An Emergency Is Coming– Are You Ready?

Being a Master of Disaster

BY DALE JOHNSON

A disaster is coming. You do not know what, when, where, or how, but it is coming. As a leader you will be the one that parents, students, and perhaps staff rely on for answers, action, and accountability.

It could be a fast-spreading fire like the one on January 1, 1989, which engulfed a two-story frame structure near Remer, Minnesota, killing 10 occupants, including eight children.

It could be a storm like the 1989 tornado in Huntsville, Alabama, which caused destruction over a 25-mile swath and claimed 18 lives.

The disaster in your future could be an earthquake similar to the 1989 quake in the San Francisco Bay area, which shook for 15 seconds, registered 7.1 on the Richter scale, and claimed 67 lives.

Or your school might have a accident like the one that occurred in 1989 in Alton, Texas, where a bus carrying high school students plunged into a rain-filled gravel pit after being hit by a delivery truck. Nineteen students trapped in the submerged vehicle lost their lives. Or the 1987 tragedy at Comfort, Texas, where a bus and a van carrying members from a church camp stalled on a bridge, and 10 teenagers were swept away by the swollen waters of the Guadalupe River.

The disaster might resemble the 1987 plane crash near Flathead Lake, Montana, in which six members of the Montana Band and four other persons were killed.

Adequate communication is essential for coordinating a school disaster plan.

With proper planning, school emergencies can be managed with minimal injury, confusion, and anxiety.

Disasters occur everywhere. They include natural disasters—tornadoes, storms, floods, and fires, as well as manmade disasters like plane crashes, bus and automobile accidents, toxic waste spills, and radioactive leaks from nuclear power plants.

Even a relatively mild disaster can produce chaos if schools are unprepared. On December 18, 1990, a weather system dumped about 10 inches of snow on Seattle, Washington. Wind gusts of up to 70 miles an hour stranded hundreds of elementary school children overnight when bus services were shut down.

"It was a zoo," said Cheryl Rodway, an office assistant at Coe Elementary School. Besides answering telephone calls from worried parents, she had to supervise 250 children in the cafeteria.[1]

However, with proper planning school emergencies can be managed with minimal injury, confusion, and anxiety. Administrators or head teachers are the single most important factor in an emergency preparedness plan. To prepare for school emergencies, teachers and administrators should take the following actions:

- Prepare a school disaster plan. Make sure that each staff member knows his or her personal role and responsibilities under the plan. Teachers may be responsible for students during and

During emergencies like floods and blizzards, students need mats and blankets and a safe place to stay.

after the emergency, which could last for 72 hours or longer.

- Make a map of the location and a list of available first aid and other emergency supplies (Appendix A). Include 25 gallons of water for each 100 persons. In larger schools, such supplies should be stored in three or four places throughout the school.
- Get to know staff skills, and make assignments accordingly. Someone should be trained in first aid, fire suppression, and damage assessment.
- Know how to turn off gas, electricity, and water, and how to check the shut-off valves for damage.
- Be sure to take proper precautions to minimize hazards, such as the following: bolt all bookshelves, file cabinets, and free-standing cupboards to the wall or arrange them to support one another; remove heavy items from the top of bookshelves and cupboards; equip windows with safety glass or cover them with protective film; make sure partitions, ceilings, overhead lights, and air ducts are secured to the building structure; and keep an inventory of hazardous chemicals in science or industrial technology areas.
- Develop a back-up communications system, such as a two-way CB (citizens band) or ham radio, to communicate with local emergency centers if telephone lines are inoperable. Large schools should have an internal communication system, such as walkie-talkies or megaphones (Appendix B).

Administrators or head teachers are the single most important factor in an emergency preparedness plan.

- Schedule an emergency training preparedness program each year so that teachers and students know how to react in case of disaster. Each teacher should know how to implement the basic emergency drills. This includes teaching students to turn away from windows or other potential hazards; drop to their knees with their backs to windows, if possible hiding under a table or chair; positioning the head down, eyes closed, grasping desk or table legs and holding on tight; keeping the body under or away from equipment; and remaining silent so they can follow directions. Students must learn to apply this behavior outside the classroom. Then, if a disaster happens when no adult is present or while the student is at lunch, in the corridor, or on the playground, he or she still will be protected.
- Establish a release policy and a way to communicate it to parents (Appendix D). Some schools have up to eight permission slips indicating who can pick up a student in an emergency. Others require anyone other than a parent or guardian to sign a release and provide a picture identification. (The latter method is more common.) A serious problem can occur when one parent has custody of the child, but the other parent wants to take the child home. Be sure to also have a staff release plan that takes into consideration any responsibilities that employees may have outside the school.
- Develop a data storage system in the central office that can be transported when the administrator or secretary leaves the building. Store duplicate copies of important data in an off-campus location.[2]

Planning Your Response

Disasters are not orderly and neat. They are chaotic and unpredictable. Therefore, one has to know in advance how to respond intelligently, because there isn't time to read the manual when the disaster is occurring. Here are the basic components of an emergency response system during a disaster:

- Develop central command posts or planning areas inside and outside the building. Be sure that the command posts have maps of the campus and buildings, a list of facilities and hazards in the area, an up-to-date enrollment sheet, first-aid supplies, and other tools necessary to manage the disaster response.
- Develop a central decision-making body to assess damage procedures. Include the administrator, office employees, and custodians or maintenance personnel.[3]

Design a response system that gives each teacher the basic operating procedures to follow:

- Implement basic safety procedures such as "duck and cover" and fire evacuation procedures.
- Store an emergency kit near the desk. The kit should contain an attendance sheet, special medical information, and student release information.
- Determine who is most seriously

Students and teachers should be trained to avoid windows in case of tornado or earthquake.

injured, administer first aid, and comfort those who are hysterical (Appendix C).

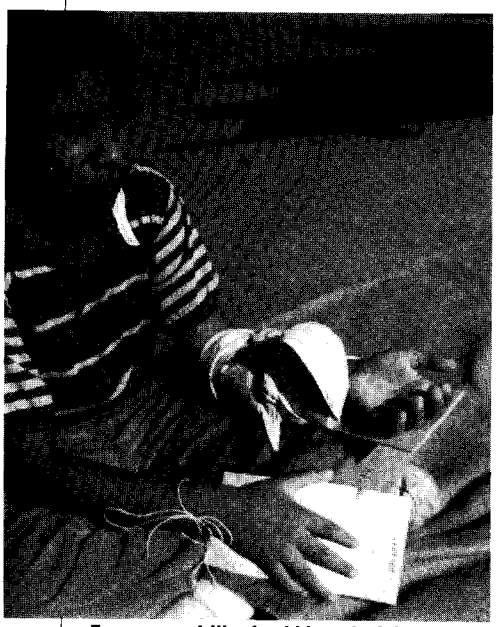
- Work on a "buddy system" with another teacher and class so if one is injured or there is a substitute teacher, the other teacher can care for the students and get them to safety.
- Evacuate the building if necessary.
- Go to an alternate site if the emergency is prolonged. When rescue vehicles and fire engines are involved, the students should immediately be taken to the alternate site to avoid interference with rescue efforts, and to ensure student safety and orderly dismissal procedures.
- Know what to do if an emergency occurs while on a field trip or other off-campus location.
- Be ready to set up emergency sanitation procedures if necessary.
- Communicate with the press through the appointed spokesperson (usually the principal).

Specialists in school emergency planning suggest that schools develop an emergency procedure and then stage simulations to make certain that everyone knows how to react. Since disasters provoke fear and anxiety, simulations can help individuals to relate to emergencies more rationally. Simulations also expose potential problem areas. This helps participants to improve their procedures and make suggested changes.

Evaluating response to actual disasters can also improve emergency preparation plans. An illustration of this is the 1987 earthquake that closed schools in the Montebello Unified School District in Southern California. Not one child out of more than 31,500 students was injured, and only six of nearly 3,000 employees reported minor injuries.[4]

Why did the emergency plan go so well? The school system had established disaster plans and staged emergency drills. Furniture was attached to structural building components, command posts functioned properly, and the schools were able to account for each student and secure their campuses.

Nevertheless, the superintendent described some problem areas. Communication within and between schools broke down because telephones did not work, information network systems didn't function as planned, and outside telephone jacks and cordless telephones were inadequate. In addition, coordination of bus transportation needed improvement. Some drivers brought students to school, while other drivers told students to go home. Parents created traffic jams by double-parking when



Emergency drills should be scheduled frequently to teach students how to react in case of a disaster.

picking up their children.[5]

Cook also emphasizes the need to have emergency toilet facilities available and to prepare school personnel to relate to emotional parents and relatives.[6]

A Simulation

Since simulated problem solving can be beneficial in emergency preparation, consider the following hypothetical circumstance and solve the problem. (See below for possible answers.)

You are the administrator of a 200-student school with self-contained classrooms. The brick building lies east-west with lower grades in the east wing and the administration complex in the middle, off the continuous hallway.

At 10:30 a.m. on a cold December day with poor visibility, you are in your office disciplining a third-grader. Suddenly there is a loud noise, the building shakes, and you hear an explosion.

What should you and your teachers do? Outline at least 12 steps to follow in assessing and coping with the disaster.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM

1. You alert the secretary, and taking the third grader along, proceed immediately to the west wing.

Everyone has to know in advance how to respond intelligently, because there isn't time to read the manual when the disaster is occurring.

2. You direct the third grader to his classroom. Upon entering the fifth-grade classroom, you assess the situation. A small aircraft has crashed and exploded. Some students are injured, but there are no fatalities.

3. You check electrical and gas lines for damage and call the secretary on the intercom to inform teachers that Emergency Plan 1 is in effect. You sound the alarm. (Schools should have at least two emergency plans, one for major disasters and another for minor incidents.)

4. Each teacher implements the disaster plan as assigned. Even-numbered classroom teachers take charge of their classroom and the classroom preceding their level. Odd-numbered classroom teachers perform specific disaster relief tasks.

5. The eighth-grade teacher takes seventh- and eighth-grade students; the sixth-grade teacher takes fifth and sixth graders (except those who are injured), making a note in her attendance record of who stayed in their classroom; the fourth-grade teacher takes third-grade students to the gymnasium where his students are in physical education class and then proceeds out of the building; and the second-grade teacher takes the first-grade students. Students are then evacuated to the academy gymnasium, three blocks away, on the same side of the street. Each leader takes class rosters and attendance records.

6. Meanwhile, back at the office, the secretary calls the police, fire department, and academy principal to inform him that Emergency Plan 1 is in effect. She then leaves the office, taking the school emergency information packet, including release forms. At this point she becomes the off-campus coordinator.

7. The seventh-grade teacher is the second in command on campus. He coordinates evacuation, secures the building, and helps direct emergency traffic.

8. The fifth-grade teacher is in charge of emergency first aid but stays in the classroom, using his first-aid kit. He sends the third-grade teacher to the central office for emergency supplies.

9. The first-grade teacher is in charge of communication. She reports to the principal at the emergency scene.

10. You realize that a fire could occur because of the explosion and tell the physical education instructor to cut off the gas line. As on-campus emergency coordinator, you take charge of advising, informing, and decision-making.

11. You tell the communication expert to notify the local radio station about the situation. Information to be conveyed: The children are all right, in the care of teachers, and onlookers should stay away from the emergency site. More information will be released as it becomes available. Later reports could advise parents when, where, and how to pick up their children.

12. You direct the communication expert to call the parents of fifth-grade students who are being treated. Parents are told where their children are being taken, and what procedures to follow.

13. You ask for volunteers to call the parents of fifth-grade students who were not injured, telling them that there has been an emergency in the fifth-grade room, and reassuring them that their child is safe and unharmed.

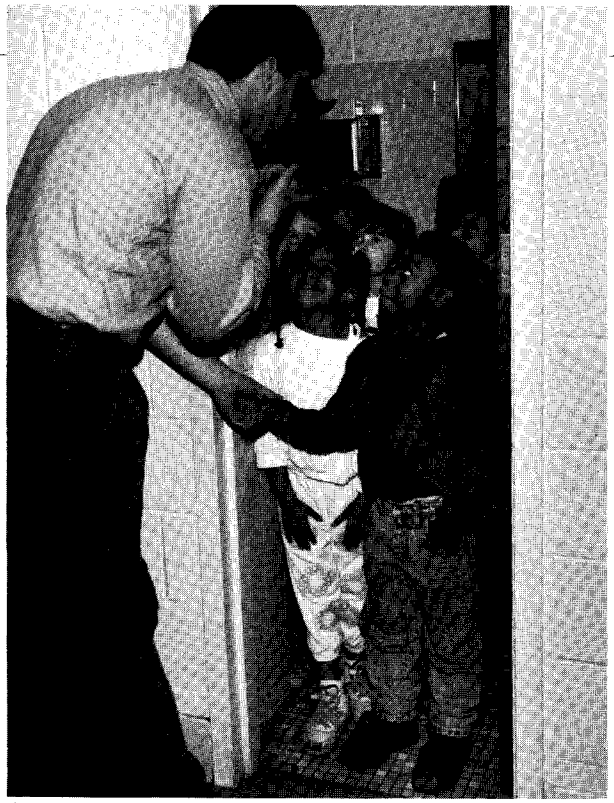
14. The fifth-grade teacher continues first-aid with the third-grade teacher's assistance. When emergency vehicles arrive, they assist medical personnel. They then help you with other responsibilities.

15. You are the only spokesperson for the news media.

To make this exercise more realistic, insert the following factors:

- ***What if the principal is at a convention and the seventh-grade class has a substitute teacher?***
- ***What if the first-grade class is on the playground?***
- ***What if the fifth-grade teacher was injured in the accident?***

How did you do? Usually leaders doing this or similar exercises have difficulty with these areas: making certain who is in attendance, choosing a proper methodology for releasing students, selecting

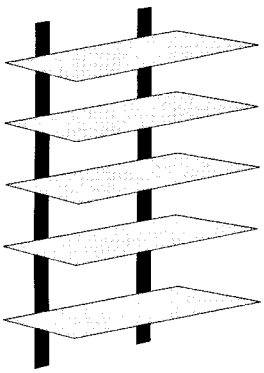


Certain locations in the school building provide more protection than others against natural disasters.

Disaster simulations provide an opportunity for schools to evaluate their emergency procedures.

PREPAREDNESS FOR THE "BIG QUAKE"

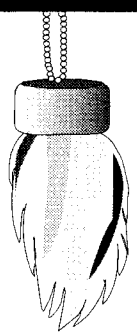
THE IDEAL LEVEL



BOOKSHELF BOLTED TO THE WALL

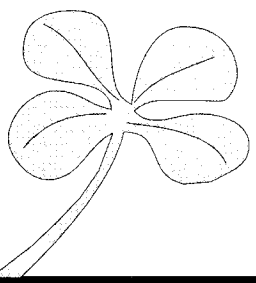
EMERGENCY SUPPLIES

THE ALL-TOO-LIKELY LEVEL



RABBIT'S FOOT

CROSSING FINGERS



FOUR LEAF CLOVER

APPENDIX A

The following basic items should be included in kits:

Adhesive tape
Antiseptic solution - (green soap)
Bandages
Blanket
Bullhorn, battery operated
Current class roster
Compresses - two sheets and towels
Drinking cups
Emergency cards
Bandages, including one triangle bandage, gauze pads
Light stick or flashlight with batteries
List of disaster procedures
Permanent marker pens
Pen, pencil, small notebook
Plastic drop cloths
Premoistened towelettes or baby wipes
Red Cross first-aid manual
Red flag - emergency signal
Safety pins
Scissors
Shovel
Space blanket
String
Toilet paper
Transistor radio
Walkie-talkies
Black plastic sheeting, four feet wide x 100 feet long, agricultural quality for privacy screen for sanitary facilities.

an alternate site for temporary housing of students, and establishing an adequate communication system.

Adequate planning can help ensure that you are a master of disaster if an emergency occurs at your school.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, December 19, 1990.

2. Much of the materials in this plan was drawn from the work of other individuals and groups. Special thanks go to Mr. Hans Krenz, principal of Buena Vista SDA Elementary School, Auburn, Washington, who conferred with me on developing an on-site emergency preparedness plan; and to the Washington Conference junior academy principals who critiqued the rough draft for the Washington Conference School Emergency Preparedness Plan.

3. Many of these concepts are summarized and adapted from:

a. Washington State School Earthquake Emergency Plan.

b. *Guidebook for Developing a School Earthquake Safety Program* by FEMA 88 (Federal Emergency Management Agency 12 [86])

c. Site Emergency Planning Workbook, Emergency Management Division, Michigan Department of State Police.

4. J. Cook, "This School District Was Ready!" *Thrust*, 17:27 (January 1988).

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Forms used and/or modified from Virgil Hauselt Memorial Junior Academy, Santa Cruz, California.

APPENDIX B

Emergency Telephone Numbers (example)

Fire Department	911
Police Department	911
Ambulance Service	911
Sheriff's Office	911
Highway Patrol	911
Coast Guard	911
Community Hospital	481-5423
American Red Cross	679-0213
Office of Civil Defense	814-5978
Gas Company	482-6600
Electric Company	491-3800
Gas Leaks	482-6666
Telephone Emergency Repair	411
Information	311
Poison Control Center	482-8912
Emergency News Bulletins	
KICQ 715 AM 94.5 FM	481-5734

APPENDIX C[7]
INJURY TREATMENT RECORD

Name: _____

DATE	TIME	TREATMENT
_____	_____	_____
		_____

APPENDIX D
STUDENT RECORD RELEASE FORM

STUDENT'S NAME	NAME OF PERSON TO WHOM STUDENT IS RELEASED	RELATION	TIME	DATE
_____	NAME _____	_____	_____	_____

ADDRESS: _____

_____

PHONE: _____

TYPE OF ID: _____

ID #: _____