

The Fourth “R” of a Crisis: RECOVERY

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The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, has caused school districts to review their emergency preparedness, and raised concerns about the safety of students and staff. The recent tornado disaster in Moore, Oklahoma, highlights that emergencies of all types can strike school communities, and that crisis plans must be developed to prepare school districts for “all hazards,” from natural disasters to health crises and incidents of violence.

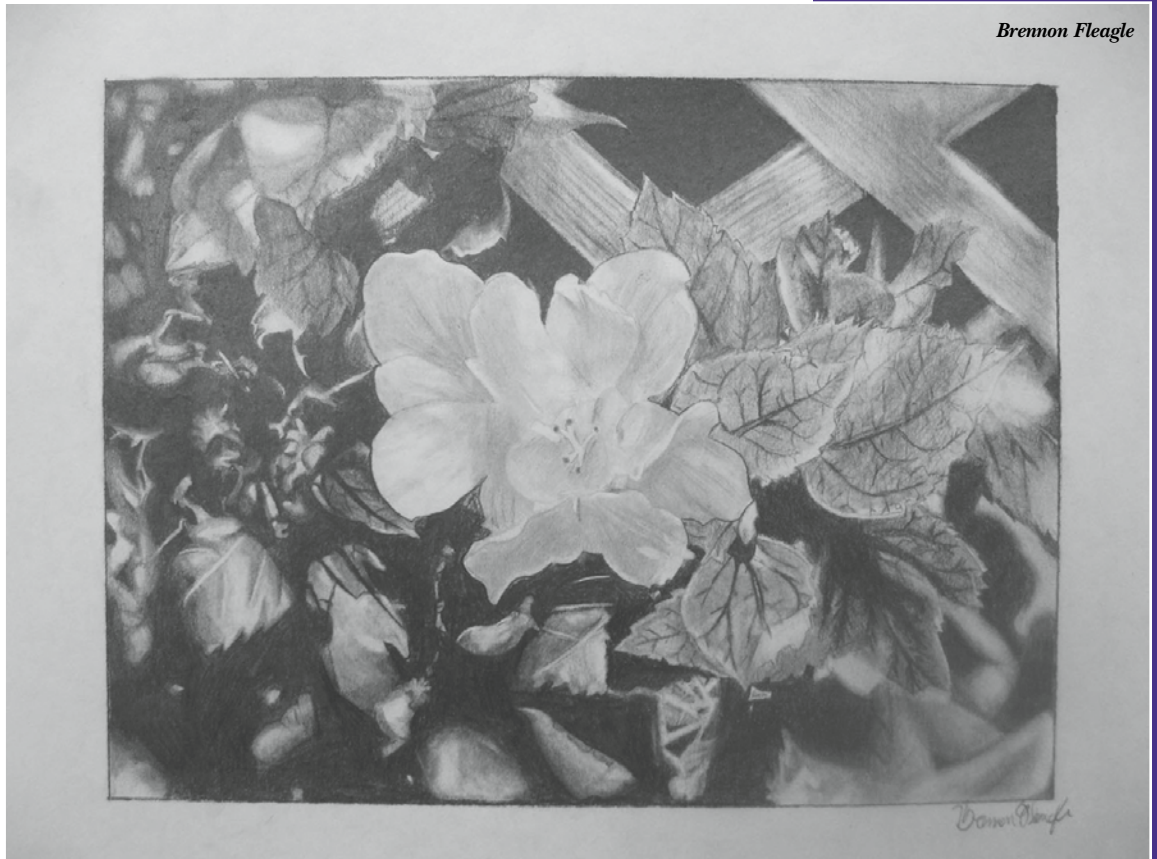
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Effective emergency management plans utilize important federal guidelines, including the four phases of emergency management (prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery) that engage community partners in effective strategies to assess and mitigate risk, avoid injury and exposure, promptly respond to any emergency, and deliver

timely and appropriate resources to facilitate recovery following a crisis.

Importantly, the recovery phase of emergency management must be addressed in the preparedness phase of planning for a school crisis. The Minnesota School Safety Center, in its Comprehensive School Safety Guide, states:

The goal of recovery is to restore the learning environment and infrastructure of the school as quickly as possible. The plan for recovery needs to be developed during the preparedness phase, not after an emergency or crisis situation. Recovery consists of four main components: emotional, academic, physical/structural and business/fiscal. In recovery planning, all four components need to be addressed. The recovery process may be short-term or long-term depending on the circumstances of the event. Time and resources need to be allocated accordingly.¹



By using a preplanned, structured approach to address emergencies, school districts develop a framework that allows for positive actions and flexible response to the crisis situation at hand. Minnesota statutes, recognizing the importance of school safety, require that schools develop their emergency management plans in collaboration with community partners. This approach recognizes the important partnership between school, law enforcement, fire, medical, and other community assets to share information, resources and ideas for the development of an effective emergency management system. This collaboration is critical in the planning for recovery actions that follow a school crisis.

The school district's emergency response team must promptly and accurately assess the crisis situation and engage several

resources to assist recovery operations.

In a natural disaster or weather event, school buildings or infrastructure may be damaged or destroyed. There may be injuries or deaths involving students or staff. Regular communication systems can be rendered inoperable or destroyed. Incidents of violence may involve law enforcement operations and a lengthy criminal investigation.

With the goal of returning to learning and restoring the infrastructure of the school as quickly as possible, there are many recovery action items that must be planned before a crisis strikes. Federal guidance from the U.S. Department of Education,² and practical reflection, suggests that schools should determine the roles and responsibilities of staff and others who will assist in recovery actions during the preparedness phase of emergency management. These steps include having

1. <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/hsem/mn-school-safety-center/Documents/Comprehensive%20School%20Safety%20Guide.pdf>

2. For example, the U.S. Department of Education Emergency Planning website, www.ed.gov/emergencyplan; and Emergency Response and Crisis Management Technical Assistance (TA) Center, www.ercm.org/rem.ed.gov/docs/PracticalInformationonCrisisPlanning.pdf.



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district counselors train school staff to assess the emotional needs of students and colleagues to determine intervention needs.

The district, in collaboration with its community partners, should also establish a Crisis Intervention Team that will be involved in recovery efforts. The Crisis Intervention Team can be a centralized recovery team, or individual school-based teams that address recovery at the local school level. In either model, it is important to be flexible to address changing circumstances through allocation of additional resources. The roles of the Crisis Intervention Team should be defined, and members should participate in practice and mock crisis trainings to exercise and understand how the team will be deployed following a crisis situation.

Recovery efforts will likely involve both buildings and people. Depending on the crisis event, the teams preselected to address recovery may need to engage a safety audit to assess the safety of buildings and infrastructure needs. The school district’s insurer, as well as its architect and legal counsel, should be consulted in the emergency planning phase to discuss and plan for crisis recovery as well as possible liability issues. Current building plans and facilities information should be updated and readily available following a crisis.

The district and community partners should have in place memoranda of understanding, mutual aid agreements or similar arrangements to facilitate joint cooperation, and effective and timely recovery resources, and avoid jurisdictional disputes. It is also important to have a protocol in place to address the varied issues presented by multiple third parties that may provide services to the school district following a crisis. In addition, the district’s recovery planning should include the emotional needs of students, staff, families and responders. The district’s Crisis Intervention Team should plan for grief counseling and mental health resources that can be utilized in recovery efforts. Depending on the crisis event, age-appropriate group interventions may be beneficial to students and staff.

Following a crisis, it is critical to maintain effective internal and external communication.

Federal guidance recommends daily debriefings for staff, responders and others assisting recovery efforts to support those helping others and to maintain professionalism and support for sustained recovery operations. The district’s recovery planning should also include regular community updates through a public relations resource or other predesignated representative who can provide regular effective information to the public. Depending on the nature of the crisis event, recovery efforts may take many months, or even years, with varying issues to address. Emotions may also be triggered by anniversaries of the crisis or other causes creating a need for further support services. Recovery planning should include appropriate recognition of these situations through memorials, group events or similar community activities.

Recovery actions following a crisis also include evaluating the incident and the effectiveness of the school district’s emergency management system: How can operations be improved? What additional resources are needed? Responders and team members should be interviewed, and critical information gathered and assessed. The district’s emergency management plan should be reviewed, mindful of this important evaluation, and adjusted as necessary.

By engaging in emergency preplanning for recovery actions, school districts will be better equipped to manage and deliver effective resources during the important recovery phase following a school crisis.

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