Management After a Crisis
Coping and Leading When Disaster Strikes A School District

PLUS
Combating Cyberbullying, p33
Ethics: Hallway Propaganda, p8
Legal Brief: Staff Abuse, p10
N

tural disasters, as well as crises of the man-made variety, call on leaders of school districts to manage scenarios impossible to predict and for which no amount of training can adequately prepare. One thing all major crises hold in common is their far-reaching effects, which can run the gamut from personal safety and mental well-being to the basic needs of housing and food. Snap decisions are a given. Some come from the gut, some from experience. Some are made alone, others benefit from the counsel of colleagues. Flexibility and adaptability are the rule.

Each crisis situation is unique with no one-size-fits-all approach to managing the aftermath. Thomas Baruffi, a superintendent who had to deal with the tragic loss of four high school football players in a car crash last summer, says, “We learned to listen to what people were saying instead of trying to impose something.”

Baruffi’s professional dealings and personal coping are described in the ensuing pages, one of six superintendents whose stories of recent crisis handling are depicted. The others involve a tornado’s destruction of a Midwestern community and its schools, the fatal shooting of an elementary school principal in California inside his office and the damage inflicted on a couple of Minnesota school districts by what one participant dubbed “a 500-year storm.”

Four stories of professional responses and personal coping in the aftermath of death and destruction in school communities across the country

BY MARIAN KISCH
Planning in advance of a crisis runs like a thread through the individual superintendents’ accounts. The school system leaders had established relationships with police, fire departments, county mental health services and area businesses. They had technology at the ready, including new forms of social media, to keep students and parents in the loop. Notably, the superintendents had lined up something that often gets overlooked in the accounts of gut-wrenching crises — personal support — from leaders of other organizations and their own administrative staffs.

“Learning from the wisdom of those who have dealt with complex tragedies and disasters provides insight and builds confidence in all of us,” says Rich Bagin, executive director of the National School Public Relations Association. “It takes more than a tweet or e-mail posting to absorb the insight of those who have successfully ‘managed crises in school settings’.”

Joplin’s Tornado

Shortly after a Category EF5 tornado touched down in Joplin, Mo., on May 22, 2011, C.J. Huff, the superintendent of Joplin’s schools who had been taking shelter in his home’s basement, jumped into his car to begin what he thought would be a standard debris-cleanup process. He didn’t get far when the severity of the massive storm became obvious. He sent his wife home in the car and walked in the dark around and over all manner of obstacles to reach his office.

There he discovered the district’s central-office facility severely damaged, so he gathered a few things and hitched a ride to the district’s Memorial School. It was there he realized the full impact of the tornado: Nine of his 19 schools were destroyed or damaged. The next day, he moved the emergency command system for the 7,700-student school district to North Middle School, located in a largely unaffected side of town.

More devastating news followed. Seven students and one staff member had been killed during the tornado, whose ferocity reached beyond 265 mph. Luckily, it hit on a Sunday night when no facilities were in use though just a few hours after high school graduation ceremonies had concluded.

Huff, Joplin’s superintendent since 2008, was frustrated by his inability to act: “I wanted to put my eyes on everything, but the traffic was horrible and the roads impassable. I couldn’t get around for 36 hours,” he says. So Huff managed things from afar. The district’s buses helped transport volunteers to aid in the search-and-rescue effort.

The superintendent decided to cancel school for the rest of the year; only 12 days remained. But he also promised school would open on schedule, Aug. 17, albeit in other facilities. He met that promise.

At the same time Huff was checking on the structural integrity of the buildings, he sought out leases until new schools could be built. Previous relationships with architects and contractors made the renovation and building process smoother. The high school was housed in a vacant department store in the rear of a shopping mall.

Communication was a priority during and after the crisis. Because cell phone service was disrupted, Huff used social networking sites, specifically Facebook, and the district’s website, as well as an automatic dialing service, to put out messages every day.

Huff says he used his daily sessions with his staff to give everyone “a chance to grieve and to paint a picture of what needed to be done. I knew I had to stay strong throughout this hard, emotional time, especially about the loss of life.” He turned for some support to a neighboring superintendent who had been through a similar situation.

“I also struggled with a sense of guilt since my house was not affected, and I was spared,” adds Huff. “It was a heavy burden, and I felt a responsibility to make sure everyone was OK.”

The schools that withstood the storm sheltered some families. Huff reached out to human service agencies and the 280 business partnerships the district had established to help with basics such as food, clothing and shelter.

What made the crisis management succeed in Joplin? Paramount, according to Huff, was a good leadership team and relationships well established prior to the disaster.

In its aftermath, the district has modified its policy about sheltering students during serious storms, moving them from hallways to interior rooms whenever possible. It also pledges to work more closely with the National Weather Service.

Huff remains optimistic about Joplin’s revival. Two new elementary schools and a middle school are slated to open by December 2013 and a new high school and technical school by August 2014.

C.J. Huff, superintendent in Joplin, Mo., in the days immediately following a tornado in May 2011.

Superintendent Nancy Lynch speaking to reporters outside the district office in Placerville, Calif., after the fatal shooting of Principal Sam LaCara in his office in February 2011.

A Shooting in California

A custodian who was emotionally upset about a hiring that he thought was leading to his imminent firing barged into the principal’s office at Louisiana Schnell School in Placerville, Calif., in February 2011, where he shot and killed the building’s administrator, Sam LaCara. A kindergartner was waiting in the outer office with two secretaries.

Immediately, the campus was placed on lockdown because the custodian’s whereabouts were unknown (he had retreated to his home). Law enforcement declared the campus a crime scene, evacuating the school’s 420 students to the nearby fairgrounds, where their parents would retrieve them.

For Nancy Lynch, superintendent of the Placerville Union School District, located east of Sacramento, the most pressing need was to ensure the safety of the school community. The key for her was having a professional advocate, someone she could turn to along the way. In this case, it was the El Dorado County Office of Education superintendent, Vicki Barber.

“When I was in a fog,” Lynch admits, “Sam was my friend, my colleague. I needed to have someone a little removed from the situation to help me through this. It was a struggle to do on my own. Vicki helped me keep moving.”

Neighboring school systems pitched in, sharing buses, psychologists and counselors. The county mental health center dispatched its professionals.

In the hours that followed, Lynch used the automated phone system to assure parents their children were safe and instructed them about pickup procedures. The district opted to let parents handle the explanations to their children
A Superintendent’s Unforgettable Lesson of Tragedy

BY DAN WOLL

On June 7, 1984, the board of education in Barneveld, Wis., convened to renew the rookie superintendent’s contract. I was that superintendent, about to finish my first year in the job. A few hours later that night, an EF5 tornado ofriterional natural strength struck the tiny village, located 30 miles west of Madison, killing nine people, injuring 200 others and destroying homes and businesses, including my district’s single school.

I spent the predawn hours helping rescue efforts, then took a short nap before waking daylight to an apocalyptic landscape. The threatening of big blades in the oppressive humidity portended an anxiety that returns to this day whenever I hear a helicopter.

The school board met in its ruined office, water pouring through a destroyed roof. We pledged to rebuild. Exiting, one board representative said, “You have a lot of work to do.” He could not know how alone that made me feel.

Most of the board members went to homes in the country, far from the leveled village. How different the experience was for those who could not escape. Through broken windows every evening, my neighbors and I smelled Barneveld burning in the dump where they hauled wreckage in an endless stream of trucks.

A Personal Toll

How does a tragedy change a superintendent? I can only describe what it did to me. I know I have been emotional and sensitive, a mixed blessing, ever since. I remember bumping into Mike Holland after the storm. His father, my athletic director, had been killed when the tornado ripped apart his house.

Mike, a high school junior, was a good student and long-distance runner. I had trained with him on snowy country roads. At that time, I was not a person who showed much emotion. But when I saw Mike, I hugged him and cried. I became more sensitive than ever with children.

I can recall vividly the first tornado drill that we conducted in school the following spring. The students always grew fearful whenever skies darkened. I felt what they felt. When the alarm sounded, children of all ages moved to designated spots in the building where they knelt down, still and silent except for their beating hearts. I’m retired now, and one thing I never miss is worrying about children.

Around adults, I sensed a change in the opposite emotional direction. I took risks with people’s emotions in a single-minded manner in the months following the storm. I became aggressive and impatient with those who could not move fast or understand my motives. I removed an insurance adjuster from the job, caused an engineer to pass outarguing with me, fired a subcontractor and hung up on a metropolitan newspaper editor. Getting the school open again was all that mattered. For better or worse, that characterized my style for the next 25 years.

Linger- ing Wounds

In the years since, I would like to have had an opportunity to explain what I did in the aftermath of the storm. I have to accept I never will. Maybe if I had not pressed so hard, we would have been forced to compromise with a larger school district. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction was pushing that agenda.

The village adopted the slogan, “We’re not giving up — we’re going on.” The community did go on and grow into a beautiful suburb of Madison, but a more accurate slogan for the residents might have been, “Whatever it takes.” It might have taken too much.

There were victims and heroes. Sometimes they were the same individuals. It has been almost a year since I wrote a 4,000-word piece about the Barneveld tornado, published on its 27th anniversary by the Capitol Times, a newspaper in Madison, the state capital. Survivors continue to seek it on the newspaper’s website (www.thyrul.com/3rirgh2) and then contact me with their untold stories.

A quarter century later, memories continue to be shared and wounds linger to be healed. Perhaps this is the lesson of tragedy. There is a false high after recovery. Long-term help comes best from those who put down the chismas and checkbooks to listen and share, for that illuminates the path to acceptance and peace.

DAN WOLL retired in 2010 after 27 years as a superintendent in three Wisconsin school districts. He resides in River Falls, Wis., and is the author of Death On Cache Lake, a novel. E-mail: sipdfant@yahoo.com

A memorial to an elementary school principal in Placerville, Calif., slain in his office by an angry custodian.

Rising flood waters obscure the high school soccer field in Pine Island, Minn., in September 2011.

Nancy went for counseling. What changes did the school district make as a result? It scripted messages that can be adapted to communicate with parents and the news media. Barber added a crisis kit to her car with staff and parent phone numbers. The Placerville district purchased 40 orange vests for staff during any future crisis, radio/ cell phones for administrators and additional laptops on which enrollment can be updated daily.

Lynch concedes some individuals remain a little jumpy, especially noticeable when there is a lockdown drill or police show up on campus for a routine matter. The custodian’s trial was set to take place in March with school staff members expected to testify.

A personal note: “No matter how good you are or how strong you are, you need someone with you in a crisis. That’s how I know I have been emotional and sensitive, a mixed blessing, ever since. I remember bumping into Mike Holland after the storm. His father, my athletic director, had been killed when the tornado ripped apart his house. Mike, a high school junior, was a good student and long-distance runner. I had trained with him on snowy country roads. At that time, I was not a person who showed much emotion. But when I saw Mike, I hugged him and cried. I became more sensitive than ever with children. I can recall vividly the first tornado drill that we conducted in school the following spring. The students always grew fearful whenever skies darkened. I felt what they felt. When the alarm sounded, children of all ages moved to designated spots in the building where they knelt down, still and silent except for their beating hearts. I’m retired now, and one thing I never miss is worrying about children.

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continued from page 22

2009 breaking all records when the water crested at 40.84 feet. Serious flooding in 2010 and 2011 had the water cresting at 36.99 feet and 38.75 feet, respectively.

“Our goal is to maintain as normal a school day as possible,” Kovash says. “Our main concern is keeping the students safe and taking care of their families if they lose their homes. We also worry about the staff, some of whom live on the river or have long commutes. It’s an emotional toll on both students and staff.”

Kovash, working with the city manager and county officials, has established flood-contingency guidelines that are revisited each year to account for improvements in prevention work, such as dikes. They cover everything from transportation of students and staff and school dismissal procedures to alternative staffing assignments and communication.

One of the school district’s principal commitments at flood time is sandbagging. The guidelines outline when students may help at what the superintendent calls “sandbag central.” The goal is to keep classes in session as long as possible. The whole community pitches in, but middle and high schoolers aren’t allowed to forgo their classes until the Red River crests over 42 feet. Students are encouraged to help after school.

Pine Island, which operates a single 78-year-old, K-12 school next to a small stream in southeast Minnesota, 15 miles north of Rochester, is used to seeing its athletic fields flood each year. But what erupted last September had Superintendent Chris Bates, a native of Birmingham, England, watching in horror as, he recalls, “the river started rising at a rate I had never seen. Nobody anticipated the gravity and speed of what happened.” Roads were impassable, and culverts collapsed. Bates agonized over whether to close school early, ultimately dismissing students 30 minutes before the day’s end. “I didn’t want to send the kids home where there were no parents and where parents might not be able to get home,” he says.

He instructed the bus drivers to return children to the school if they didn’t think it was safe to proceed, and two buses were brought back for safety. Only one two-lane road was open at the time. Eight students went home that evening with school staff. Fortuitously, Bates had just purchased an emergency phone system, enabling him to relay information to parents about picking up their children and the road conditions.

Although the basement of the school was flooded, the school could still act as a shelter on its third floor. One day of classes was cancelled. The school sustained a half million dollars in damage.

Bates, who has been superintendent in Pine Island for six years, admits he would have benefited from consulting with another superintendant about handling this situation but says he knew no one else who had endured “a 500-year storm.”

“The bottom line is that all the kids and faculty got home safely, if not on time,” he says. “That’s what was most important.”

Crash Fatalities in New Jersey

Thomas Baruffi was in his car heading to the New Jersey shore for a late-summer vacation with his family before starting a new school year as superintendent of the Mainland Regional High School District in southern New Jersey, not far from Atlantic City. His cell phone buzzed. His principal had tragic news: Four varsity football players had been killed in a crash of their vehicle on a different stretch of the very same Garden State Parkway where he was driving. Baruffi turned back to Linwood, N.J.

The accident last August occurred as eight players were riding together in an SUV to a lunch bunch after a pre-season practice. The vehicle rolled over after the 17-year-old driver swerved to avoid a car stopped in traffic on the high-speed road. Four passengers survived, though they suffered various injuries in the crash.

One of the first decisions Baruffi had to make was where to go when he returned. When he heard that people were gathering at the home of the football coach, “I knew this was the place to gather. You can’t force things. You need to see how it is playing out.” People congregated in the coach’s house and on his lawn.

Baruffi, Mainland’s superintendent for 2½ years, says he quickly realized “I needed to be the person to guide the situation and make decisions.” He admits he felt insecure in that role. “I had no previous experience dealing with something like this.” He relied on his leadership team for ideas and support.

The superintendent had to set up a place for people to assemble the next day. Through Facebook, Baruffi learned students were planning to gather on the high school’s football field. “Why fight it? We followed the kids’ lead,” he says. The vigil was set up there, with counselors and other support systems. More than 3,000 showed up. "Our instincts were correct."

Baruffi was unprepared for the onslaught of statewide and national press attention. He wanted to protect the school district family, yet recognize the news media wanted a story. So he set up a special area at the vigil and met with reporters and TV news cameras there. They agreed to respect the privacy of the school community.

One of the more sensitive matters was how much attention to give this event. Other students had died in recent years but never a group in one incident. Baruffi decided to set up a memorial fund for the four football players through a community partnership, saying, “I realized people wanted to help out the families.” Although there was some dissent, he believes he made the right decision.

Counselors met with teachers, parents and football players before and during school. Before the first football game, local businesses donated food for a tailgate event and a special pre-game ceremony memorialized the four players who had died. The high school also put in place a new requirement for seniors who want a parking space on campus: Each had to attend a 90-minute informational class with a parent regarding the graduated driver’s license.

“I don’t think there was ever a time when I felt more that people were looking to me for leadership,” says Baruffi, who doubles as superintendent of the neighboring Linwood City Elementary Schools, which he joined 12 years ago. “I needed to recognize that that was the way it was, whether I felt prepared or not.”

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