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Contemporary Safety and Security Considerations for the Catholic School

Research has shown that a primary reason for parental choice of Catholic schools is a perception of safety and discipline. Therefore, parents must always feel that their children are as safe as possible while at school. There is no question that the level of parental concern and, thus, the responsibility and liability are heightened for all schools today due to recent violent, and tragic, events.

Three *Catholic School Management Letters* (CSMLs) on the subject of safety were published in the years following the Columbine High School tragedy when school safety first became a national priority. This issue will briefly revisit those CSMLs and then discuss approaches that have changed since that time. As a division of Christian Brothers Services (CBS), CSM is able to provide information and resources from the CBS Risk Division to expand upon this topic.

The January 2001 CSML entitled “Safety Issues in the Catholic School: An Overview,” noted that most Catholic educators can report significant evidence that our schools actually are safer than their public school counterparts. Therefore, this issue of the CSML continues to urge Catholic school administrators to move from simple emergency preparedness to a more systematic vision. “The most effective school safety programs are comprehensive – an array of strategies to promote safe school climate and to respond to disruption” (Skiba). Strategies must include: prevention, intervention, education, awareness, high expectations, ongoing internal and external communication, staff and student involvement and ownership, and “character education” (Hodgin). Catholic schools are well-positioned in that character education is an inherent part of the call to educate for Gospel values.

Yet, school safety is not just having an emergency preparedness plan, although that is important. Catholic school administrators must take the lead in safety for all of those who use the school facilities. There are “no excuses” for anyone not knowing what to do in a crisis. “Once we know what to do and don’t do it; we are liable. We are being asked to respond to the unforeseeable – what we knew or should have known” (James).

“Zero Tolerance” is a catchphrase that has, hopefully, fallen out of favor in recent years. Today, reasonableness, common sense, and administrative discretion are called for when dealing with disciplinary matters and even threats. Appropriate responses should always be geared to the behavior, age, and ability of the student and aimed at de-escalation of the behavior. Conduct policies should be reviewed for effectiveness and reasonableness. Suspension/expulsion policies should follow a “fair process” to avoid arbitrary decisions.

Anti-bullying policies and programs are extremely important. There is no question that parents today expect schools to take a stronger stand in cases of low-level aggression (bullying, harassment, hazing, etc.). A history of bullying or of being bullied also is a common thread among school shooters.

“Responsible reporting” is an important and necessary skill to teach students and to make a clear distinction between this and simple “snitching.” Students need to understand that when other students are bullying, making threats, or posing a danger to themselves or others; this behavior must be reported to an adult.

Catholic school authorities have often been reluctant to involve law enforcement in school affairs. Laws that apply to public schools may not necessarily apply to Catholic schools. But, the “spirit of the law” must always be respected. Weapons or drugs in school must be reported to police. Likewise, violence or threats of violence in school must be reported. Violence prevention begins with good classroom management. Teacher training and mentoring is a must. Curricular programs should address substance abuse, social skills, and conflict management with an emphasis on healthy lifestyles.

The January 2001 *CSML* focused on “Safety Issues in the Catholic School: Emergency Preparedness Planning.” It is now a normative expectation that every Catholic school has an emergency preparedness or crisis plan in place. However, just as important as the plan, is ongoing involvement in developing and reviewing the plan by those who must use it. Every school should have a core safety team to provide ownership and leadership of all aspects of school safety and security.

In the years immediately after Columbine, many schools developed plans modeled on those of other schools. These varied greatly depending on quality of the base plan. “Expert templates” are now available that lay out a process for developing a comprehensive “all hazards” plan specifying all the areas that need to be included. This is not the same as “the plan in a can” – a ready-made one-size-fits-all plan offered by several companies, and not a recommended approach. A preferred approach is the use of expert customizable templates, such as those developed by Jane’s/Safe Havens and used in all public and non-public schools in Indiana. An alternative is to retain a school safety consultant to facilitate (not to perform) the planning process. The plan must fit the local situation at each school. So, for example, a diocesan plan that does not take into consideration local needs could be the equivalent of “the plan-in-a-can.” Elements of the plan should be shared with parents for reassurance, however, the plan should not be a public document for obvious security reasons.

Partnerships with local first responders are a crucial aspect of planning. There is a need for the officials of each school building to meet periodically with all local first responders to exchange information.

Emergency plans need to be readily available to each staff member. It is not enough to have copies in the office. “Flip chart” type protocols with steps to follow in various situations are a practical way to share the plan.

Communications with parents and others need to be well-planned in advance of a crisis. Media relations plans can help the school get information out to parents, and to “manage” the media on the scene.

An outside professional mental health crisis response team should be available in the aftermath of a crisis. This may be in partnership with the diocese or other social service agency. The team provides crisis counseling to students, parents and staff, including professional “crisis debriefing.” Catholic schools also have the distinct advantage of providing a faith-based response.

Physical security of the school building was often the first priority of early school safety planners. A “school security industry” was built around only these needs, yet prudent purchasing is advised. Certain physical security measures need to be in place for controlling access, smoke and fire detection, etc.; yet high costs are not necessarily indicated in order to be physically secure. Part of comprehensive safety planning is a site survey including physical security to help set priorities.

The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service jointly developed a document in 2004 entitled *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and Creating Safe School Climates*. The January 2005 *CSML* discusses Threat Assessments and is based on this Guide.

The Guide was the first and is still the official model for schools to handle threats outside their normal disciplinary processes. Guiding principles are: all threats are to be taken seriously; and the school should have a special team and process to deal with student threats both “made” and “posed.” The process follows a series of expert questions and steps to aid in decision-making. The guide was also an effort to address the “hysteria factor,” understanding that parents needed reassurances that schools could handle these situations. *CSM* recommends that each Catholic school have a process to deal with threats, the real safety and security issues, as well as the hysteria that may accompany such situations. Materials mentioned herein are available free as downloadable PDF files from the USDOE including updates to accompany the 2004 Guide.

Contemporary School Safety and Security Considerations:

Jeff Harrison, Risk Control Coordinator for Christian Brothers Services, has assisted in identifying contemporary considerations that go beyond the three original CSMLs on Catholic School Safety and Security Issues.

1. Access Control. Most schools today, including Catholic schools, are locked for the school day once the students arrive. Public access is usually controlled at only one entrance and most often with a simple “buzz-in” system, preferably with a camera at the door. This is in sharp contrast to only ten years ago, when many, if not most schools, left doors unlocked, and anyone could enter unchallenged. Something often-heard among school safety people at the time was: “Anyone wearing a suit and tie and carrying a clipboard could walk into any school in the US and do anything he wanted.”

In prioritizing expenditures and especially in capital improvement planning, state-of-the art equipment for access control should be a top priority, including good security cameras and key card or fob readers and alarms on entrances. This is especially critical for campus type schools. Paul Timm of RETA Security presented a webinar for CBS clients in 2013, and he recommends schools also consider a “locked vestibule” – a secure holding area for visitors at the controlled entrance. He says, “...key control is a myth.”

2. Visitor Control. Hand-in-hand with access control are good visitor control procedures. Most often, visitors to a school “sign in” on a list. Identification is not checked, and there is no way to know if the visitor has signed out or is still in the building. Timm recommends that the visitor’s driver’s license/ID be held/copied and returned when the person signs out. Also, the person should be issued a visitor’s badge on a color-coded returnable lanyard. In larger schools students and staff should wear official ID badges. Staff should be trained to challenge all “unmarked” visitors, with a courteous, “May I help you.”

3. Ongoing Safety Planning/Involvement: Often, and once the emergency plan is in place, school core safety teams meet infrequently, if at all. Consequently, the original investment and ownership is lost. Paul Timm recommends that schools have a security committee (core safety team) and while school safety is a “...top down process with the administrator held accountable.” Timm further recommends that this committee be broad-based: including staff, parents, board, older students, first responders and community members involved in an ongoing “collaborative process” and “meeting at least once each semester.”

Cyber Security

Risk Factor is the e-newsletter for Christian Brothers Risk Management Services. The Education issue for Fall 2014 covered the topic:

“Establishing Effective Cyber Security Practices.” Cyber security is a growing school safety issue. For an excellent introductory article on the topic, download this [Risk Factor Newsletter](#).

4. Active Shooter Considerations. In the aftermath of the Newtown tragedy, several “active shooter protocols” were offered ranging from good common sense to outrageous fantasies. It is recommended that schools should work with local/state law enforcement to learn what they advise, yet caution must be exercised to keep in mind that educators know their students best. Under no circumstances is it recommended that programs be implemented to directly train students to “run, hide, fight,” or similar actions. This can frighten younger students and give older ones “heroic ideas” that may cause even more trouble in a crisis. According to Timm, if active shooter training is provided, it should be for adult staff, emphasizing leadership and good common sense.

Good lockdown procedures are still the first line of defense for armed intruder events. Considerations should also include: getting kids in from outside (reverse lockdown), moving them from a gym or cafeteria to a safer area, or possibly, evacuating the school or parts of the school depending on the situation.

5. Contemporary Communication. Cell phones were still relatively new and not yet “smart” when the first safety letters were published by CSM. Nearly all communication has advanced beyond our earlier comprehension in the intervening years. But, contemporary communication is not always as “smart” as it could be.

Nearly all schools were issued free weather radios a few years ago. However, the free weather warning apps now available on smartphones and social media may be even better, and alerts are almost certain to be noticed by more people in the school. Reverse 911 is a free public safety communications system used by public safety organizations in many areas to communicate with groups of people in a defined geographic area. This is a service that all school personnel cannot afford to be without.

Paul Timm points out possibly even more critical considerations: Are there emergency dialing instructions on every school phone including numbers for the main office? Are

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there after-hours numbers available to reach school officials in an emergency? Are two-way radios (not walkie-talkies) available for all administrators, custodians and outside student monitors for instant response?

Are modern mass parent notification systems in place including text-messaging, voice-messaging, and emailing? Are procedures for use of these systems included in the emergency plans? Such systems are now included as part of many student data management programs or as standalone products and are increasingly cost-effective. Of course, there is always the traditional “phone tree” in a pinch.

6. AED/AED Training. An automated external defibrillator (AED) is a portable electronic device that automatically diagnoses life-threatening cardiac arrhythmias of ventricular fibrillation and ventricular tachycardia and is able to treat them through electrical defibrillation. In prioritizing budget items, after some of the more proactive measures listed above, consider purchasing at least one AED unit along with the necessary training for several staff members. Prompt use of these units by trained personnel has saved many lives that could have been lost waiting for first responders.

Conclusion/Updates and Training

There is much more that could and should be covered to update and refine school safety/security considerations that cannot be included in this short publication. However, it is recommended that the reading of this CSML be followed with a visit to the Christian Brothers Services website to view the excellent free webinar entitled: “School Security: What is Your Program Missing?” Click on the link below to access this one hour archived webinar presented on January 3, 2013 by Paul Timm, PSP, President of RETA Security and Jeff Harrison, CSP, ARM, Risk Control Coordinator for Christian Brothers Services. <https://cbs.adobeconnect.com/rpt-schoolsecuritywebinar-1-3-2013/>.

Other webinars are available under Communication, Educational Resources, Webinars on the Christian Brothers Services website: cbservices.org, including topics such as Bullying among others relevant to Catholic schools today.

Twelve additional school safety and security modules are available through Gallagher-Bassett Services for clients of CBS and at a cost of \$125 per school for non-Christian Brothers Risk Pooling Trust members. Please contact Jeff Harrison at CBS for details: Jeff.Harrison@cbservices.org.

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