August 2014

Student-Parent Reunification after a School Crisis

Preface

Every day there are approximately 55 million elementary and secondary school students in our nation's public and nonpublic schools. The safety, health, and well-being of these students, along with the millions of faculty and staff, are the number one priority for schools and school districts. Although not typically considered first responders, school personnel are expected to be prepared to respond to school-based emergencies, whether natural (disease outbreaks, accidents, dangerous weather, etc.) or man-made (violent attacks, active shooters, etc.).[1]

To help schools prepare for internal or external threats, school emergency operation plans are essential

and must be prepared in collaboration with first responders, including law enforcement officers, fire officials, and emergency medical services personnel, as well as public and mental health entities. The U.S. Department of Education's guidelines[2] for effective emergency management recommend the development of comprehensive, multihazard plans to help prepare for before (prevention, mitigation, and preparedness), during (response), and after (recovery) a critical incident.

One critical aspect of crisis response is accountable reunification of students with their parents or guardians in the event of a school crisis or

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1. *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

2. Ibid.

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I Love U Guys

On September 27, 2006, a gunman entered Platte Canyon High School, held seven girls hostage, and ultimately shot and killed Emily Keyes. During the time she was held hostage, Emily sent her parents text messages: "I love you guys" and "I love u guys. k?" In response to this tragedy, Ellen and John-Michael Keyes created The "I Love U Guys" Foundation to restore and protect the joy of youth through educational programs and positive actions in collaboration with families, schools, communities, organizations, and government entities.

Source: ILoveUGuys.org

emergency. The Standard Reunification Method,[3] developed by The "I Love You Guys" Foundation,[4] is an example of a protocol to help make the student-parent reunification process more predictable and less chaotic for all involved. This method provides school and district safety teams with proven methods for planning, practicing, and achieving a successful reunification.

About this BOLO

The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) presents the BOLO series, supporting the publication and dissemination of experiences and implications discovered during ongoing research in the field, with the goal of regularly communicating these resources to the law enforcement community at large. "Be on the lookout" for these field-driven, evidence-based resources that will help illuminate the nature, function, context, costs, and benefits of community policing innovations.

For questions about this specific report and technical assistance activities underway, contact **John-Michael Keyes**, executive director, The "I Love U Guys" Foundation, at johnmichael@iloveuguys.org or **Nazmia Comrie**, senior social science analyst, COPS Office, at 202-305-8327 or nazmia.comrie@usdoj.gov.

Emergency operation plans

The President's 2013 *Now is the Time*[5] plan mandated that the Federal Government develop a set of high-quality emergency management plans for schools, houses of worship, and institutions of higher education, along with best practices for developing these plans and training students and staff to follow them. In response, the U.S. Departments of Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and Homeland Security released the *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*[6] to give schools and other institutions a model for how to develop and implement reliable plans (see figure 1 on page 3). These national preparedness efforts were informed by the *Presidential Policy Directive (PPD) 8*, signed by the President in March 2011. The directive is based on the lessons learned from terrorist attacks, hurricanes, school incidents, and other experiences and describes the nation's approach to preparedness.

The purpose of emergency operation plans is to help keep students, faculty, staff, and visitors safe in the event of a school-based incident. The federal guidelines for effective emergency management

3. *Standard Reunification Method: A Practical Method to Unite Students with Parents after an Evacuation or Crisis* (Bailey, CO: The "I Love U Guys" Foundation, 2011).

4. See http://iloveuguys.org/.

5. See *Now is the Time: The President's Plan to Protect Our Children and Our Communities by Reducing Gun Violence* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2013), http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/wh_now_is_the_time_full.pdf.

6. *High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (see note 1).

recommend the development of comprehensive, multihazard plans that focus on prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery before, during, and after an incident or emergency:[7]

■ **Prevention** means the capabilities necessary to avoid, deter, or stop an imminent crime or threatened or actual mass-casualty incident. Prevention is the action schools take to prevent a threatened or actual incident from occurring.

■ **Protection** means the capabilities to secure schools against acts of violence and man-made or natural disasters. Protection focuses on ongoing actions that protect students, teachers, staff, visitors, networks, and property from a threat or hazard.
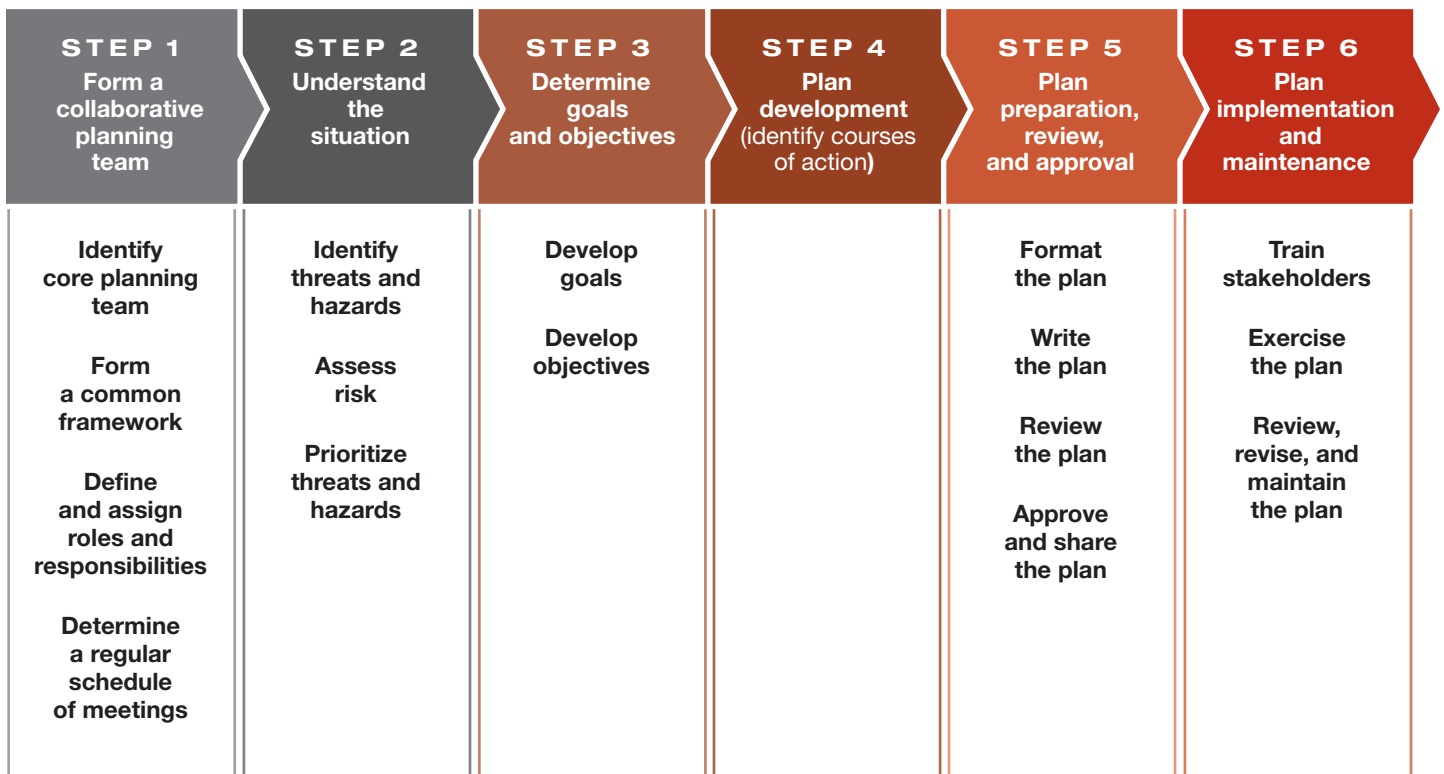
■ **Mitigation** means the capabilities necessary to eliminate or reduce the loss of life and property damage by lessening the impact of an event or emergency. In this document, mitigation also means reducing the likelihood that threats and hazards will happen.

■ **Response** means the capabilities necessary to stabilize an emergency once it has already happened or is certain to happen in an unpreventable way, to establish a safe and secure environment, to save lives and property, and to facilitate the transition to recovery.

■ **Recovery** means the capabilities necessary to assist schools affected by an event or emergency in restoring the learning environment.

The guidelines emphasize that successful planning requires that all stakeholders be part of the process from the beginning, including first responders, community partners, parents, students, staff, and those who represent the interests of persons with disabilities and others with access and functional needs. Support and collaboration is essential from school administrations, mental health professionals, district and school personnel, fire personnel, law enforcement, school security, and the local emergency management agency or office of preparedness.

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7. *High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (see note 1).

Figure 1. Steps in the emergency operations planning process

STEP 1 Form a collaborative planning team	STEP 2 Understand the situation	STEP 3 Determine goals and objectives	STEP 4 Plan development (identify courses of action)	STEP 5 Plan preparation, review, and approval	STEP 6 Plan implementation and maintenance
Identify core planning team Form a common framework Define and assign roles and responsibilities Determine a regular schedule of meetings	Identify threats and hazards Assess risk Prioritize threats and hazards	Develop goals Develop objectives		Format the plan Write the plan Review the plan Approve and share the plan	Train stakeholders Exercise the plan Review, revise, and maintain the plan

Source: Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans *(Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2013), 5.*

A vital part of the response phase and beginning of a supportive recovery phase is the development of a formalized, controlled student-parent reunification process.

Student-parent reunification

A vital part of the response phase and of beginning a supportive recovery phase is developing a formalized, controlled student-parent reunification process. The federal guidelines[8] suggest that emergency operation plans include pre-identified points of contact to work with and support family members during the incident as well as over the long term. Every person responds to traumatic events differently; therefore, resources should be made available to help families recognize and seek help after the incident. In cases where a family has lost a child, it is critical that the family members receive the support they need in their personal recovery.

A predetermined, practiced reunification method ensures the reunification process will not further complicate what is probably already a chaotic, anxiety-filled scene. In fact, putting an orderly reunification plan into action will help defuse the emotion building at the site. Once developed, reunification plans should be disseminated by the school via web pages, e-mail blasts, letters, and meetings. The plan should outline the school's parental notification methods (automated alert system, calling trees, media outreach, etc.) and cover releasing students to their parents or guardians. The planning team should consider the following when developing its goals, objectives, and courses of action:[9]

- How to inform families and guardians about the reunification process in advance, and how to clearly describe their roles and responsibilities in reunification

- How to verify that an adult is authorized to take custody of a student

- How to facilitate communication between the parent check-in and the student assembly and reunion areas

- How to ensure students do not leave on their own

- How to protect the privacy of students and parents from the media

- How to reduce confusion during the reunification process

- How frequently families will be updated

- How to account for technology barriers faced by students, staff, parents, and guardians

- How to effectively address language access barriers faced by students, staff, parents, and guardians

When reunification is not possible because a child is missing, injured, or killed, how and when this information is provided to families is critical. Before an emergency, the planning team must determine how, when, and by whom loved ones will be informed if their loved one is missing or has been injured or killed. While law enforcement and medical examiner procedures must be followed, families should receive accurate information as soon as possible. Having trained personnel on hand or immediately available to talk to loved ones about death and injury can ensure that parents and loved ones receive accurate and timely information in a compassionate manner.

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8. *High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (see note 1).

9. Ibid.

The Standard Reunification Method

The core concept of the Standard Reunification Method[10] rests on accountability achieved through a process based on managing the physical location of students, staff, and incoming parents. By having district and school personnel build a well-designed draft plan, it becomes easier to engage the first responders and other key participants in the planning process. In addition, performing a successful reunification is highly more likely when rigorous practice and drills are conducted in advance of an incident. Tabletop exercises and live drills should be scheduled and performed. The process also uses perforated cards (see figure 2), which parents or guardians complete at the reunification site. The cards are separated at the perforation, and a runner retrieves the child.

Figure 2. Reunification information cards

Reunification Information (PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY)
Have photo identification out and ready to show school district personnel.

Student Name ....

Student Grade .... Student Cell Phone Number...

Name of person picking up student ....

Signature ....

Phone number of person picking up student ....

Relationship to student being picked up ....
Photo identification matches name of person picking up student? Y or N

Print Student Name Again ....

Student Grade ....

Student Birthday ....

School personnel completes upon release of student

TIME INITIALS OTHER

Reunification
First, we want to thank you for your patience during this reunification. We share the same goal during this process: Getting you and your student back together as quickly as possible. The reason we're going through this is that an event has occurred at the school that mandates we personally reunite you with your child.

Instructions
1. Please complete the information on the other side of this card.
2. Prepare identification (If you don't have ID with you, please move to the side of the line, it may take a little longer to verify your identity.)
3. Select the check-in line based on either student last name or student grade.
4. After check-in, staff will split this card and a runner will be sent to recover your student. Please step over to the Reunification Location.
5. If there has been injury or other concerns, you may be asked to meet a counselor.
6. Please don't shout at school or district staff. We'll get through this as quickly as possible.

Parent Guardian Sign Off
I have read and understand these instructions.

Print Your Name ....Date ....

Signature ....

Source: Standard Reunification Method: A Practical Method to Unite Students with Parents after an Evacuation or Crisis *(Bailey, CO: The "I Love U Guys" Foundation, 2011), 14.*

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10. The methods detailed in *Standard Reunification Method* (see note 3) are based on the practices developed at the Adams 12, Five Star School District, Thornton, CO, by Pat Hamilton, executive director of operations, and also at Jefferson County School District, Golden, CO, by John McDonald, executive director of security and emergency planning.

The reunification process includes the following seven steps:

1. Establish a parent check-in location.

2. Deliver the students to the student staging area, beyond the field of vision of parents/guardians. "Greeters" direct parents/guardians to the parent check-in location and help them understand the process.

3. Parents/guardians complete the reunification cards.

4. Procedure allows parents/guardians to self-sort during check in, streamlining the process.

5. Runner recovers student from the student staging area.

6. Controlled lines of sight enable communication and other issues to be handled with diminished drama or anxiety.

7. Medical or investigative contingencies are anticipated.

When it's all said and done, successful reunification is based on pre-planning and integration of first responder personnel. However, as with any school safety plan, the concept of plan evolution is ever-present. Events may occur or lessons may be learned that impact these roles or procedures. Emergency planners should also remain vigilant and familiarize themselves with emerging trends regarding school safety and crisis response management in particular.

Go-kits

A "go-kit" is a self-contained, portable stockpile of emergency supplies. Some schools may choose to create two types of go-kits: one for administrators and one for classrooms. Administrative go-kit supplies may include utility turn-off procedures, a calling tree, a whistle, the parent-student reunification plan, caution tape, and a first-aid kit. Classroom go-kits may include a student attendance roster, a first-aid kit, age-appropriate student activities, and a vest or hat for teacher identification.

Go-kits are often stored in backpacks or duffel bags and placed in readily accessible and secure locations. A school's crisis response team should select supplies that address the needs of the school, as well as its population, climate, facilities, and resources. Because emergency supplies are critical to a smooth response, a school's emergency management plan should reference both the supplies needed and the staff members responsible for stocking and replenishing items.[11]

Different from school evacuation go-kits, "reunification go-kits" contain items specific to the reunification process (see table 1 on page 7). Likewise, some districts that use electronic parent verification tend to include electronic rosters, laptops, and Internet hot spots in their reunification go-kits.[12]

Because district personnel often manage reunification, the *Standard Reunification Method* said these kits aren't necessary at each school:

Rather, these kits can stay with district response teams. Larger districts may have several kits, one at the district office [and] others in the trunks or backs of vehicles used by district responders. Smaller districts may have only two kits. One at the district office. One with the primary district responder. (Two is a suggested minimum: redundancy is important.) Inventories and locations should be audited once a quarter.[13]

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11. Examples of go-kit checklists can be found at the DHS website, http://www.ready.gov/build-a-kit.

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12. *Standard Reunification Method* (see note 3).

13. Ibid.

Table 1. Example of a reunification go-kit checklist

Item	Count	Date	Date	Date	Date
Inventory sheet	1				
Pop-up tent	1				
Parent check-in banner	1				
Bungee cords	12				
Folding table (6 foot)	1				
Folding chairs	4				
24-count boxes of pens	2				
English reunification cards	2,500				
Spanish (or another language) reunification cards	500				
Directional signs	12				
Bull horn	1				
Extra bull horn batteries	1				
Flashlights	4				
Extra flashlight batteries	12				
Safety vests	24				
Set of laminated alphabet sheets (A–Z)	2				
Set of laminated grade sheets (K–12)	2				
Numbered plastic bins with lids	8				
Duct/gaffers tape	2				
Caution tape	1				
Emergency contact hardcopy	1				
Suntan lotion	10				

Source: Standard Reunification Method *(see note 3).*

Conclusion

It may be best to look at reunification planning as a process, not a switch. There will be a point where the planning results in documents that outline procedures. The *Standard Reunification Method* includes sample district and school plans,[14] but they are just templates.

Site-specific considerations have to be included in the planning. It may be the 80/20 rule in action: the template accommodates about 80 percent of the plan, but the remaining 20 percent has to be customized. The sample plans are straightforward and can be easily customized for any school or district.

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14. The templates for these plans are included in *Standard Reunification Method* (see note 3), which is available at http://iloveuguys.org/srm/Standard %20Reunification%20Method.pdf.

Additional Resources

Active Shooter and Mass Casualty Incidents, Critical Incident Response Group
http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/ cirg/active-shooter-and-mass-casualty-incidents

Caring for Children in a Disaster
http://emergency.cdc.gov/ children/

Coping with a Disaster or Traumatic Event
http://emergency.cdc.gov/ mentalhealth/

Crime Solutions.gov
http://www.crimesolutions.gov/

Emergency Medical Services for Children National Resource Center
http://emscnrc.org/

Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence, 2nd ed.
http://www.theiacp.org/portals/0/ pdfs/schoolviolence2.pdf

The "I Love U Guys" Foundation
http://iloveuguys.org

National Emergency Medical Services for Children Data Analysis Resource Center
http://www.nedarc.org/

National Preparedness Directorate, National Training and Education
http://training.fema.gov/

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center
http://rems.ed.gov/

Ready
http://www.ready.gov/

Safe2Tell
http://safe2tell.org/

Supporting Safe Schools
http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/Default. asp?Item=2687