

Chapter VII – Recovery

A. Introduction

1. Decisions and actions taken after an incident with a view to restoring or improving the pre-incident conditions of the stricken school district/school and community, while encouraging and facilitating necessary adjustments to reduce risk in future incidents.
2. In the event of an incident, critical elements of recovery should be addressed. School District/School Mental Health Teams need to consider short term interventions and long term solutions. Teams also need to address communication, psychological first aid, community crisis counseling response teams, administrative, and environmental.

B. Goals of Recovery (How do we get back to the business of learning?)

1. Strive to restore learning environment as quickly as possible.
2. Provide for the emotional well-being of staff, students and school community.
3. Restore the physical plant for learning.
4. Assist in the restoration of the school community.
5. Restore business operations.
6. Capture “lessons learned” in order to incorporate them into revisions.

C. Administrative

There are a number of administrative details that must be put into place in order to ease the transition from response to recovery and restore daily operations that support the educational process.

1. Keep documentation of all actions, meetings and decisions.
2. Take photos of any damage for insurance purposes, as well as for the possibility of a Presidential Disaster Declaration. Look at immediate and possible long-term damage, such as air quality issues that need to be included in your estimates and reimbursement requests.

A Sample Damage Inspection Chart is included in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

3. Implement the School District/School Succession Plan in the event that top administrators and other staff are not able to return to work for an extended length of time.
4. Review Incident After Action Report and discuss possible changes to the School District/School 'All Hazards' School Safety Plan.
5. If records have been destroyed in the incident, contact off-site storage area to get back-up copies.

D. Psychological First Aid

1. Traumatic events can cause psychological and emotional turmoil, cognitive problems and behavioral changes. Psychological First Aid provides assessment and referral information in order to restore emotional stability and learning.
2. Whether an incident is an act of violence, a sudden death, or a large-scale natural incident, such as a tornado, those involved often experience:
 - a. Stages of Grieving
 - 1) Shock – usually the first reaction--often experienced as numbness or physical pain and associated with withdrawal.
 - 2) Denial – acting as if no loss has occurred.
 - 3) Depression – feeling pain, despair, emptiness--may not be accompanied by some emotional release such as crying (if the person can cry, it helps release stress).
 - 4) Guilt – self-blame for not having expressed more caring or belief the loss was his/her fault.
 - 5) Anxiety – panic reactions as reality sets in.
 - 6) Aggression/Anger – toward those who might have prevented the loss and sometimes toward the lost person (may have trouble acknowledging anger toward the person of loss, but if such anger can be expressed it can help with recovery).
 - 7) Reintegration – loss is accepted (although there may be periods of relapse).
 - 8) Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
3. These feelings can trigger stress reactions that can affect school district/school employees, students, parents/guardians, emergency responders, families of these individuals, and the larger community.

E. Children's Reactions

Children's emotional reactions are impacted by five factors:

1. Their perceptions of how the adults they depend upon are reacting. If they feel the adults are unprepared for an incident or out of control, their sense of fear increases as does their sense of not being safe.
2. The amount of direct exposure the child had to the event. They may have been injured or felt their life was threatened.
3. Child's developmental age – although they all have similar reactions, young children will react differently.
4. Children often have prior exposure to traumatic events. The current event may bring back fears and experience.
5. Family problems such as divorce, financial problems or serious health problems within the home can all make children more susceptible to reactions to traumatic events.

The Resource Section at the end of this chapter includes a Sample Chart of Signs and Symptoms of Stress Reactions to Traumatic Incidents - Children. It is recommended that the chart be laminated and given to each member of the school district/school staff, as well as sent home to parents/guardians of the students.

A Sample Flyer of Helpful Tips for School District/School Staff and Parents/Guardians is included in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter. This is information that should be shared with your staff and parents/guardians after an incident occurs.

F. Caring for the Caretakers

1. The demands of responding to a crisis are intense and place the caretakers under a great deal of stress. For example, crisis counselors can be exposed to secondary traumatization and compassion fatigue. They often have trouble admitting need because day-to-day, everyone views them as "in control" and always helping others.

2. It is strongly recommended that School District/School Team members who have been involved in an incident have the opportunity for a "debriefing" session. A trained crisis counseling response team should be used from another facility like a neighboring school or county. The debriefing is an opportunity to express feelings and receive emotional support. Superintendents/Principals will often avoid support by being too "busy" taking care of their staff first. Superintendents/Principals, as supervisors, should have a separate debriefing with an outside crisis counseling response team.

The Resource Section at the end of this chapter includes two Sample Charts of Signs and Symptoms of Stress Reactions to Traumatic Incidents. It is recommended that one or more of the charts be laminated and given to each member of the school district/school, as well as sent home to parents/guardians of the students.

A Sample Flyer of Helpful Tips for School District/School Incident Command Team Members and Other School Staff is included in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter. This is information that should be shared with your staff after an incident occurs.

G. Off Campus Mental Health Providers

Sometimes an incident will be large enough that school district/school mental health professionals are not able to handle the large numbers of people needing support. Therefore, school administrators should identify and approve qualified mental health professionals during the preparedness phase of planning. These people need to be ready to respond quickly if needed. Pre-screening is important because not all mental health providers are trained to handle emotionally traumatic events. Even if they have training, many have no experience responding to these incidents.

H. Student Assistance Program/Employee Assistance Program

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania provides several programs that can provide additional assistance to students, parents/guardians, and staff in the aftermath of an incident. They are the Student Assistance Program and the State Employee Assistance Program.

Web addresses for both the Student Assistance Program and the State Employee Assistance Program can be found in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

I. Addressing Parent/Guardian Concerns

After an incident, parents/guardians are concerned about the emotional and physical well-being of their children, as well as the safety and security of the school district/school campus. Many of these concerns can be addressed through a letter home to the parents/guardians, face to face meetings, and updates on the website. It is extremely important that parents/guardians be kept apprised of the efforts being made to get the school district/school back to a “normal” status.

A Sample Letter to Parents/Guardians is included in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

J. Memorial Services

School memorials serve an important function in the grief process for students and staff. A memorial promotes the healing process by providing an opportunity for students and staff to join together and participate in a healing experience. Memorials should be planned carefully considering specific guidelines.

It is recommended that school districts/schools develop a policy on the conduct of Memorial Services, Permanent Memorials, and Anniversary Events. A copy of this policy should be included in the Recovery Section of the School District’s/School’s “All Hazards” School Safety Plan.

A Sample Guidelines for Memorial Services is included in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

K. Permanent Memorials

1. Establish guidelines and/or for permanent memorials.
 - a. Size.
 - b. Location – do not place at entrance to building.
 - c. Cost limits.
 - d. Respectful and tasteful to others deceased.

2. It is suggested that permanent memorials not be erected for suicide or deaths due to driving under the influence (DUI).
3. Involve students, parents/guardians and staff in the planning. Allow time to make good decisions.
4. Establish who will make the final decision.

L. Anniversaries

Anniversary dates are very important to students and staff and must be recognized by school administration. You should plan for these events. Do not allow them to catch you off guard. When making plans consider the following:

1. Establish a planning committee.
2. Allow students and staff to participate in the planning.
3. Involve some student leaders in the program.
4. Review plan with families.
5. Keep staff aware of the plans.
6. Permit students to select any music choices that are appropriate.
7. Establish clear rules for the media.
8. Do not permit pictures of grieving students, staff and parents/guardians.
9. Have a place where students and staff needing help can see a counselor.

Remember: These events should be part of the healing and should not be allowed to traumatize participants. Continue to monitor student needs and emotional health throughout the year.

M. Environmental

1. Structural Considerations
 - a. Be certain that the physical plant is safe for human habitation (Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools).
 - b. A Walk-Through Physical Assessment to determine the physical safety of the building (i.e. locks work, windows close).

2. Sanitation/Hygiene
 - a. Use special team for clean-up, not internal staff (a team who is specialized in bio-hazard clean-up).
 - b. Contact Local or County Health for assistance with assessment of environment.

N. The First Day Back at School

1. The first day back at school following an incident is a very important benchmark in the healing process. Returning to the school building and daily routine is an important first step in accepting the “new normal” for the children. The School District/School Mental Health Team should be available to help with the reactions in children that are triggered by returning to the scene of the incident. If necessary, contact an outside crisis counseling team to be available to assist the School District/School Mental Health Team. The School District/School Incident Command Team and the administration need to be careful in the preparations for the first day.

A Sample List of How Schools Districts/Schools can Help Students Deal with Loss is included in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

2. Careful attention should be paid to the needs of all members of the school community. Immediate needs on the first day back often include:
 - a. Managing the media.
 - b. Providing meaningful expressions to mark the occasion.
 - c. Ensuring a good sense of safety and security.
 - d. Activating a responsive referral system for students and staff who need additional support and establishing “safe rooms” for those who may need to seek quiet and comfort.
 - e. Allowing the opportunity for classroom discussion of what has occurred before transitioning into the school routine and returning to established curriculum.
3. All school district/school staff should meet at the beginning of the first day back at school to review the day's schedule and procedures. At the end of the day, school district/school staff should make certain that no high risk students are released to empty homes. Students should be encouraged to be aware of one another and to report to a responsible adult anyone who they feel needs help.

A Sample Checklist for School District/School Staff Meeting for First Day Back at School is included in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

O. Following Resolution of the Incident

Convene Incident Command and Mental Health Teams for debriefing:

1. Review successes and challenges identified during the crisis.
2. Review actions taken during the recovery phase of the response.
3. Evaluate “lessons learned” and how they should be merged into the revised School District/School “All Hazards” School Safety Plan. Changes should be made to the “All Hazards” School Safety Plan immediately.
4. Allow Incident Command and Mental Health Team members an opportunity to discuss their feelings and reactions to the incident.
5. Provide any additional support needed by the Incident Command and Mental Health Teams.
6. Identify any new partners to add to the School District/School Incident Command Team.