

**School Safety Planning: Barriers to Implementation Perceived by District
Leadership and First Responders¹**

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¹Paper presented at the 43rd annual meeting of the Northeastern Educational Research Association, October 19, 2012, Rocky Hill, CT.

Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of district and first responder leadership ($N = 6$) with respect to school crisis preparedness. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a stratified purposeful sampling of school, police, and fire/rescue personnel who were primarily responsible for the planning, training, and implementation of district safety policies. Overarching themes were: desire for coherence among procedures with guidance from the state level; and, ambiguity of roles and responsibilities in the event of a crisis. Participants believed the onus to foster inter-agency partnerships was the responsibility of either the state, or the partnering agencies. In addition, while the importance of school safety was seen as a priority, gaps in communication and collaboration were noted both within and among organizations.

Introduction

On April 10, 1999, two students entered their high school; and, through the use of semiautomatic weapons and explosive devices, they killed 14 students and a teacher. An additional 160 people were injured. This tragedy occurred at Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado. The school did not have an emergency management plan in place when this assault occurred (Erickson, 2001). Furthermore, the required multi-agency response to this tragedy consisting of law enforcement, fire, and rescue personnel had never before been managed (Mell & Sztajnkrzyer, 2005). During the incident, not all responders were able to access the communication frequency in use; a firefighter was mistaken for one of the assailants and almost shot by a police sniper; and, while the assailants committed suicide at approximately 12:00 p.m., paramedics did not reach a

critically injured teacher in the school library until 3:45pm. He ultimately died from his wounds. The Columbine Review Commission Report, through debriefing the events that occurred on that day, recommended each school in the state of Colorado schedule yearly crisis drills in coordination with multi-agency first responder personnel (Erickson, 2001).

Eight years after the traumatic events of Columbine, the 2007 United States General Accounting Office (GAO) report on school emergency management indicated an estimated 73% of all districts conducted some type of school drill to prepare for emergency situations; however, 75% of those districts indicated they do not regularly train (i.e. at least once a year), and 27% have never trained, with any first responders to implement their plans in accordance with federally recommended practices (GAO, 2007). These alarming statistics are evidence that further investigation into the coordination efforts between schools and first responders in the planning and implementation of school emergency management plans is imperative.

This study explored the perceptions of district and first responder leadership with respect to the development, review, and implementation of collaborative crisis preparedness and training activities, as well as perceived barriers to this affect.

Review of the Literature

Cornell and Mayer (2010) stated “an essential first step in any effort to study a problem is to develop means of gathering information and measuring it” (p. 10). National research in the area of school safety, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010*, report survey data among students, teachers, and principals in regards to; incidents of injury, bullying, weapons, gangs, drug and alcohol use, disciplinary and security measures (Robers et al., 2010). While the report conceptualizes safety as either a negative correlation to violence; or synonymous with security measures, absent is a specific definition to the term *safety*. Furthermore, when exploring the construct of *school violence*, Mayer and Furlong (2010) note the lack of consensus about a conceptual definition.

Having neither a quantitative referent base of a broader array of student behaviors associated with school violence nor definitive means of quantifying unacceptable, marginal, and acceptable behaviors at school, highly variable interpretations of the seriousness of school violence incidents are possible. Mayer & Furlong, 2010, p. 16.

Research in the field of school safety notes the paucity in empirically testable contextually sound frameworks with regards to aggression and violence (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005).

While frequency of violent incidents is presented in statistical format (Robers et al., 2010), absent are data with regards to perceptions of what constitutes a relative degree of safety; or how these behaviors are considered relative to prosocial behaviors which occur much more commonly in schools (Mayer & Furlong, 2010). In an empirical analysis of

school fatality, violence, and crime data between 1992 and 2000, Verdugo and Schneider (2005) state “there is no denying that schools are safe” (p. 98). Furthermore, Modzeleski, Feucht, Rand et al. (2008), in reviewing the same data sets, concluded that schools are among the safest places in America. While there was approximately one homicide or suicide of a student at school per 2.5 million students during the 2008-09 school year (Robers et al., 2010), the public could perceive schools as unsafe based on media reports of these incidents (Mayer & Furlong, 2010).

Conceptualizing School Violence and Safety

When the concept of *harm* is considered relative to school safety, statistical data show there to be a serious public health risk (Mayer & Furlong, 2010). In the 2007-08 school year, 85% of public schools reported at least one violent crime at school contributing to 1.5 million student victims of nonfatal crimes, including 26 violent crimes per 1000 students; compared to 20 violent crimes per 1000 students away from school. Furthermore, 25% of schools reported student bullying occurred on a daily or weekly basis; and while the rate of crime for students away from school declined between 1992 and 2007, no measurable difference was found in schools between 2004 and 2007 (Robers et al, 2010). “When examining these findings in total, how is it possible to conclude whether schools are becoming more or less safe over time or how safety indicators compare with some broadly accepted tolerance level?” (Mayer & Furlong, 2010, p. 17). Astor et al. (2010) indicated school violence and safety theory should focus on the school context as it is “the milieu where the complex social dynamics of school perpetration and victimization occur” (p. 69).

Lack of a Unifying Framework

The school domain is a complex organization which by its nature, brings together several interacting groups (i.e.: students, teachers, support staff, administrators), each having unique perspectives (Astor et al., 2010; Zantal-Wiener & Horwood, 2010). In studying the perceptions among these groups with regards to school violence, Benbenishty and Astor (2005) found discrepancy rates among them were greatest in schools that had higher rates of victimization. Furthermore, Astor et al. (2010) indicated the need for theoretical paradigms to outline how safety issues intermingle with internal social patterns through the linkages between school safety and reform literature.

At present, the field of school violence and safety, similar to other areas of social-behavioral research, lacks a unifying framework. Studies are often focused within type-specific discipline domains (e.g., education, criminology, public health) that are not often interconnected, which may contribute to the research-to-practice gap (Mayer & Furlong, 2010). Furthermore, Mayer and Furlong (2010) note a lack consensus with regards to; standards for assessment of problematic behaviors, and the degree of harm related to victimization or crisis events.

Developing theoretical coherence is of utmost importance for the systemic development of meaning that informs future research, practice, and planning in the area of school violence and safety (Zantal-Wiener & Horwood, 2010). The lack of consensus to what constitutes as school safety indicates the need for contextually sound research to better understand the basic dynamics surrounding the phenomena of school violence (Astor et al, 2010; Mayer & Furlong, 2010). In order to provide a clear empirical picture of how all forms of school violence co-occur on school campuses, Astor et al. (2010)

indicated the need for conceptual unification of research agendas that currently focus exclusively on separate types of violent outcomes which could further serve as the basis for a stronger theory of school safety.

Defining School Crisis

In literature regarding school safety, the context of *crisis* has been described interchangeably with various words and phrases including: *emergency, disaster, serious incident, critical incident, violent incident, and crisis situation or event* (Brock, Sanoval, & Lewis, 2001; Heath, Ryan, Dean, & Bingham, 2007; MacNeil & Topping, 2007; Nickerson & Zhe, 2004). According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2005), the word crisis means: a) an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending, especially one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome; b) a situation that has reached a critical phase. While crisis terminology varies according to setting and profession (Heath, et al., 2007); Brock, Sandoval and Lewis (2001) define crisis events that occur in schools as having “an emergency quality to them and have the potential to impact an entire school community” (p. 14). Rosenthal et al. (2001) state them as “a period of upheaval and collective stress that disrupts the known reality in unexpected, often inconceivable ways” (p. 6). Specifically, Neiman, Devoe, and Chandler (2009) list the following threats of, or incidents, as *crisis situations*: shooting, natural disaster (e.g., earthquake or tornadoes), hostage, bomb, chemical, biological, or radiological events, suicide, U.S. national threat level is changed to Red (Severe Risk of Terrorist Attack), and pandemic flu. In *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* (2003), the US Department of Education (USDOE) states that “in essence, a crisis is a situation where schools could be

faced with inadequate information, not enough time, and insufficient resources, but in which leaders must make one or many crucial decisions” (p.5).

On the state level, the Rhode Island School Safety Steering Committee’s (RISSSC) definition of a crisis in its guidebook *School Emergency Planning: Preparedness, Response, and Recovery* (2008) cites *crisis* as “a state in which coping skills are overwhelmed, leaving the individual feeling out of control, helpless and anxious” (RISSSC, 2008, p. 121). Notable is that guidebook uses similar terminology to define *emergency*: “a sudden, generally unanticipated event that has the potential to profoundly and negatively impact a significant segment of the school population” (p. 1). This is further evidence that the field of school safety and crisis research needs to develop consensus for a conceptual framework regarding the definition of domains from which data are collected (Jimerson, Brock, & Pletcher, 2005; Mayer & Furlong, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

In order to better understand crisis preparedness at the school level it is necessary to investigate the influence of the theoretically grounded models within the area of public relations in regards to crisis communication research (Christensen & Kohls, 2003; Collins, 2007; Drabek & McEnrire, 2003; Fowler, Kling, & Larson, 2007; McEntire, Fuller, Johnston, & Webber, 2002; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Wang, 2008). The framework of which can be viewed as a process of: identification and preparedness towards crisis events; response procedures designed to mitigate detrimental actions; and recovery actions which repair the institution, and its image (Fink, 1986; Hale, Dulek, & Hale, 2005; Pearson & Clair 1998; Ritchie & MacDonald, 2010; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001).

Preparedness Communication

In the late 1980's, management research began to shift its view of crisis from an event to be avoided to that of a "natural phase of an organization's development" (Seeger et al., 2001, p. 156). Through proactive planning and the proper use of communication, organizations could mitigate, and even view crisis events as an opportunity for growth as the incident progresses through the natural development of its stages: incubation, acute action, and postmortem (Burnett, 1998; Marra, 1998; Penrose, 2000; Wang, 2008).

Through use of environmental scanning, an institution becomes aware of both internal and external environments as well as develops an understanding of attitudes and perceptions of individuals toward the organization while developing an open exchange of information (Brickman, Jones, & Groom, 2004; Hale et al., 2005; Seeger et al., 2001).

"Such interaction allows an institution to recognize possible threats before they mature, diffusing an event similar to Columbine by identifying trigger events – which may include bullying and harassment – before the crisis erupts" (Collins, 2007, p. 50).

According to Seeger, "inadequate pre-crisis communication increases the probability that a crisis event will be surprising, that precautions will be inadequate, and that serious harm will occur" to the organization (p. 158).

Phases of Crisis Preparedness

The most important tenet of crisis communication occurs in the preparation phase, in which the organization identifies and addresses potential incidents, and develops basic structural plans. Seeger et al. (2001) identified distinct components of this phase; the first of which is development of a crisis management team, coordinated through the utilization of both internal and external emergency response expertise. Imperative is that these

members meet regularly to not only evaluate plans based on recently identified potential crisis; but also to develop rapport, alleviating unfamiliarity when an incident occurs.

Penrose (2000) noted the success of a response is contingent upon member preparation and utilizing a team-based approach.

Secondary in preparation is the development of procedures, checklists, and guides to mitigate harm which include prepackaged communication responses for availability to external publics and the press. These documents decrease an organizations uncertainty, and aid in the prompt release of information to media outlets (Arpan, 2002; Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Horsley & Barker, 2002; Seeger et al., 2001; Venette, Sellnow, & Land, 2003). Tertiary, and the most often overlooked (Collins, 2007), is crisis management plan maintenance. “While failure of an organization to withstand a crisis often transpires due to the sheer lack of an active crisis management plan, more often than not a deteriorated plan reflects the actual culprit of poor response” (p. 52). When a company progresses without facing emergency incidents, their crisis plans become obsolete, this may present more of a liability than no plan at all as it indicates a false sense of security in the midst of a crisis situation (Collins, 2007). Seeger et al. (2001) indicated effective public relations and crisis management requires organizations remain vigilant in their search for potential threats: creation of contingencies to mitigate; as well as the revision, assessment, and practicing of their plans. Collins (2007) further noted that an organizations ability to create valuable and comprehensive contingency scenarios is dependent on the efforts made during the vulnerability audit process.

At the core of the second, response phase of the cycle is incident mitigation; which requires strategic action, allowing for a quick resolution to the conflict, and segmenting

the population in order to identify those requiring the greatest amount of attention and resources (Burnett, 1998; Collins, 2007). Burnett (1998) asserted the importance of viewing this phase as a learning opportunity through review and debriefing of actions taken which proceeds into the recovery phase.

The recovery, or postmortem stage, requires communication from the organization to its members as to the review of the plan's application, and best practices in the event of a similar crisis event. Implementation this stage is dependent upon the both the flexibility of the organization's culture, and the support of all affected as to the utilization of the preventatives (Collins, 2007; Wang, 2008). In further exploring the fulfillment of crisis plans, Collins (2007) noted perceptions of success affect mitigating events with the potential to do irreparable damage to the organization.

Case Study in Policy Implementation

Brock (2000) stated that while developing school crisis policies indicate a district's intention to address safety, identification and addressing the barriers to implementation are critical components which must be explored. Through a case study of California's Lodi Unified School District (LUSD) in which Brock was a participant observer, he noted the policy development process as *bottom-up*; beginning with school psychologists, which then enlisted principal, superintendent, and Governing Board support (Brock, 2000). As principals would bear primary responsibility for implementation at the school level, their attitudes towards resisting the change initiative were identified. The impact of recent district changes; specifically a year round school calendar, a newly hired and progressive superintendent, and a sudden rapid growth in student population created a culture of cynicism towards additional change efforts. These factors were compounded

by resistance specific to crisis planning which Brock indicated as: 1) the tendency to avoid thinking about, and preparing for, the unpleasant reality of a potentially traumatic event; 2) the life-altering impact of a crisis “thus, for a District already reeling from numerous change efforts, the concept of preparing for a crisis would be doubly hard” (p. 3). Any resistance to policy development was “completely destroyed” when a shooting incident in a neighboring elementary school district resulted in the deaths of five children, and the wounding of an additional 30 (p. 5).

Implementation of the adopted policy was supported through an in-service staff development model for training of trainers, thereby building capacity of basic crisis intervention knowledge among the schools within the district. Brock notes that most participants were support staff; and while principals were encouraged to attend, competing priorities of managing the daily functions of their schools made it impractical.

In evaluating the most significant barriers to policy implementation Brock (2000) cites: 1) conflicting perceptions about policy requirement, and 2) difficulty of schools to take primary responsibility for their crisis interventions due to a lack of engagement in all essential components of the policy, and a reliance on individuals perceived to be crisis experts (i.e., the researcher). “In all likelihood, both of these implementation problems were a function of the fact that the school principals and key district-level administrators had not participated in the training for trainers in-service”, resulting in varying degrees of crisis response preparedness among schools in the district (p. 10).

Heinen, Webb-Dempsey, Moore, McClellan et al. (2006) conducted a case study to evaluate the perceptions of the administrators and staff in regards to the effectiveness of the School Action for Emergencies (SAFE) project at Byrd High School in West

Virginia. The goal of SAFE was to develop a partnership between the Board of Education and county first responders for their coordinated reaction to a crisis through the use of school surveillance cameras which displayed real-time video images to principals, district officials and emergency responders via laptops and handheld computers. Using pre-post surveys, Heinen et al. (2006) explored the domains of: a) safety perceptions; b) policy issues; c) protocol issues. The data show statistically significant gains in all three domains ($p < .05$) post project implementation. One-to-one, and focus group interviews revealed the enhanced surveillance, focus on safety policy, and increased collaboration with first responders were well received by both staff and administration. In regards to the affects of SAFE, the implementation of the new technology proved ancillary to: school autonomy in adopting district crisis policy; trust among district, building administrators, and teachers; as well as clear understand of crisis policy among building staff members (Heinen, 2006). “Although atypical for most bureaucratic arrangements, considerable discretion was available to district officials, building administrators, and teachers, likely because district officials recognized the need for collaboration at the beginning stages of the project” (p. 216).

Summary

The school domain is a complex organization which by its nature, brings together several interacting groups (i.e.: students, teachers, support staff, administrators), each having unique perspectives (Zantal-Wiener & Horwood, 2010). In studying the perceptions among these groups with regards to school violence, Benbenishty and Astor (2005) found discrepancy rates among them were greatest in schools that had higher rates of victimization. Furthermore, Astor et al. (2010) indicated the need for theoretical

paradigms to outline how safety issues intermingle with internal social patterns through the linkages between school safety and reform literature.

Understanding the affect of organizational culture is critical as “a crisis management plan is ... of limited use if it does not coincide with an organization’s philosophies, values, attitudes, assumptions, and norms” (Penrose, 2000, p. 160). Decentralization, with greater levels of autonomy at lower organizational levels, was found to contribute to the success of a crisis plan’s implementation (Fowler, Kling, & Larson, 2007; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001). As noted by Argenti (2002), “employees will know what to do in a crisis only if they have been absorbing the company’s guiding principles all along” (p. 108).

A majority of public schools have developed plans with regards to crisis preparedness; however, the implementation of drills around these plans is inconsistent across school, districts, and states (Graham, Shirm, Liggin, Aitken, & Dick, 2006). A major finding in the U.S. General Accounting Office report, *Emergency management: Most school districts have developed management plans, but would benefit from additional federal guidance* (2007) was that without collaboration and training, school districts and their first responder partners may be at risk of not responding effectively during a school emergency. It was recommended that the Secretaries of the Department of Education (DOE) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) “identify the factors preventing school districts, first responders and community partners from training together; and develop strategies for addressing these factors” (p. 48).

While the literature regarding best practice in school safety recommends conducting a variety of drills in conjunction with first responders, there is paucity in the research that

examines the perceptions of the personnel responsible for the planning and implementation of these types of collaborative efforts (Allen, Cornell, Lorek, & Sheras, 2008; Graham et al., 2006; Kano & Bourque, 2007; United States Accounting Office, 2007).

Methodology

This qualitative study, which utilized a grounded theory approach, explored the perceptions of crisis preparedness among school administrators and first responder personnel by investigating the following research question:

What are the perspectives of district leadership and first responder personnel with respect to the implementation of crisis preparedness training?

Recruitment

Data were collected utilizing purposefully selected participants interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Gall et al. (2007) noted “it is clear that purposeful sampling is not designed to achieve population validity. The intent is to achieve an in-depth understanding of selected individuals, not to select a sample that will represent accurately a defined population” (p. 178). The criteria for selection were individuals responsible for crisis preparedness within school districts representative of central office administrators, police, and fire/rescue personnel (Creswell, 2009; Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002).

Instrumentation

The interview questions (Appendix A) were developed based on support from the literature on crisis preparedness (Graham et al., 2006; Kano et al., 2007; Kano &

Bourque, 2007, Kano & Bourque 2008), and the judgments of three content experts in the area of school safety; one Rhode Island district-level administrator, one person from the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE); and one Rhode Island Chief of Police. In addition, the interview guide was pilot tested with two Rhode Island district-level administrators who were responsible for school crisis planning and implementation during the 2009-10 school year. Interviewees then examined the interview guide's introduction, questions, and probes for; clarity, redundancy, content, and completion time. Revisions to the interview guide were accomplished based on the data analysis and suggestions of the interviewees from the pilot administration (Gall et al, 2007; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Data Collection

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews between October and December of 2010 to collect qualitative data through a purposeful sample of key informants which included district level administrators and first responder personnel (Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Interviews consisted of seven central questions with content specific probes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) across the following school crisis preparedness themes: knowledge of, and experience with; emergency drills, safety planning, inter-agency collaboration benefits and barriers. The purpose of the interviews was to explore perceptions of school district preparedness with respect to the development, review, and implementation of collaborative crisis preparedness and training activities, as well as perceived barriers to this affect.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a stratified purposeful sampling (across urbanicities) of school district, police, and fire/rescue personnel who were

primarily responsible for school crisis planning, training and implementation between October and December of 2010 (Gall et al., 2007; Patton 2002; Rubin & Rubin 2005). Interviews occurred at locations and times convenient to the interviewee with his/her consent. Additional consent was obtained from the participants for the use of a tape recorder for data collection). Each interview session lasted approximately one hour, and consisted of seven central questions with content specific probes across the following school crisis preparedness themes: knowledge of, and experience with; emergency drills, safety planning, inter-agency collaboration benefits, and barriers.

Credibility was established via member checking (Gall et al., 2007). Following the initial interviews, the researcher emailed the participants providing them with a summary of their responses to the questions presented in the interview guide. They were invited to critique and respond to researcher's summation of their responses. These emails were then followed by additional phone calls again thanking them for their participation, and providing them an additional opportunity to refine and revise their responses. (Krefting, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1995; Patton, 2002; Polit & Beck, 2008).

Data Analysis

Data analysis and interpretation of the personal interviews were conducted utilizing the framework developed by Creswell (2009) to describe the major phases of qualitative data analysis. First, field notes were typed up; and interviews were transcribed.

All data were initially arranged into three groups: district level leaders, fire, and police personnel. Data were reviewed to obtain a general sense of meaning, depth, tone, and credibility (Creswell, 2009). Next; data were reduced (Miles & Huberman, 1994), inductively coded, and cross-case analyzed according to themes and patterns that

emerged, and then utilized to develop a qualitative codebook (Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Findings from the analyses were conveyed using narrative passages, including quotations from participants, which represented the descriptions and themes obtained. Finally, interpretations of the data involved the researcher's personal interpretation based on his experiences as a public school principal; and "meaning derived from a comparison of the findings with information gleaned from the literature" (Creswell, 2009, p. 189).

Triangulation (Patton, 2002) was achieved through comparison of the data across perspectives of district, police and fire/rescue personnel, as well as through document review of written emergency management plans within each interviewee's school district. Peer debriefing of the open-ended responses and interview data was conducted with a Rhode Island school district level administrator with expertise in school crisis preparedness. Written summaries of the data, along with the researcher's categories and themes were reviewed for evidence of; researcher bias, possible errors of interpretation, and the identification of all potentially relevant themes (Polit & Beck, 2008).

Results

Semi-structured personal interviews with six key informants were used as a qualitative means to gain deeper insight into collaborative planning and training efforts between district leadership and first responder (e.g., police, fire/rescue personnel) partners. The researcher via email correspondence achieved participant feedback following these interviews. Each informant was provided with a summary of data collected from their interview session, including direct quotes. Additionally, written crisis plans and

procedures were obtained from the school districts associated with the participants and compared with interview data as a means of triangulation.

Once all interviews were transcribed and inductively coded, initial drafts of the researcher's interpretations and conclusions were peer reviewed with; two building principals; an additional district-level administrator; and, a member of Rhode Island Emergency Management (RIEMA). Through these discussions, additional codes and themes emerged from the data that were included in the study.

The following analysis was conveyed using narrative passages. It includes quotations from participants, when relevant, for thick descriptive purposes. As a means of maintain confidentiality, references to specific locations, people, and events were removed from direct quotes as represented by an "X". The narrative is organized according to themes that emerged regarding the participants' perceptions of emergency preparedness, and the barriers to collaborative training utilizing school crisis plans.

Experience within the Profession

Of the six respondents, all had served within their respective professions (e.g., police, fire, education) from 15 to 30 years. Notable for each, was that all years of experience were in the State of Rhode Island. Participants further stated they had been in their current leadership positions between two to nine years; and, had progressed through the ranks and levels within their current organizations. Involvement with school crisis preparedness did not start immediately upon employment for any of the interviewed respondents. While coordination of school safety and crisis response was now a specific component of their overall responsibilities, it was not noted as a primary role when asked to describe their job, and "walk through a typical day on the job".

One district administrator stated with regards to Q1:

The roles and responsibilities in the district are pretty big. It's very lean here with regards to administrative support. I do all the curriculum and instruction; organize the professional development; all the grants; also business management; and deal with a majority of the human resource issues. Even the principals have district level responsibilities.

Plan Development

An initial theme that arose through the interviews was the emphasis to develop school crisis plans initially after the shootings at Columbine High School in 1998; and then to further refine them after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. According to one administrator, "Even after Columbine, people were saying, 'It wouldn't happen here.' 9/11 was really the thing that spurred this. It made people say, 'Ok, it's show time' ". Another administrator echoed a similar response to the effect of 9/11:

I was on the crisis team when it first got started in 2000. That team had made a little bit of groundwork, but it hadn't been doing much. It was right after 9/11 that it had started a little bit. The State, or RIDE [Rhode Island Department of Education], had mandated that you had to have a crisis response team, and that's how it started.

Within district-level crisis planning teams, administrators indicated varying levels of collaboration with first responders in the development of the policies and procedures.

According to one district-level leader:

We completely revamped the evacuation process. We created a lockdown process.

We kinda brought all the organizations together, EMA, fire, police. They all became

part of the district committee. It wasn't just a school-based crisis response, it really was the town. All our first responder agencies were involved since the beginning... so I think that's key. Constantly communicating with them is crucial.

Contrarily, an administrator from one district initially stated that he was "asked by the Superintendent to attend them [workshops] and come back and put together a procedure for school evacuation, school lockdown, and to work with the police and fire personnel and other community agencies in the district to execute those plans". However, deeper into the interview, the respondent noted, "What I did was... X District had one... their high school. I took that, and then based on some of the information that I got from some of the workshops and conferences that I attended... that's really how it all came about."

Additionally, when a key first responder from that district was asked about the status of the district's crisis plan, he stated:

I have not been part of any committees on a school safety planning team in this city. The entire process needs to be looked at. The emergency plan that I have located in the police department is from 1999. I'm not sure if it has been updated since then. If it was, we weren't provided with one.

As interviews progressed, all respondents indicated the need to revisit the existing procedures at the district level; specific to types of policies and drills. Again, divergent responses were noted among district level administrators which indicated varying levels of participation within school organizations. One administrator noted:

There used to be a Safety Committee. I don't know how active it is now, but there was one... and this fell under that with our insurance company... the whole thing. I'm not sure where that stands, but I know that they're [principals] still doing the drills. But as far as... is that plan on a shelf somewhere... are people aware of the plan... are people aware of the Code Levels...

In another district with a similar population of students, the district level leader noted a markedly rigorous level of review:

During the planning process, we were having them once a month for about three years. Now, we review the crisis plan right about October. We have a crisis response meeting just to go over... 'Remember, these are our procedures... our plans.' 'How's everything going at your school?' We'll do another one when we come back from break in January. We'll have another two, in spring, and then late in the year. It's more of check-in now."

Additionally, this administrator noted additional collaboration with first responder partners, stating that either the Deputy or Chief of Police attends every meeting; and that were "deeply involved in the lockdown and fire drill process".

Building-Level Implementation

Crisis preparedness at the building level was a reoccurring theme within each interview. As policy and procedures were discussed, there were consistent references to onus on schools; as well as indicators that implementation barriers were evidenced with respect to: principals, teachers, and students. The development and communication of

district policy to building implementation was often described as “top-down”. Once the plans were “in the hands of the principal”, central administrators reported conflicting feedback within their interviews as to autonomy versus procedural adherence granted to schools.

In one case, the central administrator noted, “I worked with a couple of people... we put it [crisis plan] together and sent it to the schools, and the schools more or less adapted the plans that they all have.” Additionally, the question of grade level appropriateness was addressed as indicated by the following response:

Each school needs to decide, do we say ‘Code Red’? Do our students know what Code Red means? What do we tell them? Maybe at the Kindergarten level you don’t tell them anything. But at the high school level, maybe even elementary and middle, they need to know what that means. The entire staff needs to be aware and take an active role in terms of what are their responsibilities

There was an additional theme of liability that emerged from district-level administrators as a consideration when “making people aware of plans.” As indicated by one administrator,

In the event that someone gets hurt, and there’s liability, we can say this is our plan. Even though no matter how well we put this all down on paper... even though it isn’t going to be executed properly... at least in the event that something happened, we can say... ‘Listen, we did have a policy. We ran a number of drills. This is what we told our teachers, our students, our parents. We did the best we could.’ Someone obviously is going to get hurt, but at least we can show that we took as much into

consideration as we practically can. Just to cover as many bases as you possibly can, because litigation is alive and well in the United States.

When speaking of the alignment of evacuation procedures, another administrator explained, “The practice is K through 12. So the elementary were following the same exact process as the secondary schools.” However, further into the interview it was stated that: “The elementary school has come up with something really creative in addition to the ticket system, where they hold up a green or red card. So we know instantly just by looking that there’s a kid present but missing from class. So we have to find them somewhere else.”

One respondent noted frustration with a principal’s modification of district procedures during an actual incident which required the implementation of lockdown procedures:

One of the elementary schools had to go into a lockdown because a robbery was taking place at the bank across the street. And the principal had instruction continue, which is a huge [emphasis added] violation because the police hadn’t apprehended the person who was armed and had took off on foot. There’s no such thing as a “perimeter lockdown” [sarcasm noted]. Lockdown is lockdown... and that’s that.

Additionally, district leaders noted that teachers were resistant to new policies, or changes to existing practices. As one administrator stated, “You would be amazed the amount of push-back you got when you’re changing the evacuation routes that have been in existence for 20 years.” Denial on the part of some teachers, that a crisis would occur in their school, was cited frequently. “You always get two to five (teachers) that say:

‘It’s not going to happen’ or; ‘Why are we doing this?’... the typical response. That would be the biggest barrier... more than the agency stuff.” In another district, when discussing the implementation of new crisis policies with faculty, an administrator detailed teacher resistance to the ‘top-down approach’ during a faculty meeting:

Some teachers thought that the process was hoakie. It’s the only word I can use for it. When I would create something new and bring it to a staff meeting and describe all the processes that we’ve put in place, you’d hear comments like, ‘Oooh... Stop, drop, and roll.’ Silly stuff like that... and them not really taking it seriously.

This lack of cooperation reached a degree of insubordination in one case where:

It took forever to make teachers understand that they couldn’t tape things to their windows. First responders need to have a clear view into your classroom. I went to a second level grievance with the Union president because he refused to take maps off his window. So I took the maps off his window... and that was that... because you’re violating state law.

Overall, administrators noted that overall policy implementation took time. “It took about five years until whatever the committee said, we did... and that’s that... they just did it. But it took about three to five years to make people think differently.”

With regards to students, concerns were more focused on their use of phones to communicate with people outside the school during a crisis event, which could potentially have a negative impact on response.

One of the biggest things you're going to see as a barrier when bad things happen is technology...kids using it. I don't know how you can control that. I don't think you can. If something tragic happens, as a school, and as a school crisis team, you better be thinking of ways to mitigate that because that's going to start flying around. I don't know what the answer to that is... I don't know what the answer to that is. But it's definitely a consideration... I don't know.

As a means to overcome implementation barriers, district leaders perceived that first responders, specifically police, could assist with these efforts, stating that; "They could be a little more present so there is a reality to it. So the kids understand. Having them there gives the edge that this is real." However, when asked if schools conduct evacuation drills with the local fire department, one administrator responded, "We just turn the override key and do it. That's a good idea though."

First responders also noted that their presence would be beneficial to the drill process. One police official stated, "We could observe and comment on the procedure and assist in the observing of the kids' and teachers' reactions to the drill." A Deputy Fire Chief also indicated, "It only takes us a minute to come to the school if we aren't busy. All we need is for them [school personnel] to call us." Additionally, first responders reported that collaboration during drills would be of benefit to the training of their own agencies. "There's been a lot of turnover in the [fire] department these past couple of years. We just hired four probies this past week. We need to get the new guys involved, and stay involved."

Although police first responders similarly noted similar benefits, and both stated they were willing to do so, neither agency member indicated that they had ever participated in this type of “live” drill while students were present in the building in over five years.

Interagency Communication: Benefits and Barriers

The need for continuous communication between school districts and first responders to mitigate the affect change was indicated by all participants. Each agency noted the turnover in personnel within all levels of their organizations. One administrator noted:

Having the members of the district and the first responders go over the plans and determine what needs to be changed... that has to be updated on a constant basis. Because there are so many things that change... you have new teachers coming in. You have new administrators coming in. They may not all be on board. They may not be aware of what the process is. The same goes for police and fire. They have new people coming on board.

Additionally, both first responders and district leaders expressed concern that modification of plans without notifying all partners could have negative repercussions if the plan were to be implemented. Reflecting on current procedures for school evacuation, a district-level leader stated, “I don’t think all first responders know where all the students from X school are to evacuate to.” He further described the need for community agencies to “be on board”.

We have them in our plans as evacuation sites. How we used to do it before was with a phone call. But I really don’t think that’s sufficient. If we were to evacuate one of our schools to one of these places, and you don’t know who to call to open the

building, those kids are going to be out in the cold for a long time. I think that's why it needs to be revisited often. School X was supposed to evacuate to the VFW hall, but that's closed now. So I don't know if they have a place to go. I say these things should be done at least twice a year. People change. It has to be ongoing... it has to be ongoing.

Although the collaboration efforts were seen as instrumental in keeping plans updated, and stakeholders "in the loop", the ways in which individuals perceived collaboration differed. Participants who referred to multi-agency group meetings as "us" and "them" had negative perceptions of the interactions and overall outcomes. As one administrator noted:

There was one time when we invited the School Resource Officers to our safety planning committee. They had no idea as to what the protocol we had for teachers regarding a lockdown. They were saying we should lower the curtains on the windows... and we were told to keep them up.

First responders indicated the benefit of meetings to clarify the roles and expectations of all individuals under certain events. In some circumstances, first responders were only familiar with district level personnel. They noted that meeting with building principals and their staff would "put a face to a name". In one case, a Fire Chief stated that the working relationship between stakeholders could be improved through the use of "table-top drills with different agency reps... how to handle things... best practice... get to know each other."

The most frequently discussed barrier to communication was the logistics of scheduling meetings. All respondents referenced that their organization members, and those of their partners, were busy. When discussing the review of the district's plans, one administrator stated:

The State Police tend to be pretty busy people. But they were really great to come up here and kinda audit all our safety procedures. They looked at the lockdowns and said, 'Yeah that's a good plan.' They also helped with our selecting cameras for the schools, and where to place them.

Additionally, district leaders noted the need to emphasize the presence of their own staff members. "A lot of the times we'll have the meetings at the middle and the high schools. Come on... let's face it... that's where most of the action is. We get sparse attendance from our elementary principals. They're just busy." From a first responder perspective, a Fire Chief remarked, "There needs to be a push for more meetings. But it's tough getting busy people together."

Lack of District-to-Building Review

There were notable differences among district leaders with respect to the implementation of crisis plans at the building level. In one case, meetings were conducted with district-level personnel and principals on a quarterly basis. In another example, procedural reviews were in place in the past, but no longer conducted as evidenced by the following:

At one point principals had to notify me when the drills were being executed so that the other schools would be aware of what was happening. That basically was my involvement in terms of coordinating... just being aware of it... that they were taking place.

Lack of current review with district level leaders was further indicated when referencing current policies. "I think we did have at one time a sheet with different codes. Code Black, and what the teachers needed to do... Code Red, and so on. "Do staff know what those codes mean?" Things like that. I don't know if they are located in each classroom anymore." Additional probing questions further revealed that the administrator perceived the onus was on the building principals to further implement the crisis plans developed at the district level. "Schools need to get highly organized. The school principals have to constantly go over this with their staff. I think the different schools do it at different times, but I don't know if it's as frequent as they should." When asked about best practice in reviewing plans at the building-level, the administrator stated, "I think the plans should be reviewed quarterly. The more training people have, the more of this whole thing comes second nature. They know what their roles are."

The issue of leadership in crisis preparedness was additionally expressed by another district-level respondent:

The Superintendent recognizes that it's important, and he had someone that will do it. Some districts don't have someone that will do it. So unless you appoint someone, you're just going to rely on the building principal to get it done. Well... if the building principal isn't trained the right way... how do they know?

Crisis Preparedness Training

All first responders noted the theme of constant and mandatory training on crisis response for a variety of event, including those in school buildings. Educational leaders indicated different degrees of school preparedness professional development. For them, districts did not require attendance to these types of training. Additionally, some participants noted multi-agency development in school crisis planning. However, participants in those trainings stated that either their district, or first responder, partners were not present. In regards to these specific trainings, conducted by the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency (RIEMA), a district administrator stated:

EMA will run conferences every year... so you go to those. You start building up this repertoire of professional development and bring it back to your district. It's mostly School Resources Officers. Larger district will have school personnel there. A lot of the small district won't send people. But I go because I want to keep the training up, and because I've just always been interested in it.

A Police Chief had similar comments: "I have not been part of any committees on a school safety planning team in this city. I have been part of the school security initiative with the RIEMA." This respondent noted additional police training specific to schools:

Our agency has been training for the past two years on Active Shooter Response. It's been paid for through a grant that was awarded to the police department for this type of training through UASI [Urban Areas Security Initiative]. I know there was some money granted to the district to do planning with us too. I've seen the district

facilities manager at the meetings, so he may know about that end of it. I've seen principals from other school districts there in the past... but nobody from our school district.

When probed as to the aspect of the active shooter training, the officer indicated, "at some point we would want to conduct a simulated active shooter drill with kids and teachers, but we haven't had much luck getting that done on their end." In another district, an administrator "highly involved" in crisis preparedness stated: "During the summer the SWAT team practices school intruder drills in the schools. It's pretty intense. They use live fire rubber bullets. The kids aren't there. I go because I'm interested in it, but the principals aren't there. It's more for the police."

Procedural Coherence

The theme of a need for coherence was noted by all participants, specifically in regards to the development of crisis procedures. Conflicting instructions as to "best practice" was particularly mentioned in the implementation of internal security (e.g., lockdowns). Both first responders and district administrators perceived that guidance in this area should generate from either the State or the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). A Fire Chief stated that the "process for all the schools should be the same. They should be uniformed across the district. I do not recommend different processes for individual schools." Another first responder added: "I feel that the State should come up with a standard process for this drill. That way if a substitute teacher came from outside the area, the procedure would be the same as any other school they may have taught at before teaching at your school."

District-level leadership expressed similar thoughts with regards to the lockdown process. One administrator noted:

What I did find was that there was very little consistency within the State. The Department of Education was saying this... then another groups from Higher Education was saying something else. There needs to be greater consistency with what is a 'Code Red'. What is the teacher supposed to do? Blinds up or down? Lights on... or off? Do doors lock from the inside? What do you do if there is a lockdown and a kid is in the bathroom? What do you do? [frustration noted] We spoke about that. You might have to inform the students... and it needs to be consistent among the school... and the district. Do you tell the student to just stay there? Or find a closet? [sarcastic tone] What is their responsibility in that event?

Another administrator added that “the lockdown drill is something that has constantly changed with research. Shades up or shades down? The best research has told us to leave the shades up. That’s the best that they’ve told us as of right now.” Another respondent brought up additional questions:

What happens if someone from outside the building is visiting or providing a service during a lockdown? Do they just go back to their office or go home? Those have been concerns of mine for quite some time. Lunch aides, janitors, part-time staff... what is their responsibility when there is a lockdown or a full evacuation?

The lack of coherence was echoed by one administrator who noted frustration with a lack of teacher adherence to procedures; and complaints about the process.

With lockdowns, a lot of those things can be legal. There is no discussion about whether or not a teacher should be locking their door. A lot of teachers had issue with that. ‘Well my door doesn’t lock.’ ‘I need a special key.’ Well... yeah... you have to lock your doors. [emphasis added] It took about three years for teachers to understand that. Regardless of the time of day, your door should be locked. That way we can just shut the door, and you are in lockdown.

Parents and the Media

School district administrators noted concerns over the mitigation of the media and parents during a crisis event. In the development of coordinated response plans, media and parents were grouped together, and seen as “people to deal with”, rather than partners in the process.

Because a lot of the plans are confidential, we give information to the parents through the media. There’s a while public relations aspect that we’ve worked out when dealing with the media. You have to keep feeding them. Last year we wrote a media relations policy. We never had one.

Another administrator stated, “With technology now, parents will be flooding a scene.” Noting past experiences in school incidents, another district-level leader noted, “If we learned anything from school shootings, it’s that parents are coming. The media is coming.” Working with first responders was viewed as a way to alleviate the effect of parents arriving at a school. “I don’t know if all first responders know where all the students from a school are supposed to evacuate to.... But I think that the first responders

should know that. There should be at least one police officer there when parents show up in droves to gather their children.”

“Turf” Leadership

In the discussions regarding planning, training, and crisis response, the theme of turf and leadership were underlying themes that came across from each respondent. District administrators indicated that support from the Superintendent was critical in implementing plans at the building level. When speaking of crisis planning on the State level, one district-level leader noted, “There are huge disparities among the school districts. It comes from the leadership. In my role now, I have a lot more capacity to implement things.” Within each district, it was noted that policy implementation came from central administration to the building level. “As a principal, you’re not going to just call up another principal and then them what to do. It’s just inappropriate.”

Prior communication between school principals and first responders on clarification of roles and responsibilities was seen as a benefit in the event that multi-agency response was required at a building. As noted by one district-level administrator, “I think sometimes its turf. This is my building. These are my students. The point person isn’t necessarily going to be the principal. Sometimes that’s a barrier.” It was perceived that through collaborative review of drills, “the two groups [schools and first responders] become more comfortable working together. They get to know each other, and who is in charge. It would bring a lot of clarity to the entire process.”

One district-level leader perceived positive affect of his years fostering partnerships with first responders within a small district. “In a small town, it’s easy to set aside your egos and work together. It’s a real symbiotic relationship.” When an incident involving

students and school personnel occurred, he relayed how first responders perceived him as a partner in the response process.

There was an accident where a secretary rear-ended a school bus. When I got on the scene, the police and fire were waiting instruction from me. That's because the district is small and I've been doing this for seven or eight years. So they know that I'm the person to ask the questions to when it comes to crisis response. That's what makes it easy in a small town.

In larger cities, it was noted by a first responder that "in a larger city, getting the key agency people who can make a decision... the ones that people listen to... I think that's crucial." A Police Chief with experience in both small towns and larger cities in speaking about a response to an incident with students outside the school:

When it comes to a big district, when the district person or principal arrives on the scene, and the police are there... are they going to even know who this person is? Are they going to listen to them? ...of course not. They are going to await a response from their commanding officer.

In additional conversations regarding inter-agency partnerships with an emphasis on school crisis planning, district leaders indicated more communication with police agencies. Police also saw fire personnel as independent of the collaborative process. One police official stated, "The only agency that gets a little cavalier is fire. They just see their roles as getting victims out. They make comments like, 'I have a universal key... it's an ax.'" When further probed as to how fire department personnel worked

with police on school-based drills, he noted, “Not sure I’ve seen an actual drill [fire or evacuation] performed to give you a comment on how well they go.” District leaders additionally noted that, “the RIEMA director does a lot of communication with the fire [personnel]. We do a lot of communication with the police.”

In districts where leadership perceived there were collaborative relationships with first responders, the administrator noted concern with capacity within the system to fill the role in his absence. “The questions is, ‘What if I leave?’, or, ‘What if I’m away?’ We need to get people cross-trained. But if the key person leaves, there is going to be a void.”

Authentic Drills

Another theme that emerged through the interviews was the need for a sense of realism when conducting crisis drills at school level. Drill types most often noted by participants were: those that required building evacuation; and those that necessitated the security of the building from either an internal or external threat, referred to as lockdowns. Both district leaders and first responders perceived benefits from collaboratively conducting drills. Both police and fire first responders indicated their presence would allow for procedural review and debriefing with school personnel. School district leaders noted similar benefits; in addition, they felt the presence of first responders during a drill would give “an edge” to the process so that “teachers would take them more seriously.” On administrator when describing teachers’ responses to an evacuation drill relayed the issue of a lack of seriousness. “Teachers, being the funny people that they are, would write down scientists names as extra students on their rosters to see if we were paying attention. It’s all in good fun.” A Fire Chief additionally stated,

“The drills aren’t really that realistic. In some schools the drill sound is different from the actual fire evacuation sound. We need to fix that.”

While district leadership noted the need for drill realism, there were procedural differences indicated between how certain drills were conducted in comparison to response to an actual event. The level of realism of drills was often predicated upon the perceived level of organizing the different agencies, impact on instruction, the surrounding community, and resistance from school personnel.

One administrator spoke of an experience of conducting a collaborative drill with police personnel. “We called a lockdown, and had police departments come into a school with their drug sniffing dogs, as training for them too. We didn’t even tell the teachers.” However, in reference to plans which would mitigate the arrival of parents and media to an ongoing school crisis incident, the same respondent stated: “We’ve gone so far as to involve public works in the planning. So if it’s a real crisis [emphasis added], public works dump trucks and fire trucks are closing down roads to schools to create a secure perimeter.”

When discussing the evacuation planning process, another participant indicated, “The police should ensure that in the event of a real evacuation, at least one officer is there to help control the crowds... because that came up a lot of times with our teams.”

The barrier to conducting realistic drills was noted by one first responder who stated: There used to be a [Fire] Captain who would go to schools once in a while and pull surprise drills. We got a lot of complaints from the schools on that because principals were saying that it interrupted kids taking tests... stuff like that. Not like he was doing them during lunch, but it pissed off a lot of people... so we stopped.”

One district administrator when discussing communication with first responders in the planning and drilling identified additional concerns. “It has to do with clarity of the plan and the roles and responsibilities. Right now I don’t know if there is enough clarity in the real event... if it would operate as smoothly as possible.”

The need for continuous communication between school districts and first responders to mitigate the affect change was indicated by all participants. Each agency noted the turnover in personnel within all levels of their organizations; and, both first responders and district leaders expressed concern that modification of plans without notifying all partners could have negative repercussions if the plan were to be implemented.

Reflecting on current procedures for school evacuation, a district-level leader stated, “I don’t think all first responders know where all the students from X school are to evacuate to.”

Additionally, district leaders noted the need to emphasize the presence of their own staff members. “A lot of the times we’ll have the meetings at the middle and the high schools. Come on... let’s face it... that’s where most of the action is. We get sparse attendance from our elementary principals. They’re just busy.” From a first responder perspective, a Fire Chief remarked, “There needs to be a push for more meetings. But it’s tough getting busy people together.”

Results and Discussion

Of the themes that emerged from the data, the most notable was “communication” with regards to: 1) the need for best-practice, procedural coherence between organizations; and, 2) barriers specific to implementation at the school level. The GAO

had also indicated the need for increased communication and training to implement plans with first responders in 66% of school districts that had emergency management plans. Additionally, 39% of districts across the United States stated that the lack of experience with partnerships was a challenge to effective collaboration in planning and training for emergencies (GAO, 2007).

Procedural Coherence

The desire for coherence was noted by all participants, specifically in regards to the development and implementation of specific crisis procedures. Conflicting instructions as to “best practice” in the implementation of internal security measures (e.g., lockdowns) was a notable concern. As indicated in the research, “perhaps one of the most important elements of developing district policies in ensuring they are effective and draw on best practices in the field” (Hutton & Bailey, 2007, p. 25). Notable were that although all interviewees were the key members within their organization responsible for school crisis preparedness, none had made reference to the guidebook developed in 2008 by the Rhode Island School Safety Steering Committee: *School Emergency Planning: Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*. This document was created based on research through interviews with Rhode Island school personnel, and reviews of existing crisis plans, which indicated many schools had emergency plans; but wanted guidance in best practices, as well as assistance in establishing partnerships with their community first responder agencies (RISSSC, 2008). Specific content development was based on Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency’s (RIEMA) emergency procedures guide, as well as nationally recommended best practices in school crisis response planning which

included the United States Department of Education guidebook, *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* (USDOE, 2003).

While the intent of *School Emergency Planning: Preparedness, Response, and Recovery* was to address the specific concern of the need for frameworks of best practice which were indicated by all interview participants in this study, notable was that their specific agencies and organizations were credited within the guidebook for their assistance in its development and revisions (RISSSC, 2008). In summation, interview participants were credited for a guidebook, which addressed their needs with respect to school crisis planning frameworks, yet they were unaware of its existence.

The gap between crisis plan policy and stakeholder knowledge has been noted through school crisis preparedness research (Auf de Heide, 1989; Carely & Harrald, 1997; GAO, 2007; Graham et al, 2006; Kano & Ramirez, 2007). Preparedness plans at district and school levels provided from interview participants ranged in scope and year of development. In some cases, first responders and school districts from the same city had different versions of procedural documents.

Possible reasons for their unfamiliarity or consistency with either the *School Emergency Planning: Preparedness, Response, and Recovery* guidebook, or current district crisis documents, were indicated within the interviews. As many participants noted, there was significant personnel turnover within all levels within their organizations. When contingency plans for continuity of school preparedness planning and implementation are not evidenced within an agency, loss of expertise and a loss of intra-agency communication result when key members of involved with the crisis preparedness process are gone. According to the GAO (2007) “given the challenges

many school districts face due to a lack of necessary equipment and expertise, they do not have the tools to support emergency management plans they have in place and therefore, school districts are left with gaps in their ability to fully prepare for emergencies” (p. 21).

Additionally, without an established framework for communication between organizations, factors such as: competing priorities; and the perceptions of safety in the absence of critical incidents, serve as barriers to collaboration and distribution of crisis preparedness knowledge (Graham et al., 2006). As noted by some participants, a priority towards collaborative school emergency planning decreased with changes of leadership within organizations. When an organization progresses without facing critical emergency incidents, their crisis plans become obsolete. This may present more of a liability than no plan at all, as it indicates a false sense of security in the midst of a crisis situation (Collins, 2007).

According to research on organizational crisis theory (Penrose, 2000; Seeger et al., 2001), the most critical aspect of crisis communication occurs in the preparation phase, in which the organization identifies and addresses potential incidents, and develops basic structural plans. A distinct component of this planning phase includes development of a crisis management team, coordinated through the utilization of both internal and external emergency response expertise (Seeger et al., 2001). Imperative is that these members meet regularly to not only evaluate plans based on recently identified potential crisis; but also to develop rapport, alleviating unfamiliarity when an incident occurs.

District administrators and first responder personnel noted a wide variety in the amount of communication and planning with partnering agencies ranging from monthly, to greater than three years. Penrose (2000) noted the success of a response is contingent

upon member preparation and utilizing a team-based approach. Respondents who indicated they had not planned with district or first responder agencies in recent years expressed the desire to do so, but felt either by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), or the partnering agency should initiate it.

Communication and Implementation at the School Level

According to Seeger (2001), “inadequate pre-crisis communication increases the probability that a crisis event will be surprising, that precautions will be inadequate, and that serious harm will occur” to the organization (p. 158). Data from interviews indicated that participants noted difficulties not only in coordinating between agencies with regards to policy planning at the district level, but also with implementation at the school level. “While failure of an organization to withstand a crisis often transpires due to the sheer lack of an active crisis management plan, more often than not a deteriorated plan reflects the actual culprit of poor response” (Collins, 2007, p. 52). While district level administrators noted varied levels of current collaboration with first responders with regards to crisis policy development, consensus was noted that barriers were experienced when attempting to enact trainings, drills, and implementation at the school level.

Understanding the affect of organizational culture is critical as “a crisis management plan is of limited use if it does not coincide with an organization’s philosophies, values, attitudes, assumptions, and norms” (Penrose, 2000, p. 160). Respondents noted school district approach to developing and disseminating plans as “top-down” (e.g., district to principals; principals to staff). This is contrary to research, which indicated that decentralization, with greater levels of autonomy at lower organizational levels, was found to contribute to the success of a crisis plan’s implementation (Argenti, 2002;

Fowler et al., 2007; Seeger et al., 2001). Without guidance from central administration; however, respondents noted principals, and their schools, would not implement procedures and drills with fidelity. As noted by Argenti (2002), “employees will know what to do in a crisis only if they have been absorbing the company’s guiding principles all along” (p. 108).

A lack of guidance, support, and accountability from the district level may be a reason for inconsistency in school implementation. Again, drawing from organizational crisis theory, evidenced was the need for structural flexibility and responsibility within integrated response systems under an overarching strategy critical to adaptation and survival during crisis situations (Boin & Hart, 2003; Kapucu, 2006; Rusaw & Rusaw, 2008; Von Clausewitz, 2007; Wang, 2008).

Theoretically grounded models within the area of public relations in regards to crisis communication research have defined a framework of which can be viewed as a process of: identification and preparedness towards crisis events; response procedures designed to mitigate detrimental actions; and recovery actions which repair the institution, and its image (Fink, 1986; Hale, Dulek, & Hale, 2005; Pearson & Clair 1998; Ritchie & MacDonald, 2010; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001). Critical to this framework is the implementation of drills specific to a variety of potential scenarios, which would necessitate a multi-agency response.

Respondents that indicated a lack of collaboration at the district planning level also noted lack of implementing interagency drills at the school level. School crisis research suggest partnerships with first responders can be enhanced through conducting multi-agency mock drills to; as well as provide schools with an opportunity to examine their

capacity to respond to an emergency (Auf de Heide, 1989; Carely & Harrald, 1997; GAO, 2007; Graham et al, 2006; Kano & Ramirez, 2007). “Thus it is imperative for school personnel and emergency responders to meet and organize their efforts prior to, not during, crisis events” (Allen et al., 2008, p. 193).

Furthermore, the need for a well-coordinated response between schools and local emergency agencies is critical because of the limited training and experience of school personnel. Interview respondents again noted that changes in administrative, teaching and first responder personnel, as well changes within the community as further needs to: conduct an environmental analysis, update plans accordingly, and collaboratively drill on potential incidents. Key to an effective school emergency response is to maintain a steady state of preparedness during non-crisis times (Graham et al., 2006). This entails receiving appropriate training, testing, and practicing response protocols; as well as coordinating with local emergency response agencies (Kano & Bourque, 2007).

Educational Implications

Penrose (2000) noted the success of a response is contingent upon member preparation and utilizing a team-based approach. Without an established framework for communication between organizations, factors such as: competing priorities; and the perceptions of safety in the absence of critical incidents, serve as barriers to collaboration and distribution of crisis preparedness knowledge (Graham et al., 2006). As noted by some participants, a priority towards collaborative school emergency planning decreased with changes of leadership within organizations. When an organization progresses without facing critical emergency incidents, their crisis plans become obsolete. This may

present more of a liability than no plan at all, as it indicates a false sense of security in the midst of a crisis situation (Collins, 2007).

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Through the findings and conclusions generated from this study of perceptions of school crisis preparedness among: Rhode Island public school administrators; district-level leaders; and community first responders, the researcher formulated the following recommendations to further guide policy and practice:

1. All district and school personnel involved with school crisis planning and response should receive professional development and training regarding best practice.

Through collaboration between the United States Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Emergency Management Institute, free, independent study, on-line courses are available to all school professionals. The courses: IS-100.SC, Introduction to the Incident Command System for Schools as well IS-362: Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Schools are available at: <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is362.asp>. Through these courses participants can become familiar with and incorporate the principals of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command System (ICS). These frameworks, utilized nationally by all first responder organizations when responding to any type or size of emergency, should be incorporated into school preparedness policy and practices to better facilitate the communication and cooperative efforts between schools and first responders.

2. The Rhode Island School Safety Steering Committee should reconvene to revise the School Emergency Planning: Preparedness, Response, and Recovery guidebook. The Committee should consist of members from: State and Local first responder agencies; the Rhode Island Department of Education, schools of High Education, as well as district-level leaders from both public and private school districts. This researcher is currently a member of the Committee, which began meeting again with regards to policy review and development in March 2011.

3. District-level crisis teams which include: central administrators, building principals, community first responder personnel, and parents, should annually review preparedness plans and policies. This process should incorporate: environmental scans for potential threats within the community; safety audits/needs assessments of school buildings and grounds (for guidance see: Safe School Facilities Checklist: www.edfacilities.org/cjecklist/checklist.cfm); and a review of after-action incident reports data which include how schools addressed these problems. Plans and policies should be revised to further prevent and/or mitigate these potential threats and events.

4. Stakeholders should review building level crisis plans annually including: principal, staff members, first responders, parents, and students (where appropriate). Critical in this process is to illicit feedback from members on the sections of the plan that pertains to them. These plans should detail roles and responsibilities of individuals (as well as alternates) in the event of a variety of potentially identified crisis events within an established incident management structure.

5. Conduct emergency drills at the building level in coordination with first responder personnel. Through both tabletop exercises and functional drill exercises, which involve students, potential issues within crisis plans can be identified. Actively debriefing these practice scenarios allows for improving communication among participants. In addition, training procedures, which involve students serve to better prepare students, and those responsible for their care, to respond in an actual crisis event.

6. Revisit State and District accountability measures for implementation of Rhode Island General Laws with regards to school crisis response teams (RIGL 16-21-24) and emergency drill requirements (RIGL 16-21-5). While Rhode Island General Laws detail the requirements for the components of school crisis teams, and drills, this research indicated paucity in the monitoring of these statutes being enacted and/or implemented with fidelity at the building level. While RIGL 16-21-5 states that all schools must implement 15 drills, of which two are lockdowns; compliance is indicated by a report submitted by each building administrator to the Rhode Island Department of Education in May of the school year. As indicated by this research, the lack of an accountability system towards drills and crisis teams can result in communication breakdown with regards to school emergency preparedness between district and building leadership, as well as between school district and first responder partners.

Recommendations for Further Areas of Study

This study explored the perceptions of school crisis preparedness with respect to those in key leadership positions responsible for planning, training, and implementation of these efforts in Rhode Island schools. Based upon the findings from this study, differences were indicated among district leadership and first responder personnel. Although this scope of the study was limited to public Rhode Island districts, the findings may be generalizable to other states, as several of the findings were similarly noted in research conducted on both national and state levels (Allen et al., 2008; Dinke et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2006; Kano & Bourque, 2007; Kano & Ramirez, 2007; United States Government Accounting Office, 2007). While the intent of this study was focused on those in leadership positions, the following are recommended areas of future research:

- Explore and correlate the perceptions of teachers, parents, students, and administrators with regards to self-efficacy in school crisis situations, including the differences among: urbanicity, grade level, and years teaching experience.
- Construct action research to evaluate the creation, knowledge, and barriers, of school crisis policy and procedure implementation at the district and building level.
- Explore the affect of technology as it relates to communication benefits and barriers with respect to crisis preparedness.
- Construct action research to evaluate the partnerships between school districts and first responder personnel including those with School Resource Officers (SROs).
- Correlate the experiences of school crisis events among school populations with the perceptions of safety and implementation of crisis procedures.

- Explore and evaluate accountability measures utilized districts and their schools with regards in implementation of crisis preparedness policy and procedural implementation.

By exploring the perceptions of crisis preparedness; as well as the barriers to collaboration between first responders and school districts, the findings from this research could be used to develop strategies that school districts and first responders could implement to increase joint planning and training opportunities.

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Appendix A

District-Level Administrators and First Responder Personnel: Open Ended

Interview Questions

Opening Statement:

This interview is being conducted as part of a research study to better understand perspectives of school safety and crisis preparedness among Rhode Island administrators and first responder personnel. As a person in one of these key roles, you are in a unique position to describe the efforts taken on behalf of your organization in regards school crisis planning, training, and implementation. And that is what this interview is about: your experiences with school safety and crisis preparedness, and your thoughts and experiences.

The responses from all interviews will be combined for the final research report. Nothing you say will ever be identified with you personally. As we go through the interview, if you have any questions about why I am asking something, please feel free to ask. If there is something you do not want to answer, just say so. The purpose of this interview is to get your insights with regards to school safety and crisis preparedness.

You have received a consent form to sign, which indicates your consent to this interview. This interview will be recorded. Any questions before we begin? (adapted from Patton, 2002, p. 407, 422)

1. First, I'd be interested in knowing about your role in the district/department. What is your official title?
 - a. How many years have you been in this position?
 - b. What would you describe to be your role and responsibilities in the district/department?
 - i. Probe: Could you walk me through a "typical" day on the job?
2. I'd like to ask you some questions now which directly relate to your knowledge and experience in regards to school safety and crisis preparedness.

In regards to school crisis drills, Rhode Island General Law states there shall be 15 drills or rapid dismissals during the school year, 4 of which shall have at least one or more exits and stairways in the school building blocked. There shall also be two evacuation drills and two lockdown drills included among the 15 mandatory drills in each school year. The Rhode Island Fire Safety code on fire drills adds that "the fire marshal, assistant deputy fire marshal, or local fire authority may require that a fire drill be conducted in his or her presence."

- a. What experience have you had with school fire drills?
 - i. Probe: What could schools do to improve the drill process?
 - ii. Probe: How could first responders help to improve the drill process?

 - b. What experience have you had with school lockdown drills?
 - i. Probe: What could schools do to improve the drill process?
 - ii. Probe: How could first responders help to improve the drill process?
3. Rhode Island General Law CHAPTER 16-21 also states that school committees shall adopt a comprehensive school safety plan regarding crisis intervention, emergency response, and management. The plan shall be developed by a school safety team which includes members of the school community along with local law enforcement, fire, and emergency personnel. Members of the school safety team shall be appointed by the school committee of the town, city, or regional school district.
- a. What experience have you had with comprehensive school safety planning?
 - i. Probe: How could first responders help to improve the safety planning process?

- ii. Probe: How could districts help to improve the safety planning process?
 - iii. Probe: How could individual schools help to improve the safety planning process?
 - iv. Probe: What could be done to improve the safety planning process?
- 4. What benefits could be realized by first responders collaborating with schools in implementing their various crisis drills?
 - a. Probe: What benefits would there be for the schools?
 - b. Probe: What benefits would there be for the first responders?
- 5. Collaboration among agencies and districts in planning and training for school crises takes effort on everyone's part. What would you describe as the main barriers to these types of collaborative efforts?
 - a. Probe: What barriers do you perceive for your agency/district?
 - b. Probe: What barriers do you perceive for the other agencies involved?
- 6. You mentioned ... as some of the main barriers. What could be done to alleviate some of these barriers towards collaboration among the district and first responder agencies?
 - a. Probe: What could you do in your capacity to alleviate these barriers?

- b. Probe: If you were a key person (police, fire, superintendent) in one of the other agencies, what would you do to alleviate these barriers?
 - c. Probe: What additional assistance (e.g., local, state, federal) would your or the other agencies need?
7. Ok, you've been very helpful. I appreciate all the information you have provided.
- Are there other thoughts or suggestions you'd like to share with me to help me understand how you feel general school safety and training can be improved?
- Anything at all you'd like to add?