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Developing Lockdown Policies

By Charles J. Russo, J.D., Ed.D.

Districts should ensure they have comprehensive policies in place in the event of lockdowns.

Hardly a week passes without reading or hearing about a school being locked down because of concerns for the safety of students, teachers, and staff.

The increasing number of events that prompt lockdowns presents a sad commentary about today's world. Aware of the very real possibility of threats of violence on campus, district leaders must ensure that they have current policies that cover the safety and risk management issues associated with imposed lockdowns.

Recommendations for School Lockdown Policies

School leaders should establish policies that identify who is responsible for calling for and directing the implementation of lockdowns, as well as other safety- and risk-related issues. Accordingly, they may wish to consider the following suggestions.

1. Consult with public safety officials—their local and state police and fire departments, as well as federal agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Homeland Security—about what their lockdown policies should address. A key member of the policy-writing or policy-revising committees should be the person responsible for preparing and working with the district's school resource officers and local law enforcement agencies. Insofar as representatives of those agencies will have had experience in dealing with emergencies, their input will be invaluable.

Policy teams should also include a board member, a central office official such as the school business official, a parent, a community representative, a building-level administrator, a teacher, the head of the counseling department (because the services provided by professionals in this

area can be crucial in the aftermath of a crisis), a school resource officer, and perhaps a high school student, who should be able to appreciate the necessity of a policy of this type. Board attorneys should also be active participants in this process to help ensure that the policies comply with applicable state and federal laws and regulations.

2. Identify whether anyone can order lockdowns independently or if another person must be consulted before acting—and who that person is. If a principal is out of the building or has been incapacitated during the emergency, it is important to have identified alternates who can act in the principal's stead.
3. Provide examples of the types of emergencies that might justify ordering a school lockdown. Delineate between soft and hard lockdowns (discussed below).
4. Outline responsibilities during and after lockdowns. Identify who in the central office should be contacted when a lockdown needs to be called and who is responsible for making that contact. Identify who will alert the police and other first responders. Designate the individual who will be the official spokesperson during and after lockdowns. Ensure that teachers understand the importance of taking attendance so students can be accounted for.
5. Post lockdown policies on district websites, and include them in teacher, staff, student, and parent handbooks to increase awareness of what must be done during emergencies.

Soft Lockdowns

Soft, or preventative, lockdowns are better described as warnings, as calls to be vigilant should there be a concern that intruders may have come on campus, or that nearby

events, such as fires or explosions, may become immediate threats. In this case, the principal could make announcements on a school's intercom or use electronic communications, such as Emails or text messages, advising everyone to be on a heightened alert because of the soft lockdown. The message can be as simple as "Soft Lockdown On."

During soft lockdowns, teachers should try to continue normal classroom activities. At the same time, teachers should (1) ensure that students remain in their rooms, (2) close classroom doors and windows and lower blinds, (3) lock doors from the inside or wedge them closed to enhance safety, (4) take attendance, and (5) notify the office, preferably via electronic communications, about student absences.

Hard Lockdowns

Hard lockdowns occur when officials know or are reasonably certain that one or more intruders are in school buildings, or when nearby events present imminent threats.

One way to announce a hard lockdown is to make an announcement via the schoolwide intercom system; another way is to rely on electronic means, such as text messages. Insofar as public announcements, even coded messages, may put intruders on notice that officials are aware of their presence, it seems to be more prudent to avoid doing so. Instead, leaders may be better off relying on electronic communications, such as text messages, employing such straightforward language as "Hard Lockdown On."

Education leaders should remind recipients of the lockdown messages not to communicate with people outside the buildings or others on campus during lockdowns. They do not want to unwittingly alert intruders, nor do they want to create public panic in nearby communities or among visitors in the schools.

When hard lockdowns are in effect, teachers should (1) direct their

students to remain in their classrooms; (2) close doors and windows and lower blinds; (3) lock doors from the inside or wedge them closed to enhance safety; (4) not allow anyone in or out; (5) have students remain silent; (6) turn off electronic equipment, including cell phones, that may make noise alerting intruders of their locations; and (7) take attendance as during soft lockdowns.

Students in such locations as the cafeteria, library, or gymnasium should follow the directions of their teachers or staff members as to where to gather for safety. Students who may be in bathrooms, hallways, or other unsupervised areas should enter designated safe locations or nearby classrooms as soon as they can reasonably do so.

When emergency first responders arrive, school officials, including the school resource officer, should take direction from them about whether they should assist with securing the building and locating students. If security cameras are in place, police and the school resource officer should review tapes to help locate intruders who may be hiding, as the resource officer will have a better understanding of the school facilities.

During hard lockdowns, everyone should remain in their safe locations until they receive signals to do otherwise. When ending lockdowns, principals or other designated officials should make announcements, notify everyone electronically, or both. A proclamation such as "All Clear, Lockdown Ended" can be accompanied with advice directing students, teachers, and staff what to do next.

Other Lockdown Procedures

Shortly after a lockdown, education leaders should make counselors available to anyone associated with the school who may need help dealing with what occurred.

As with traditional fire drills, districts should provide regular drills on lockdown procedures for students, teachers, and staff to help ensure

that their policies are implemented quickly and smoothly. Laws specifically mandating lockdown training are already in effect in Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas, and Washington. The laws in Arkansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Texas specify that drills should occur during each school year, whereas Delaware's statute requires at least two per academic year, and Washington requires at least three.

Mandatory training sessions for students, teachers, and staff should be presented by emergency personnel, who are well versed in evacuation procedures. Participants should be reminded to stay calm and follow specific routes to safety if it becomes necessary to evacuate classrooms or other locations. Students should be reminded to turn off their cell phones when told to do so; teachers may be directed to place their phones on silent so they will still be able to receive communications from their administrators or safety personnel.

Another valuable tool to help manage risk and ensure safety is to have participants practice reentering the buildings in the same quick, quiet manner when drills or actual lockdowns end.

Conclusion

We can only hope that a day will come when school leaders will rarely, if ever, have to call for school lockdowns. However, until such time, education leaders must be alert to threats to school safety. Having sound policies in place is the ounce of prevention that can become the proverbial pound of cure.

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