide the best way to communicate with parents.
- Demonstrate competence.
- Make sure information provided is accurate and reliable.

## Crisis Management: It's about being prepared

***In an emergency, it's not enough to call 911. Your school district needs a comprehensive crisis management and communication plan.***

Fires, floods, earthquakes, explosions, vehicle crashes, shootings, death and disease – all crises your schools must be ready to face. Is your staff prepared?

When disaster strikes, school staff must react immediately and in a way that clarifies student safety as the top priority. A crisis management and communication plan ensures that when the emergency ends, that sense of security for students, for parents and for staff survives.

Your school board needs to signal its commitment by adopting policies that clearly state the need for crisis preparedness. (A sample board policy on crisis response is available on the OSBA Web site: <http://www.orlocalgov.org/osba>.)

Once the general framework of expectations is created, step back and leave the actual planning to those who will use it. Each school building should own its plan – they are the ones who will have to follow it.

Crisis planning needs to go beyond the boundaries of your schools, says Bruce Smolnisky, director of elementary and special education for the Springfield School District, who helped develop the district's crisis management plan. Involve police and fire departments, city hall, local hospitals, your education service district and the county mental health department. "Don't develop this plan in a vacuum; get to know these people," he says. "When the time comes, their involvement in the planning will make the difference between a well run process and confusion."

Springfield was prepared when tragedy struck on May 21. The district had involved local emergency service agencies in its emergency plan development. Just two years ago the district staged a mock emergency event involving school staff, students and local emergency personnel. "We made it a big deal for principals to develop a crisis response plan," Smolnisky says. When the district and building plans were completed, representatives of the city's police and fire department and city hall were there to discuss the plan as it was handed out.

Smolnisky cautions administrators not to let the plan gather dust. "Review that plan at least twice a year," he urges. Consider three types of emergency drills: schoolwide, administrators only, and districtwide disaster simulations. Invite local emergency personnel to participate in drills. Widespread participation also gives emergency personnel practice and draws attention to the district's commitment to safety.

Although crisis management plans will vary depending on district size, location and staffing, all plans should emphasize two critical areas: management and communication.



## Management:

Who will do what, when and how? A clear understanding of who is in charge of what function. Establish a building crisis response team: the principal, assistant principal, school counselor, school secretary, teacher, school security officer and head custodian. Create a district level crisis team: usually composed of the superintendent and/or deputy, public information director (or someone designated to help the news media), district's attorney and/or representative of district's insurance agency, facilities director, special education director and/or school psychologist. Remember, the principal can't do everything. When a crisis strikes, the principal will be at the epicenter. The crisis team members are the principal's eyes and ears for the school. They deal with rumor control, student and staff needs, parent concerns, calling 911, meeting emergency needs and keeping the principal informed.

## Communications:

How will parents, students, staff and the community be kept informed? Who will deal with the news media? The crisis team's priority is to communicate as quickly as possible to staff, students and parents. Develop a way of informing other district schools.

The building and district teams are in charge of developing the plans. Start with brainstorming sessions about the different scenarios – bus accidents, floods, school accidents, teacher/student deaths, kidnaping, fire or explosion.

Create levels of crisis severity. *Level 1* – Can be handled by vice principal. *Level 2* – Can be handled by vice principal with assistance from security personnel. *Level 3* – Requires outside help: fire, police, emergency medical technicians. This is no longer just the school's crisis. *Level 4* – Involves entire community. A catastrophe.

Plans need to first focus on managing – ensuring the safety of students and staff, protecting the district's property and restoring normal educational processes as quickly as possible. Also focus on communicating – before, during and after a crisis. Build in flexibility. "Things don't always go as planned," Smolnisky says.

A primary goal is keeping the public informed about the crisis while maintaining student and staff privacy.

As soon as possible, provide the communication person a concise statement of the facts so information can be released. The statement should be based on what you can confirm at the present time. *Never* speculate. It's wise to have one spokesperson to handle media. Although the superintendent should be onsite at the crisis scene and make a statement early on, it's recommended that the superintendent not be the ongoing spokesperson.

A crisis always seems like something that happens somewhere else – that is, until it arrives on your doorstep, full of fury. Although other issues and challenges scream for your attention, your school board should not postpone crisis management planning.

If a crisis hits, a sound plan can guide your district through the tragedy with sensitivity, credibility and dignity.

*Sources: Bob Irvine, president, Institute for Crisis Management, Louisville, Kentucky; The Complete Crisis Communication Management Manual for Schools, National School Public Relations Association; Cheri Lovre, Director, Crisis Management Institute, Salem; Michael Cunningham, Special Services Coordinator, Willamette Regional ESD; , Marv Purvis, Director, School Health and Safety, ESD 105, Yakima, WA.*

## Information to include in Assessment/Information Sheet

- Brief description of crisis
- Actions completed
- Who now knows of crisis
- Assessment of damage/harm
  - To people
    - Number involved
    - How many unaccounted for
    - Injuries (seriousness)
    - Evacuated
  - To buildings:
    - Damage
    - Further damage potential
- Projections of events in next two hours?
- News media
  - On site?
  - Who?
  - How many?
  - Special requests
- Check resources needed
  - Develop a list of possible resources so person filling out form can simply check off ones needed. Include: counselors, medical, safety, construction, communications, media relations, transportation, food service, clerical, insurance/claims, legal, etc.
- Place for signature of person filling out form, time
- Give copy to principal and FAX to district office



# Never the Same AGAIN

School violence turns the world upside down. Safe places are suddenly filled with terror and carnage. Once the initial crisis is past, we want things to return to normal, but they never do.

Violence has lasting effects on students, staff, parents and the community, according to Scott Poland, Ph.D., director of Psychological Services at Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District in Houston, Texas, and chair of the National Emergency Assistance Team of the National Association of School Psychologists.

“A crisis shakes everything up,” he says. “Unresolved issues and problems hidden in people’s mental closets get shaken out. No one escapes unharmed.”

After a violent episode, students may experience the following symptoms:

- Fear of the future. They may ask, “Will it happen again? Do I have to go outside? How can I return to the room where someone died?”
- Academic and behavioral regression. They may whine and cling, have toileting accidents, ask for night lights. School performance may deteriorate.
- Nightmares and night terrors.
- Physical complaints. Stomachaches, headaches, dizziness, with no apparent cause.
- Withdrawal, listlessness, decreased activity, preoccupation with the disaster.

Students need time to express their feelings, according to Poland.

“Don’t rush to return to normal,” he says. “Clean up the blood, but leave the bullet holes so people can look at them and remember where they were at the time of the shooting. Open schools right away. Schools are a primary support system for kids; they need to be together to talk about what happened.”

Most importantly, parents and teachers need to listen without offering advice. “We want to fix things when they go wrong,” he says. “But this is one situation that can’t be fixed.”

# EMOTIONAL IMPACTS OF VIOLENCE

## *The human element*

Violence of any kind is traumatic and frightening. It triggers a wide range of emotional reactions, from grief and fear to rage and numbness, and it can affect survivors for months and years afterward.

The physical and emotional reactions of people caught in a violent situation are closely linked, according to Cheryl Tyiska, Director of Victim Services at the National Organization for Victim Assistance.

	Physical	Emotional
Phase One	Physical shock: immobilization (“I couldn’t move.”) and time distortion (“It was only a few seconds, but it felt like hours.”)	Shock and disbelief: (“I can’t believe this happened.”) provides an emotional cushion until reality sinks in.
Phase Two	Fight or flight: the body may empty itself through involuntary urination, defecation or regurgitation; sensory input is imprinted (“Every time I hear that sound, I feel afraid.”)	Emotional mobilization: a wide range of intense emotions including outrage, revenge, terror, confusion, frustration, shame, humiliation, grief, sorrow.
Phase Three	Exhaustion: adrenaline levels drop; people may pass out or fall asleep suddenly.	Reconstruction: not a return to “normal,” but the building of a new life; survivors may move, change friends or careers, adopt a variety of coping strategies.

“About 25 to 30 percent of those directly involved in violence have severe long-term stress reactions requiring therapy,” Tyiska says. “Another 25 percent have very mild symptoms. A lot depends on your personal history. If you have other traumas in your past, a violent episode may bring them back.”

To help students cope with their emotions and move toward healing, Tyiska suggests the following strategies:

- Model good grieving behavior. It’s okay to cry or show your feelings, but don’t get carried away in the classroom.
- Allow professionals to help. Teams of trauma-trained counselors are available on short notice.
- Let people tell their story again and again, using talking, art, music, journals, etc.
- Watch for students who might need additional support.
- Allow students to hold memorials.
- Open school as soon as possible. Being alone can be dangerous; it’s better to suffer together.
- Bring trusted adults on campus to create an atmosphere of safety.
- Set up support rooms for students who need individual counseling.



# Jonesboro: A Look Back

**O**n March 24, 1998, four students and a teacher were shot to death and 10 others were wounded during a false fire alarm at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Ark. Two boys, ages 11 and 13, are accused of setting the alarm and then opening fire from a nearby wooded area.

Within minutes of the attack, school officials, law enforcement personnel and emergency medical teams were on the scene. As word of the tragedy spread, parents and community members rushed to the school to check on friends and relatives. By evening, the area was inundated by reporters.

Four months have passed since the shooting. Jonesboro is quieter now, but the crisis has left an indelible mark on the community. The schools, in particular, will never be the same.

“During the rest of the school year, we had uniformed deputies on campus to make everyone feel more secure,” says Grover Cooper,

Superintendent of the Westside School District. “We also cleared out the wooded area and put up a privacy fence.”

Counseling, provided day and night immediately after the shooting, continues. Cooper says that everybody — teachers, counselors, and other staff — is watching carefully for signs of emotional trouble among students.

A committee of school employees is working with local law enforcement to come up with a plan to improve security. Teachers are being trained in conflict resolution. And a district team is developing a comprehensive crisis plan.

“Right after the event, our plates were so full, we were just trying to survive,” Cooper says. “Now we’re working on longer-term solutions.”

There’s no way to be sure of preventing school violence, but districts can take steps to reduce the chaos that follows such an event.

Cooper advises districts to:

- Develop a building-level plan before something happens, and make sure everybody understands it.
- Have a spot for the media to gather off school property.
- Pick one person to deal with the media, preferably someone who knows a lot about the school and can answer questions.

## Lessons from Jonesboro

Jack Bower is a psychologist on staff at the Craighead County Special Education Cooperative in Jonesboro. Shortly after the shooting in March, he was appointed by District Superintendent Grover Cooper to lead the district’s crisis management effort. Bower is working with several other district officials to develop a crisis management plan, which includes the following suggestions for the first days after a shooting:

- Hold a debriefing meeting with teachers and counselors before students return to school.
- Make sure a strong team of adults is in place in each class directly affected by the tragedy.
- Know how many law enforcement personnel, if any, will be needed on campus.
- Provide teachers with a list of questions (are you eating, sleeping, etc.) to help them determine stress levels among students.
- Provide teachers with stress-reduction techniques to share with students.
- Prepare students for the wounded visiting or returning to school.
- Encourage teachers to re-establish structure in the classroom.
- Provide parents with a form to refer their child for counseling.
- Identify “high-risk” students and teachers and follow up to make sure needs are met.
- Set up regular meetings with teachers and staff.
- Provide support to spouses of staff.
- Develop a program that includes grief activities; encourage teachers to use it.



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<http://www.orlocalgov.org/osba>



## WHEN CRISIS HITS

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Flood and fire victims experienced similar charities of community spirit. They've also learned that healing takes a tremendous effort of time, patience and process.

When Molalla High shook with the "Spring break quake," little did the Molalla River School District anticipate the myriad of federal steps, reports and studies required to decide the school's fate. Almost *five years later* the wrecking ball finally demolished the school after unsuccessful attempts to sell it.

Almost 900 students had been displaced, and the Class of '97 spent their entire high school career in trailers. Molalla suffered significant enrollment decline (a "hidden" result of the disaster).

"The major lesson we learned — aside from strengthening your buildings — is to make sure you get a qualified expert to assess the damage at the beginning," says Superintendent Alice Ericksen. "Check their credentials." The first engineer who came out representing the Federal Emergency Management Agency estimated \$200,000 would fix the

problem. (More like \$4 million, they learned later, which ultimately became cost-prohibitive.)

That launched the district into five years of more reports, angry citizens wanting to save the school, environmental and historic studies, marketing reports, hearings, more hearings, and unsuccessful attempts to sell the property.

"We finally enlisted the help of Senator Ron Wyden and began cutting through the red tape." The building was demolished just weeks ago and thanks to a bond the new high school opened this year.

Lessons learned in Sheridan's elementary school fire also point to the critical need for planning. In their case, the news was better. "We had done a recent appraisal, which helped tremendously with the insurance settlement," says Superintendent Al Wells. "We also learned to store backup computer disks off campus and update them regularly. We lost a lot of records."

Sheridan staff and board members met the night of the fire to plan student relocations and staff meet-

ings. "We discovered that young children especially had a hard time emotionally. Some kindergartners asked if their teachers died in the fire because they thought teachers lived in schools," he says. "So we had a community event Wednesday night for teachers and kids to get together. We also learned that rumor control is a must, and limited the spokespersons to two or three people."

The outpouring of donations from other districts and businesses overwhelmed Sheridan. The only things they had to buy when school started again on April 1 were eight dozen chairs and eight white boards.

"When you experience trauma, you understand the needs of others better," he adds. "We sent a letter to Thurston High extending our help in anything they would need. Even the little things mean a lot."

Note: OSBA has added a special session on managing crises to its annual convention. The pre-conference workshop on Nov. 12 will feature crisis experts and school districts that weathered the storms.

Visit OSBA's Web site for additional information on

crisis planning and how to prevent violence in our schools... <http://www.orlocalgov.org/osba>



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