



LESSONS LEARNED

From School Crises and Emergencies



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BUS CRASH AT LAKEVIEW PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Incident

At 3:30 p.m. on Feb. 19, 2008, a school bus traveling north of the small town of Cottonwood, Minn., was transporting students home from Lakeview School. Six minutes later, as the bus reached an intersection, it was broadsided by a minivan. The impact caused the school bus to hit another vehicle and then tip over, with 28 elementary and middle school students and the driver on board. As a result of the crash, sixteen of the student passengers were injured, and four were killed.

This Lessons Learned issue highlights the response and recovery efforts of Lakeview Public Schools, in collaboration with its community and regional partners, regarding this devastating incident. The geographically isolated yet close-knit nature of this region played a significant role in the recovery efforts and resources available to assist the community following the tragic accident. The lessons learned from Lakeview Public School District's experiences with this crisis are shared here to assist all types of school districts in their emergency planning efforts and response strategies.

The Response

Word of the incident traveled quickly through the small community. One of the first to arrive at the crash site happened to be the off-duty fire chief of Marshall, a town about 15 miles southeast of Cottonwood. He immediately began assisting the bus driver in evacuating students from the bus. Soon, additional off-duty first responders, school personnel, families of students, as well as on-duty first responders arrived on the scene. In total, 22 service representatives, including ambulance, state patrol, fire, police, and air care personnel from local and neighboring communities, as well as state department of public safety and highway patrol staff, contributed to the response efforts that day.

The Recovery

Recovery efforts in the days, months, and even year following the crash provided several lessons learned for Lakeview Public Schools. Upon reflection, Lakeview Public Schools Counselor Shelly Buntjer sees three key facets of the recovery process that both presented challenges for the district, and helped pave the way for a healthy recovery for the students, staff, and Lakeview community. These facets were: the communication of information around the event, the organization of support services in the aftermath of the crash and beyond, and the emotional processing of the incident with memorials and the anniversary.

The district of Lakeview Public Schools includes students living in the communities of Cottonwood and Wood Lake in two separate counties of southwestern Minnesota. A single school, Lakeview School, houses all 588 students in the district in grades K through 12.

The district's communication of information to students, staff, and media

"Communication is key," says Buntjer, "and any time there is a situation that forces people to abruptly adapt in a crisis, things are never ideal, but communication is important." Specifically, communication about the incident matters, from a school district perspective, to three audiences: students, staff, and media. In fact, Buntjer suggests appointing someone specifically to lead in this role as head of a communications committee or similar group. "It is one thing to have a crisis team, but you need to have someone take the duty, specifically, of directing communication, and there needs to be consistency in that," she explains. For example, many people were at the crash scene and at the school building immediately following the incident, yet students were unaccounted for, so there was a concern that families of injured students, especially those injured fatally, would not be the first to know.

Staffing a central confidential communications center with a few individuals helps to ensure that sensitive information is conveyed appropriately and in as timely a manner as possible.

The day after the crash, the first thing students wanted to do was to learn the details of what had happened. “[Students] were looking for the pieces to put together the puzzle,” Buntjer observed. “In terms of sharing information, we have learned that the more you can share, the better.” Classes were not held, but the school was open and grief counselors were available for students. In a small community, the school building and school environment often acts as the center of the community. Therefore, the school served as a natural hub for recovery. “Getting people to the school is the best thing—kids need kids, and need adults and structure, and need to make sure the grieving is healthy. We started lots of [healthy] opportunities for grieving,” explained Buntjer.

The communication committee played a significant role in keeping youths safe during the days following, including ensuring they were not leaving the building at odd hours, distressed, or that people were getting onto school grounds that should not be there. “You want to monitor the school perimeters in light of everything,” Buntjer said. Lakeview asked the school’s head custodian to take over that role.

Meanwhile, the district’s superintendent served as the public face for the school district and acted as the liaison between the school and the media. Within a day of the crash, the superintendent had published what Nancy Riestenberg of the state’s Safe and Drug Free Schools program and the Minnesota School Safety Center called a “powerful and effective” letter to the district’s Web site. The district also closed off the school to the media.

“Our superintendent’s experience [having previously gone through a similar incident with a different district] was really helpful,” school counselor Buntjer shared. As a result, “His take was that the media has to do their job, just like we do. So how do you allow them to do theirs without being offensive or intrusive? Give them what they want . . . but that doesn’t mean you have to let them into school.”

Lakeview’s superintendent held press conferences updating the media on events related to the crash, conducting such conferences at a separate location from the school. This compromise allowed students to be kept safe and protected at school during the day, but also gave media personnel the satisfaction of knowing they would receive updates to serve their needs.

When school resumed that Thursday, counseling and administrative staff sat down with teachers to talk about how to handle the situation with their students. The situation was especially difficult for staff, as one teacher had lost a child in the crash. “The more information you can provide for the staff, the better,” Buntjer remarked. “We certainly did a lot, but looking back—we could have done even more.” Staff also were provided tangible resources, such as pamphlets on how youths express grief and the different developmental stages in the grieving process. “But to be honest,” Buntjer observed, “staff were so overwhelmed [with coping with the crisis themselves] at that point, they couldn’t handle one more thing.” Riestenberg echoed this sentiment. “It is always a challenge to also deal with the adults. The staff are also first responders to the children. Children will talk to the staff because that is who they know. Staff need to be treated carefully, because their services are needed greatly, but they have needs, as well.”

One way the district helped support their staff was to have them “shadowed,” meaning that retired teachers, substitute teachers, teachers from other school districts, and even a retired superintendent were brought in to stand by and assist certain teachers and administrators as they went through their day-to-day schedule. For teachers who maintained their classroom with no shadowed support, a few roaming substitute teachers also were hired. “That way, teachers could voluntarily sign up for an hour or half or so with the professional, and no time was deducted from their pay or [they were not] looked down on,” explained Buntjer. Lakeview also recruited individuals experienced with compassion fatigue to help staff, and hosted an in-service meeting for staff during the school day to discuss grief processing. “If you can’t care for yourself, you can’t care for others,” Buntjer said.

Organization of support services

In the aftermath of the crash, an outpouring of support was shown to the Lakeview community by local, regional, state, and national partners. The district already housed a full-time counselor and a school psychologist two days per week, but when the crash occurred, neighboring county and district mental health providers shared counselors, social workers and school psychologists to provide a greater reservoir of psychological assistance to Lakeview. A preexisting agreement between school districts in the area dispatches a student assistance staff member or members to help a neighboring district in the event of an emergency. “The next day [following the crash], people started coming to school, even without being asked – and by Wednesday afternoon we had between 20 and 30 mental health professionals or counselors.”

This influx of mental health providers presented an unexpected situation for the district; unlike other

“As chaotic as it seemed at the time, there was structure to everything. We gathered as counseling staff and took the lead. ... We immediately started a process after we had gotten all the volunteers that Wednesday. We knew who was coming back Thursday based on sign-ups, and then assigned them ... making sure every grade that might need somebody had somebody,” said counselor Buntjer.

first responders (fire, EMT), psychological first responders are not a cohesive unit. The influx required organization, so one counselor stepped up and ran triage for all the mental health professionals who arrived. A sign-in sheet was started, asking the mental health workers to commit their availability. “We never turned down anybody. You can always send people home, but you can’t get them back,” said Buntjer.

As part of preparedness efforts, districts can plan for those who will be in charge of, and triage, the psychological first aid assistance when they arrive, and how the command module for their deployment should be organized. In fact, relationships with area mental health professionals can and should be created before a crisis event occurs; that way, in the aftermath of a crisis, energies can be devoted to the delivery of services, rather than to the possible organizing of providers. It is crucial for districts to pre-screen mental health providers for appropriate

credentials prior to their being needed in an emergency to ensure the best possible care is given to children.

The day of the bus crash, coincidentally, the supervisor of the Minnesota State Safe and Drug-Free Schools (SDFS) program and the associate assistant deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools were attending a conference in Minnesota. Soon after the crash, they held a conference call with the Lakeview superintendent, and the federal program staff provided contact information for other districts across the nation that had experienced a similar tragedy, as well as information regarding Project School Emergency Response to Violence (SERV) funding for response and recovery. State staff visited the district, and aided the superintendent in drafting and completing a Project SERV application. In April 2008, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a Project SERV Immediate Services grant to assist the district in the recovery process. The Minnesota State SDFS program also provided the district \$25,000 of reallocation funds for the student support staff’s continued work up to the anniversary and end of the school year 2009. Project SERV funds, once awarded, were used to provide additional support for students, families, and staff in the recovery process. In addition, Project SERV funds paid for the substitute teachers needed so that staff could take needed time off to emotionally process the events and grieve. Additional information about Project SERV may be accessed at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/dvppserv/index.html>.

Memorials and Anniversary

Emotionally processing a tragedy like the Lakeview bus crash and its loss of lives is difficult for any community, and understanding how to best facilitate the process of healing is important for the school district involved. In deciding how to handle the organization of memorials, Lakeview Public Schools personnel gathered information from other districts regarding similar situations; however, ultimately, the Lakeview community itself shaped the honoring memorials to these tragedies. “We are so small, and families are so integrated with each other and the school, so it was inevitable to have memorials on the school site,” said Buntjer.

Several wakes and one funeral were held at the school gym. Although holding funeral ceremonies

at the school site was not ideal, the size of the community in this instance and the fact that it was the only facility large enough to accommodate the outpouring of attendees justified it under these circumstances. The community and school also agreed upon the creation of a memorial garden on the edge of school grounds. The garden was planned not only as a memorial to the bus crash victims, but also as a memorial to anyone; community members have the option of purchasing memorial bricks to pave the garden walkway. “Whatever you do ... sets a precedent.” Buntjer shared, speaking of the best way to handle memorials in the face of such a tragedy. “You hope something like this never happens again, but if it does, you have to at least be equal in the response. The families were the driving force [behind the garden], but the administration and the school board were the final decision makers.”

The anniversary of the crash brought another opportunity for reflection and emotional processing of the event, and again, it was important for Lakeview Public Schools to handle this date in a way that would be healthy and beneficial to the community. “The anniversary really presented an emotional need just as big as the crash itself, and to not prepare for that is a disservice,” Buntjer said. “We started preparing well in advance, and a social worker and counselor took the lead.”

First, planners met with a specialist in the grieving process of children to decide what the anniversary should entail, from a psychological perspective towards healing. Planners also spoke with the families of the crash victims to see what they wanted the anniversary-marking events to involve, and presented options to the school board. Once approved, the grief specialist became the director of the planning committee of over 15 individuals, including school board members, staff, community members, and students. The entire anniversary day was planned together, but throughout the process, students played an important role. The Lakeview students chose to

“[Students] have great ideas [about how to honor the anniversary of such an event], and they know where they are in the grieving process,” said counselor Buntjer.

mark the anniversary with a theme of giving back to all the supporters who had helped them through the crisis.

The anniversary day, themed, “Our journey of hope,” was thus comprised

of service projects. Students made thank-you posters for first responders, donated fleece blankets to a foundation that had supported the school in the aftermath of the crash, made pillows and other comfort items for service organizations to provide to youths in emergency response situations, made bracelets representing the students who were lost in the crash, and drew representations on tiles of what made them hopeful about the future in light of the entire experience, which will be used to create a “wall of hope” within the school building. While the younger students enjoyed puppet shows, the older students received a visit from professional athletes and other inspirational figures and speakers who emphasized to the students the great journey of healing they had taken. “It was fabulous,” said Buntjer. “You always think of [an anniversary like this] as somber, but it was a celebration.”

Responding to and coping with a crisis, such as the Lakeview bus crash of February 2008, is always a challenge. However, as Buntjer observed, “In those situations, you don’t necessarily need a whole bunch of professionals or money—you need people who are willing to give their time and be with each other.”

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The REMS TA Center was established in October 2007 by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS). The center supports schools and school districts in developing and implementing comprehensive emergency management plans by providing technical assistance via trainings, publications and individualized responses to requests. For additional information about school emergency management topics, visit the REMS TA Center at <http://rems.ed.gov> or call 1-866-540-REMS (7367). For information about the REMS grant program, contact Tara Hill (tara.hill@ed.gov) or Sara Strizzi (sara.strizzi@ed.gov).

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