School safety, a major concern for students, parents, and school staff, is also a key issue for state and federal legislators who develop educational guidelines and standards. This article summarizes early disasters and the subsequent impact on school-based crisis intervention and safety plans. In particular, children’s mental health services are emphasized as a critical component of crisis intervention. Additionally, based on feedback from State Departments of Education, the current status of school crisis planning across the United States is summarized. [Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention 7:206–223 (2007)]

KEY WORDS: school, history, safety, crisis, legislation, plan.

What Is a Crisis?

A crisis is shaped by the context in which it occurs: the type of event or situation contributing to or triggering the crisis, where and when the crisis occurs, and the vulnerability of those involved. From a mental health perspective, a situation becomes critical when an individual’s emotional and/or physical needs exceed available resources (Caplan, 1964; Slaikeu, 1990). When safety, security, and stability are compromised, a state of crisis ensues, creating what Caplan described as “psychological disequilibrium” (1964, p. 53). Intervention is provided to mitigate the impact of crisis, offering immediate and ongoing support services, most effective when sensitive to and compatible with the setting and unique needs of those served (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2003).

Defining School-Based Crisis Intervention

Terminology related to crisis intervention varies, dependent on the setting and the profession. For example, rather than using the term crisis, the American School Counselor Association (2000) uses the term critical incident. On the other hand, in the very same setting, school psychologists routinely refer to crisis plans and crisis intervention (Brock, Sandoval, & Lewis, 1996, 2001; Heath & Sheen, 2005; Nickerson & Zhe, 2004; Pitcher & Poland, 1992; Sandoval,
State and federal education agencies typically use the term *safety plan* rather than *crisis plan* (National Strategy Forum, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2003). Professional organizations typically publish within their specific field, maintaining professional identity and, although not overtly intended, often inhibiting cross-communication and cooperation between organizations.

Regardless of terminology and professional alignment, crises in schools are highly impacted by the nature of available supportive resources. In particular, human resources in a school setting are unique: A large number of children and adolescents are entrusted to the leadership of a few adults (Brock et al., 2001; Johnson, 2000; Pedersen & Carey, 2003). Johnson states that crises in school settings threaten the comfort, stability, and secure environment familiar to students. Some crises, such as school shootings or natural disasters, potentially involve hundreds, even thousands of students, leaving them vulnerable to “threat, loss, and traumatic stimulus” (Johnson, 2000, p. 3). Furthermore, if a school crisis is not quickly contained or properly managed, chaos ensues, making it difficult for the limited number of adults to manage and bring the situation under control (Johnson, 2000, p. 18).

However, not all crises have widespread consequences, nor affect large numbers of individuals. Crises range from isolated incidents affecting a few individuals, to situations impacting the student body, staff, and community. A wide variety of situations, each with their own distinctive set of implications, have the potential to threaten the stability and safety of school environments. Crises affecting children and youth include teen pregnancy; sexual, physical, and emotional abuse; school failure and dropout; critical or life-threatening illness; suicide; loss, death, and grief; drug abuse; gang activity; bullying, aggression, and violence; natural disasters (fires, earthquakes, storms, hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes); accidents and medical emergencies; school shootings; bomb threats; and terrorism (Brock et al., 2001; Heath & Sheen, 2005; Johnson, 2000; Pitcher & Poland, 1992).

To fortify against potential threats, schools have taken steps to prepare and respond in an organized fashion, preparing crisis plans and organizing and training school crisis teams (Allen, Burt, et al., 2002; Allen, Jerome, et al., 2002; Brock et al., 2001; Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001). Indeed, based on reports of school psychologists and school counselors in 2001, over half participated on crisis teams and over 90% reported their school had a crisis plan in place (Allen, Burt, et al. 2002; Allen, Jerome, et al. 2002). This information corroborates similar findings by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Based on their report, almost 96% of schools reported having a crisis plan, though few details about crisis plans were specified (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [U.S. DOE, NCES], 2002).

**Purpose of This Article**

Current federal legislation supports safe schools and highlights the power of political mandates in shaping school safety across the United States. In addition to this political support, a shift in professional thinking moved crisis response from merely providing for physical needs to providing for mental health needs (Lindemann, 1944, 1979; Weaver, Dingman, Morgan, Hong, & North, 2000) and, more specifically, providing for children’s mental health needs (Terr, 1979, 1981, 1983). Putting these factors into perspective, the purpose of this article is to provide a historical background of school-based crisis intervention and the growth of safe school planning. It is proposed that tragedies involving schools and threats to the safety of children laid the groundwork for current
school-based crisis intervention. A list of international, national, community, and school-related disasters and events highlighted in this article are summarized in Table 1.

The Infancy of School Crisis Plans: Fire Drills

In regard to the origins of school-based crisis intervention, over the past 150 years most of the publicized school-based disasters were fire related. Subsequently, fire drills were one of the first precautions school crisis plans addressed. Even though fire drills are commonplace today, familiar to all students and teachers, this was not always the case. A few examples highlight the long-term need for fire drills and, sadly, the disorganized momentum of preventing disasters and pushing children’s safety to the forefront.

1851, False Alarm

In 1851, a fire alarm sounded in Greenwich Avenue School in New York City (NYC). In a mass disorganized exodus, attempting to escape from the suspected fire, 40 children were killed and many others injured. Tragically these children were not familiar with escape routes and were not trained for fire drills (Golway, 2002). In hindsight, what did schools learn from this experience? There was a desperate need to beef up preemptive strategies, protecting children and preventing injury and death.

As news of the 1851 tragedy spread across America, many teachers took it upon themselves to practice fire drills, training their students to quickly and safely exit buildings (“The Value of System and Drill,” 1882). However, over time this reactionary resolve to prepare for potential fires subsided. Ironically, in 1882, New York City Grammar School No. 41, built to replace the aging Greenwich Avenue School, nearly repeated the earlier disaster. When alerted of a fire in the building, students hystERICALLY attempted to mass exit. However, this time school staff, firemen, and police were able to restore order and safely evacuate all students. After this incident, NYC Superintendent John Jasper ordered all NYC school principals to conduct “practice fire drills,” training all children to exit quickly and safely (“Miscellaneous City News,” 1882).

1901, Fire Week

Enlarging the safety net, a decade after the initial practice fire drills, New York’s governor signed a bill requiring “all” schools in the state to practice fire drills (“Fire Drills Required,” 1901). However, based on subsequent newspaper articles over the years, “requests,” “requirements,” and “orders” were repeatedly made, indicating the inconsistent follow-through of mandated school fire drills. For example, in 1926, NYC Mayor James Walker declared an official “fire week” (“Mayor Proclaims,” 1926). He requested that during this particular week schools take the time to teach children about fire drills and to practice exiting the school. Apparently the previous requirements and requests were not consistently nor strictly enforced because schools needed continual reminders. Bottom line, students remained at risk because there was not a practiced strategy for exiting buildings quickly in case of fire.

1908, Lake View Elementary School Fire

New York was not the only state reporting loss of life in school fires. On record, Ohio reports the largest number of student deaths associated with a school fire. On Ash Wednesday, March 4, 1908, a fire destroyed Collinwood’s Lake View Elementary School near Cleveland. During the first few hours of school, around 9:00, steam pipes overheated in the ceiling, igniting the dry wooden roof joists. The fire spread rapidly: Unable to escape, children and teachers panicked. Parents living nearby...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Event and brief description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1851         | NYC, NY                 | False fire alarm at Greenwich Avenue School  
Death toll: 40 children died exiting the building                                              |
| 1901         | New York                | NY governor mandates school fire drills                                                      |
| March 4, 1908| Collinwood, OH          | Fire destroys Lake View Elementary School  
Death toll: 172 children, 2 teachers, 1 rescuer                                               |
| May 18, 1927 | Bath, MI                | Man-made explosion destroys school  
Death toll: 45 (38 children)  
Injured: 58                                                                                |
| March 18, 1937| Rusk County, Texas      | Gas explosion destroys New London Consolidated School  
Death toll: estimated 300                                                                   |
| 1950s        | United States           | School duck and cover drills  
Initiated by the DOE  
Goal: protect children from nuclear attacks  
Formed basis for today’s earthquake and tornado drills                                           |
| December 1, 1958 | Chicago, IL             | Fire in Chicago’s Our Lady of Angels School  
Death toll: 92 children and 3 nuns  
Injured: 77                                                                                |
| July 15, 1976| Chowchilla, CA          | School bus hijacking  
1 bus driver, 19 girls, and 7 boys (ages 5–14)  
All survived  
| October 17, 1989 | San Francisco Bay Area, CA | Loma Prieta earthquake  
Red Cross creates new division of services: DMHS  
Note: In 2005 Red Cross developed training specific to children’s needs                        |
| April 19, 1995 | Oklahoma City, OK      | Explosion of Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building  
Death toll: 168 (19 children)  
Injured: over 500  
Disaster precipitates development of NEAT  
Note: NEAT (aligned with National Association of School Psychologists) supports children and schools |
| May 21, 1998 | Springfield, OR         | Thurston High School shooting—Kip Kinkel (expelled student), opened fire in school’s cafeteria  
Death toll: 2 students  
Wounded: 25  
Kinkel also murdered his parents  
Clinton requested the DOE to develop guidelines to prevent tragic violence in U.S. schools |
rushed to the school screaming for their children to jump to safety. Trapped children jumped out of third-story windows into the arms of parents below, causing additional injury and loss of life. That morning 172 children, almost half the children attending the school, 2 teachers, and 1 rescuer perished in the burning school (Jablonski, 2003). This fire served as a tragic reminder of the need for mandated fire safety standards and drills in schools.

1958, Our Lady of Angels School Fire

However, looking at national trends, school fire drills were not standard routine across the United States until much later. In fact, on December 1, 1958, in Chicago’s Our Lady of Angels School, a fire killed 92 children and 3 nuns: Seventy-seven additional children and nuns were seriously injured (Babcock & Wilson, 1959). According to a newspaper article, “Some children jumped from windows; others were pushed. Still others were trampled as they groped for exits” (“Panic Grips Classroom,” 1958, p. 1). News reporters were quick to note that a safety plan to exit children quickly from the burning school would have prevented or greatly reduced the number of tragic deaths. There was no such plan in place.

By 1961, New York moved beyond mere mandates to actually practicing fire drills and developing routines for exiting buildings. For example, one article stated: “With precision, speed and cooperation that might surprise their parents, thousands of NYC school children evacuate their classrooms in record time twice each month during fire drills” (“Fire Drills Held,” 1961, p. 38). According to this article, the Board of Education required each principal to conduct nine types of fire drills each year, teaching children to exit the school from various locations, including the classroom, auditorium,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Event and brief description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| April 20, 1999  | Littleton, CO  | Columbine High School Massacre  
|                 |                | Death toll: 15               
|                 |                | Injured: 24                  
|                 |                | Galvanizes federal and state support for safe schools  
|                 |                | Clinton initiated national conferences on school safety  
|                 |                | DOE models school crisis plan—expands beyond school violence, includes a variety of school crises  
| September 1–3, 2004  | Beslan, Russia | Armed terrorists held school hostage for 3 days  
|                 |                | Death toll: 344 (186 were children)  
|                 |                | Injured: hundreds  
|                 |                | Hickock, U.S. Education Deputy Secretary sent policy letter to U.S. school administrators, highlighting need to enhance school security  
| October 2, 2006 | Nickel Mines, PA | Amish school shooting  
|                 |                | Death toll: 5 female students  
|                 |                | Wounded: 5 female students  
|                 |                | Shooter commits suicide  

**TABLE 1 continued. School-Based Crisis Intervention: Historical Timeline of Critical Events**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Event and brief description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| April 20, 1999  | Littleton, CO  | Columbine High School Massacre  
|                 |                | Death toll: 15               
|                 |                | Injured: 24                  
|                 |                | Galvanizes federal and state support for safe schools  
|                 |                | Clinton initiated national conferences on school safety  
|                 |                | DOE models school crisis plan—expands beyond school violence, includes a variety of school crises  
| September 1–3, 2004  | Beslan, Russia | Armed terrorists held school hostage for 3 days  
|                 |                | Death toll: 344 (186 were children)  
|                 |                | Injured: hundreds  
|                 |                | Hickock, U.S. Education Deputy Secretary sent policy letter to U.S. school administrators, highlighting need to enhance school security  
| October 2, 2006 | Nickel Mines, PA | Amish school shooting  
|                 |                | Death toll: 5 female students  
|                 |                | Wounded: 5 female students  
|                 |                | Shooter commits suicide  

HEATH ET AL.
cafeteria, and library. Apparently, New York schools followed these guidelines and carried out regular fire drills. As a result, children understood what was expected of them: They responded calmly when required to quickly exit school buildings.

However, until about 1961 it was not clear which states required fire drills or exactly how schools were held accountable for carrying out fire drills and training students to exit buildings. Clearly, fire drills became progressively more common and efficient across the United States. In fact, today fire drills are as familiar to students as is the pledge to the flag. Based on information posted on State Department of Education (DOE) Web sites, specifics regarding fire drills vary somewhat depending on state and city fire codes. However, most states require schools to conduct one drill during the first week of school and one drill per month during the school year. Furthermore, schools are required to post escape routes in all rooms occupied by students. During school hours, schools are typically required to keep doors and exits unlocked and all doors and exits must open outward, reducing the danger of becoming trapped in a burning building. Typically, school principals are responsible for holding fire drills and reporting these drills to the district’s superintendent.

**Historical Examples of School Disasters**

In order to understand the historical foundation of school-based crisis intervention and to build on lessons learned, it is important to review previous school disasters. Historical events not only give an indication of how schools and communities have responded to crisis but also more importantly how they moved beyond tragedy and resumed the daily task of educating students. Amazingly resilient, each school touched by tragedy has a story to tell. The following are examples of school disasters, not often referred to in the crisis literature. These tragedies demonstrate the overwhelming need for crisis planning and preparation to meet the needs of schools.

**1927, Bath, Michigan Disaster**

Some of the worst school disasters in U.S. history are little known today, but vividly remembered by the communities in which these events occurred. For instance, in Bath County, Michigan, a school bombing in 1927 killed almost three times as many victims as the Columbine High School Massacre (Ellsworth, 1928; Johnston, 1999). This incident was perpetrated by Andrew Kehoe, an angry school board member who blamed his farm’s financial problems on rising property taxes. Financially strained, Kehoe was particularly angry about the district’s plan to build a new school with the newly approved taxes.

After months of planning, on May 18, 1927, Kehoe carried out a series of bombings targeting his farm and the nearby school. In terms of human loss and suffering, the bombings killed 45 and injured an additional 58: Of the casualties, 38 were children. During the chaotic aftermath, Kehoe carried out the disaster’s finale. After rigging his own vehicle with explosives, Kehoe drove to the school, parked, and called out to the school superintendent who was assisting with recovery efforts. As the man walked toward the vehicle, Kehoe detonated the explosives, killing himself, the school administrator, and several others.

Across the country, tragic news of the Bath disaster was overshadowed by headlines heralding Charles Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight (Johnston, 1999). Additionally, Kehoe did not live to see the ongoing devastation caused by his actions. However, history links his name with the Bath school disaster and the infamous notoriety of murdering the largest number of victims in a U.S. school. Furthermore, until the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the Bath.
incident was considered the most devastating act of domestic terrorism in the United States (Parker, 1992; Snell, 2002).

How did the community and nation respond? Upon receiving news of the disaster, Michigan’s Governor Fred Green announced the Bath Relief Fund, asking citizens to donate money to assist the community. Michigan’s Senator James Couzens donated money to build a new school. Children across Michigan rallied, donating their pennies to pay for a statue of a young girl holding a cat. A plaque accompanying this statue reads, “This bronze statue was sculpted by University of Michigan Professor Carlton W. Angell in memory of the victims of the Bath School Disaster of May 18, 1927. School children throughout Michigan contributed pennies to fund this lasting memorial” (Bauerle, 2002–2003; Parker, 1992).

1937, Rusk County, Texas

Another school tragedy dated March 18, 1937, occurred when a gas leak led to an explosion in the New London Consolidated School in Rusk County, Texas (Smith, 1937). Today a museum in this small oil town honors the lives of almost 300 students and teachers who died in the explosion. In a 2001 interview, 74-year-old Molly Ward, a survivor of the explosion, talked about her experience (Ydstie, 2001). She was 10 years old when the explosion destroyed the school. When asked how survivors recovered from such a loss, Molly recounted her memory of people staying in their homes for several days, crying so loudly that she heard wailing and sobbing from her neighbors’ homes. Molly explained that no mental health services were provided to surviving children or adults, something she claimed would have helped in coping with the tragedy. She emphasized that students and teachers shouldered the trauma in silence: No counselors were available to provide support and listen to children’s concerns. She continued, “Well, the best that I can describe is they did not talk about it. They may have talked within the homes, but when we went back to school within about two weeks, this was never brought up at school and it was never brought up until the day we graduated” (Ydstie, 2001).

How did lawmakers respond to this tragedy? A few days after the accident, the Texas legislature proposed placing an odor with natural gas to alert people of a gas leak. Prior to this school tragedy, natural gas leaks were difficult to detect because natural gas, without an additive, is odorless. Within a few weeks of the disaster, laws were passed mandating gas companies comply with this precautionary effort. This example demonstrates expedited political clout in response to the question: “What can be done so this will never happen again?”

1950s Civil Defense Duck and Cover Campaign

During the Cold War, the United States became acutely aware of the potential for nuclear war. In particular, concerns of Russia targeting a major U.S. city filtered into the public school system. In the early 1950s the U.S. Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) initiated an educational campaign on how to handle the threat of nuclear attack. In addition to promoting fallout shelters and developing the Emergency Broadcast System, FCDA corroborated with the DOE in an effort to prepare children and schools for the possibility of a nuclear attack (Brown, 1988; Carey, 1982; Mauer & Rizzo, 1951). These efforts, although later criticized and the object of ridicule (Hawn & Ion, 2006), constituted a move beyond the infancy of school-based crisis prevention programs.

_Duck and cover_, a 9-min animated movie, featured a cartoon character, Bert the Turtle. Bert demonstrated how students could protect themselves from nuclear fallout (Mauer & Rizzo, 1951). The movie begins with Bert
walking by a monkey in a tree. As the monkey lowers a lit firecracker, Bert ducks into his shell, remaining safe and unaffected by the exploding firecracker. However, unlike Bert, the monkey and tree are destroyed. The video continues with school-age children demonstrating basic strategies for protecting themselves against a nuclear explosion. The video suggests that the best protection against nuclear attack is to duck to the ground and protect the face.

Although the FCDA acknowledged that instant death would occur at ground zero, they argued that some protection was better than none. The duck and cover drills were developed to protect students against falling debris, radiation burns, and flash burns. Additional information and a short clip of Bert the Turtle can be accessed at the following Web site: http://www.archive.org/details/DuckandC1951. Also of interest, this Web site documents a short film featuring actress Mia Farrow, 7 years old at the time of filming, and her family promoting duck and cover drills ("Mia Farrow," n.d.).

During the 1950s and 60s, in conjunction with Bert the Turtle, many public and private schools near “likely target” large cities began air raid drills, known as “cover” or “sneak attack” drills. In these drills, the teacher yelled “Drop!,” prompting students to crawl under their desks (Brown, 1988). Although duck and cover drills for nuclear attacks are no longer practiced, similar drills are performed in school districts threatened by earthquakes and tornadoes (Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], 2005). However, controversy continues as to whether the benefits of children and adolescents practicing certain drills outweigh the risks of increasing children’s anxiety and fear of potential disasters (Brown, 1988; Comoletti, 1999).

1976, Chowchilla School Bus Hijacking

Similar to the importance of Lindemann’s (1944, 1979) focus on survivors’ emotional needs following the 1942 Cocoanut Grove fire, Lenore Terr was instrumental in promoting mental health support services for children in crisis. She followed the emotional adjustment of children traumatized in the Chowchilla, California school bus hijacking (Terr, 1979, 1981, 1983). This incident began on July 15, 1976, when three armed men abducted a school busload of 19 girls and 7 boys, ages 5–14, and their bus driver.

After driving the bus to a remote location, the captors transferred the children and bus driver into two vans, drove around the area for 11 additional hours, then transferred the victims into an 8’ × 16’ moving van trailer buried in a secluded rock quarry ravine. After a few of the boys and the bus driver forced the covering off of an opening in the trailer’s roof, they all escaped from the buried trailer and walked to get assistance. They were soon rescued, ending the ordeal approximately 27 hrs after their initial abduction (Baugh & Morgan, 1978; Miller & Tompkins, 1977).

At the time of the rescue, the major focus was on the children’s physical condition. All involved with the recovery efforts were relieved to find the children physically unharmed. Assuming all was well, crisis counseling was not provided. However, after conducting a follow-up evaluation 4 years later, Terr (1983) discovered that these children continued to suffer with significant anxiety and emotional trauma related to the incident. Indeed, Terr concluded that the rescued children in Chowchilla suffered ongoing emotional difficulties because they were not provided with immediate counseling to address the traumatic incident. Today, proponents of crisis intervention emphasize that victims’ long-term recovery appears contingent upon immediate emotional first aid (Brock & Jimerson, 2004; Everly & Flynn, 2006; James & Gilliland, 2005; Klingman, 1996).
Public’s Perception of School Safety

Even though an estimated count of school crisis plans has been proposed, the content and specificity of crisis plans are more difficult to summarize (Nickerson & Osborne, 2006). However, one driving force currently impacts school-based crisis planning: the public’s perception of school safety. In particular, the media’s coverage of school shootings heightens public awareness, gives names and faces to victims, and personalizes disaster (Donohue, Schiraldi, & Zeidenberg, 1998). Fortifying and increasing momentum, after each school shooting, the media and political proponents of school safety remain focused on school violence. In fact, tragedies such as the 1999 Columbine High School massacre in which two teens gunned down students and teachers, killing 15 and injuring an additional 24, trigger fear in the general public that such an incident is not only possible but also likely to occur in their community (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2000; Peterson, Larson, & Skiba, 2001).

2004, Terrorist Attack on School in Beslan, Russia

On an international level, in terms of fatalities, one of the worst school tragedies occurred during September 1–3, 2004, in the Russian town of Beslan in North Ossetia. Gathering in the neighborhood school, students, staff, parents, and relatives celebrated a national holiday. Without warning, armed terrorists took hundreds of children and adults hostage in the school. Drawing the incident to a close, on the third day, September 3, 2004, shooting broke out between the terrorists and Russian security. After the situation was finally brought under control, the number of dead totaled 344, of which 186 were children. Additionally, hundreds of survivors were wounded.

How did this tragedy affect schools in the United States? On October 6, 2004, U.S. Education Deputy Secretary Hickok, posted a letter addressed to all school administrators. The letter identified “lessons learned” from the Beslan tragedy and recommended building security precautions in hopes of protecting U.S. schools from similar terrorist threats. Most importantly, school administrators were admonished to enhance existing school security. Additionally, Hickok listed resources to assist in beefing up school security (U.S. Department of Education [U.S. DOE], 2004).

2006, Amish Nickel Mines School Shooting

More recently, October 2, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts, age 32, took 10 girls hostage in a small Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania (Scalfro, 2006). After several hours, Roberts ultimately shot all 10 of the young girls. Roberts ended the assault by taking his own life. Three of the young girls died immediately, two shortly thereafter. This assault to the simplistic purity of Amish life further strengthened the nation’s resolve to ensure children’s safety in schools.

Countering Perceptions With Facts

Indeed, these horrific incidents of school violence cannot be ignored: Vicariously, we grieve loss and human suffering, even though we are not directly involved. Situations are especially poignant when innocent children are murdered, particularly in a school setting where children’s safety is expected (Scalfro, 2006; U.S. DOE, 2004). However, this powerful pull of the media’s focus on school violence distorts perceptions, misleading the general public to believe that school shootings and terrorism are not only possible but also likely to occur in neighborhood schools (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice [CJCJ], 2000; Donohue et al., 1998). Countering perceptions, based on the 1992–2002 school safety reports,
students aged 5–19 were over 240 times more likely to commit suicide and 70 times more likely to be murdered in their own home and community than in a school setting (DeVoe, Peter, Noonan, Snyder, & Baum, 2005, p. 6; U.S. DOE, NCES, 2005). Based on this information and other statistics related to school safety, schools have been and continue to be a safe haven for children and youth (Brener, Lowry, Barrios, Simon, & Eaton, 2004). Indeed, commonly held perceptions of increasing school violence in recent years are not supported by facts: Statistics over the past decade indicate a “decrease” in school violence and student victimization, “not” an increase (Guerino, Hurwitz, Noonan, & Kaffenberger, 2006; U.S. DOE, NCES, 2005).

Unfortunately, exaggerated perceptions of school violence have taken precedence over facts. Additionally, perceptions have been and continue to be reinforced by federal and state agencies’ highly public response to isolated incidents of school shootings and disasters (CJCJ, 2000; U.S. DOE, 2004). Consequently, although not always in the best interest of students and schools, school-based crisis planning is directed by “top-down” mandates from state and federal legislation (Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001; U.S. DOE, 2004).

**Federal Safe School Legislation**

In 1993 and 1994, Clinton’s administration promoted the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (U.S. DOE, 1994a). Ultimately, the proposals for improvement were formulated into eight goals. One goal specifically focused on school safety: “…by the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning, by ensuring that all schools are safe and free of violence” (U.S. DOE, 1994b). Federal legislation bolstering school safety included the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act of 1994 (SDFSCA). This act expanded the previous SDFSCA of 1986; included funding for violence prevention and education programs to deter drug use; and provided additional funding to increase school security, related training, and technical assistance. Additionally, this act established “safe zones” beyond the actual school property, increasing protection for students traveling to and from school.

Additionally, the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 specified disciplinary action for students in possession of guns while on school grounds (Skiba, 2000). More specifically, schools were required to expel offending students for a minimum of 1 year (ultimately, allowances were made for case-by-case review of each situation). As typical for most federal legislation involving education, states not in compliance risked losing federal school funding. In particular, federal funding from Improving America’s Schools Act was contingent on schools complying with the Gun-Free Schools Act. This type of federal legislation forced the issue of creating and implementing precautions to ensure school safety (Bailey, 2006; Jacob & Feinberg, 2002; Skiba, 2000; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2001).

Even though increased efforts were taken to prevent school violence, on June 13, 1998, following the May 21, 1998, Thurston High School shooting, President Clinton formally requested the DOE to develop guidelines to assist with troubled youth, identifying warning signs, helping parents and schools to respond effectively, and preventing tragic incidents. This prompted the August 1998 publication of *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools* published by the DOE (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998).

Broadening the focus of crisis intervention in school settings, on May 16, 2003, Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education, announced the availability of a new government publication:
Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities. This publication was developed as a support for schools to plan and implement crisis plans covering such incidents as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and school violence. Federal grant money was also made available to assist schools in strengthening planning efforts. Listed in the suggestions for safe school planning, each school district was advised to address safety planning in four phases: prevention and mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Paige also announced federal financial support, $30 million during 2003 and $30 million during 2004, to support schools in strengthening school safety plans.

No Child Left Behind

Responding to an increased focus on school accountability, on January 23, 2001, President George W. Bush presented a comprehensive educational reform initiative: No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Essentially, NCLB reauthorized the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the major federal law affecting education of all students K–12. In addition to educational reform and accountability, NCLB also included initiatives related to school safety, in particular the responsibility of each school to develop and improve school safety plans. More specifically, NCLB requires states to define “persistently dangerous schools,” tracking and reporting crime statistics and threats to school safety. This aspect of NCLB seeks to ensure each student the right to learn in a safe environment conducive to learning. However, a safe environment free of crime, weapons, and school violence was not always the focal point of school safety. As previously discussed, school fires preceded school violence as the public’s major concern regarding children’s safety at school.

National Disasters Impacting Children’s Mental Health Care

1995, Oklahoma City Bombing

Prior to the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center attack, the Oklahoma City bombing was the worst terrorist attack in the United States. Shortly after 9:00 a.m. Wednesday April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh detonated his strategically parked truckload of fertilizer and fuel oil. The resulting explosion destroyed a massive portion of Oklahoma City’s Alfred P. Murrah federal building. Hundreds of individuals were unaccounted for during the initial chaos. Over 500 sustained injuries. As recovery efforts progressed, the death toll was estimated at over 100. However, it was not until the building was demolished in late May that all bodies were accounted for, bringing the official death toll to 168. Nineteen of these victims were children (Call & Pfefferbaum, 1999).

Although this act of domestic terrorism did not occur in a school, the federal building housed a day care center for employees’ children. The media zeroed in on the children, increasing public sensitivity to the horrific senseless nature of the bombing. In fact, the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Spot News Photography was awarded to Charles Porter IV for his photographs of a critically injured 1-year-old child pulled from the rubble and carefully handed to a fireman (“Pulitzer Prize,” 1996).

Immediately following the Oklahoma bombing, President Clinton and First Lady, Hilary Clinton, concerned about children’s reactions, directed aides to gather information from childcare experts. The Clintons, sensitive to children’s fears and confusion, wanted to support this vulnerable group following the disaster. On Saturday, April 22, 1995, President Clinton held a special meeting in the White House Oval Office for children of several federal employees. Children were encouraged to ask questions.
about the bombing and the President and his wife sensitively responded (Bury & Koppel, 2001; “Remarks by the President,” 1995).

Honoring those who lost their lives in the Oklahoma bombing, a massive memorial was constructed. Aspects of the memorial were specifically designed with children in mind, acknowledging their response to the trauma. Children created hand-painted tiles to decorate a portion of the memorial. Additionally, chalkboards were included as part of the memorial, providing young visitors an opportunity to express their feelings in artwork, drawings, and written comments.

**National Emergency Assistance Team**

The National Association of School Psychologists National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT) was formed following the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing (Eaves, 2001). In 2000, NEAT succinctly declared their purpose: “to respond to crises involving schools and children and to facilitate the training of school-based crisis teams to respond to emergencies involving children and adolescents” (Dawson, 2000, p. 19). Scott Poland currently chairs NEAT, directing this team of specialists as they respond to national disasters impacting children, particularly school shootings.

**Red Cross Disaster Mental Health**

Historically, crisis intervention focused more on physical needs of individuals and groups devastated by tragedies. In fact, it was not until the early 1990s that the Red Cross added Disaster Mental Health Services (DMHS) to its broad base of national and international support. This addition was precipitated in 1989 by Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta earthquake (Weaver et al., 2000). Even more recently, in 2005 Red Cross expanded the DMHS training to include a child/family segment, *Meeting the Needs of Children and Families*. This training was specifically geared to address children’s emotional needs, further strengthening and expanding DMHS (American Red Cross [ARC], 2005).

Large-scale disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 and the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 26, 2004, have strengthened the organization of national and international relief efforts. In particular, meeting the emotional needs of children affected by the disasters has increasingly become a primary target of relief efforts (Abramson & Garfield, 2006; ARC, 2005; FEMA, n.d.; Gurwitch, Pfefferbaum, Montgomery, Klomp, & Reissman, 2007; National Institute of Mental Health, 2001).

**Current Status of School Safety Plans**

Directors/coordinators of each state’s school safety program were contacted by phone and/or e-mail. Information was gathered from all 50 states and then checked for accuracy with information posted by the National Association of State Boards of Education (2006). Each state’s policies regarding school safety plans were evaluated to determine (a) the presence/absence of a generic statewide school crisis plan; (b) the presence/absence of state legislation mandating school crisis plans; and (c) whether districts/schools are required to prepare their own crisis plans.

Based on the information provided, states were assigned to four categories.

1. Hawaii differs from the other 49 states. Hawaii contains a single, statewide school district. Hawaii has a uniform statewide plan mandated by state law. All public schools in Hawaii follow their state’s crisis plan.
2. Twenty-two states mandate, by state law, that each district/school in their state creates a school crisis plan. In these states,
state legislation lists guidelines for districts/schools to follow when creating their plans, leaving districts and local schools responsible for creating their own school’s crisis plan, but legislating ingredients to include in the plan. States’ guidelines run the gamut from a listing of generic issues that must be addressed (e.g., violence, bullying, natural disasters, and building security) to extensively detailed procedures to follow during various types of crises. This category includes the following states: Alabama, Alaska, American Samoa, Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Indiana, Los Angeles, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, and Utah.

3. Similar to the second category, nine states have legislated mandates requiring districts and/or schools to create a safety plan. However, legislation does not specify topics or guidelines for safety plans, even though model plans and guidelines are typically provided. This category includes the following states: California, Colorado, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

4. Eighteen states “suggest” that each district and/or school have a plan; however, no specific state laws are in place mandating school safety plans. The state may or may not provide guidelines. This category includes the following states: Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, West Virginia, Wyoming.

In summary, 32 of the 50 states have legislated mandates requiring districts and/or individual schools to have a safety plan in place. However, the extent to which each state mandates the content of district plans varies. Although the remaining 18 states do not have state laws mandating school crisis plans, Title IV-A of NCLB requires all schools in the United States to have safety plans in place, guaranteeing every child an education in a safe setting.

Discussion

The Evolution of School Crisis Plans

Considering past difficulties in implementing fire drill standards, similar difficulties should be anticipated as schools nationwide respond to legislated mandates stipulating crisis intervention protocols. Similar to the history of fire drills, the real challenge is not in stating what needs to be done, but in the face of disaster and trauma, carrying out crisis plans and ensuring effective results. Unfortunately, creating a plan on paper and ultimately putting that plan into action are two separate issues.

Currently, school-based crisis planning faces numerous challenges: responding to federal and state mandates; developing crisis plans that adequately address those mandates “and” meet the unique needs of individual schools (Heath, Annandale, Ryan, & Smith, 2006; USDHHS, 2003); implementing evolving plans as crises arise, taking into consideration who will assist and how to best prepare those individuals to effectively intervene, in particular supporting children’s emotional needs (Allen & Ashbaker, 2004; Brock et al., 1996, 2001; Everly & Flynn, 2006; Heath & Sheen, 2005; James & Gilliland, 2005; Young, 1998); and evaluating a plan’s effectiveness after a crisis occurs (Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001).

Additionally, complications arise when state and federal directives are not funded to support schools in carrying out those mandates. For
instance, NCLB initially created soft money for competitive Safe School grants. Federal money also funded state and federal staff positions operating under Safe Schools, encouraging school training and development of crisis plans. As federal budgets tighten, soft money to direct, support, and monitor crisis plans dries up, leaving an initially flourishing system with insufficient momentum and resources to sustain effective school-based crisis intervention. Based on projected federal budgets, federal Safe School money will be zeroed out by 2007 (Eliminates Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2006).

Hence, support for school safety is currently being weaned from the initial driving force of federal funding, shifting to the meager resources of local school districts.

Hence, school-based crisis intervention stands at a critical juncture: Do we have the knowledge and resources to protect our schools and students? At a grassroots level, can we build on existing knowledge to ensure adequate crisis intervention? Ultimately, preventing tragedies is of paramount importance. However, when tragedies occur, immediate support for traumatized individuals must be the focal point of school-based crisis intervention (Brock et al., 2001; Brock, Lazarus, & Jimerson, 2002; Johnson, 2000). In particular, crisis intervention must include mental health services to support the emotional needs of children and adolescents.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interest: None declared.

References


