Leadership Before, During and After a Crisis
Q&A With Janet Robinson, Superstorm Sandy’s Aftermath, Off-Campus Tragedies

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A Q&A with Newtown’s Janet Robinson on the emotional impact, protocols to emulate and her lessons for colleagues

“Nothing can prepare you for a tragedy like this.”

That understatement belongs to Janet Robinson, the superintendent in Newtown, Conn., at the time of the murder of 20 young pupils and six staff members at her district’s Sandy Hook Elementary School, a tragedy that shocked the world last Dec. 14.

A month later, Robinson sat for an interview with James Harvey, director of the National Superintendents Roundtable. Harvey included the Q&A in the second edition of The Superintendent’s Fieldbook: A Guide for Leaders of Learning, published by Corwin earlier this year. He granted permission to School Administrator to run extended excerpts of the interview, during which Robinson reflected on the experience. “You just have to try to make decisions that focus on helping children and families heal,” she said.

Robinson, after five years running the Newtown schools, has assumed a new leadership post this fall, as superintendent in Stratford, Conn.
**Q: When did you become aware that a shooting had occurred at Sandy Hook?**

**ROBINSON:** Shortly after 9:30 a.m., which is when Sandy Hook Elementary doors would be locked according to our security protocols, my assistant told me of a report of a shooting at the school. It was hard to believe. Surely, I thought, this was an incident of domestic violence near the school, but not in the school.

**Q: What was the first thing you did?**

**ROBINSON:** We called the school. No one answered. We called the police. No one answered. We kept calling. Finally, a police officer responded, but he had no information, and then the line went dead. Theooter turned across the hall then told me there had been a shooting at the school. She recommended I stay at the central office. Then we called the emergency operations center, and they confirmed a shooting and advised me to stay by the phone. I immediately put every school in the district on lockdown. There were rumors that two gunmen were involved at Sandy Hook. Who knew how many more there might be? Next we sent an electronic message to all parents in the district alerting them to a rumor of the shooting and informed them of the lockdown. Then I ignored the advice I had been getting. I couldn’t remain in my office worrying. I drove to the school.

**Q: What did you find on the scene?**

**ROBINSON:** It was chaotic. I couldn’t get near the school because there were so many emergency vehicles parked around haphazardly — local police, state police, ambulances and fire trucks from all over, and some helicopters. I parked as close as I could and walked to the building.

There was a fire station near Sandy Hook. Teachers had just arrived there with their students. One teacher had her class singing. Others were reading stories to their children. I couldn’t see the principal, but a math teacher emerged as a situational leader. She had a clipboard and was going around trying to account for students and teachers. There were reports the principal had been shot. No one had solid information.

**Q: When did you become aware of the full extent of the catastrophe?**

**ROBINSON:** It took a while. The local police, the state police and the FBI kept on dragging their feet. It was terrible. The first responders were so devastated by what they came across that they could hardly talk. We had three psychologists in the room with these grieving parents, and the situation overwhelmed even these trained professionals.

We needed to identify these children. Who was going to do that? It would have to be someone like an art or music teacher who saw all the children in the school, but I vetoed that as too traumatic. Then we realized we had school pictures — but we had to get them out of the school office. The police used the pictures to identify the children.

The state troopers saved an entire section of one classroom wall that had the artwork of the whole class on it. In that classroom, all but one of the children had died. The troopers told me they hoped this legacy would be meaningful for the community because the pictures had had such an emotional impact on them.

**Q: What procedures and protocols seemed to work reasonably well?**

**ROBINSON:** We had state-of-the-art security at Sandy Hook. People had criticized me for too much security. They didn’t want the schools turned into fortresses. The district has a director of security. Across the district, school doors are locked. We have cameras and buzz-in systems. We have school resource officers on hand at the middle, intermediate and high school levels. We have lockdown practices regularly. All volunteers are fingerprinted.

If someone has an assault rifle and is determined to get into a school, it’s not likely you can stop that person. But I think the fact this man had to shoot his way in is what gave the office time to dial 911 and gave our courageous teachers an opportunity to save many children.

We assigned counselors to teachers and families. That worked well. We assigned a state trooper to every family that lost a child. We think that helped protect their privacy.

**Q: What about relationships with the police and other local and state agencies? How well did they work? Any confusion defining roles and responsibilities?**

**ROBINSON:** We’ve always had good relationships. I was very impressed with Secret- woman Pat Llodra and so impressed with all the police and state troopers. Volunteers and police officers arrived from everywhere. For me to get to all these funerals, given the press of all the people coming to Newtown, the police had to pick me up and get us to the funerals. We were going to from three to five funerals or wakes a day.

**Q: How did you get schools reopened?**

**ROBINSON:** That was a challenge. We decided Sandy Hook could not reopen until after the holidays. And we needed a new building. Jim Agostine, superintendent of neighboring Monroe Schools, put Chalk Hill Middle School at our disposal, and Sandy Hook children started school there on Jan. 3, 2013.

I found myself struggling with the adults in the community, both parents and teachers, about reopening other Newtown schools. We got a lot of push back about opening these schools on the Monday after the shootings. I was told, “We’re not ready.” But I was determined to reopen these schools before the holidays started and insisted that the children needed the security of their regular routines as
soon as possible. We had a delayed opening on Tuesday so that staff could get together before the students arrived. It worked very well. The kids wanted to be back in school.

Q: Looking back on this terrible incident, what lessons do you think it holds for other superintendents?

ROBINSON: I need time to process this. I think everyone needs emergency protocols in place. With us, it was this terrible gun violence, but it could be hurricanes in New Jersey or the Gulf states or an earthquake in California. You can’t make it up on the spot.

First, review your security provisions. You may never have to draw on them, but you will never regret time and attention paid to security.

Second, pay particular attention to security protocols at elementary schools. I’m planning on putting in panic buttons in our elementary schools wired directly to the police department. We also need to think about the fact that most schools wired directly to the police department.

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the principal is the single leader.

Third, our schools contracted with individual photographers for school pictures. That had two effects. School IDs for staff all look different. And the pictures of students and staff are in the school. We are going to hire a single, district-wide photographer, require uniform IDs and keep copies of the photographs in the central office.

Beyond that, you need to put out a statement as soon as you have definitive information to provide. In the process, you need to correct false rumors. The entire world thought for several hours that the gunman’s mother worked at Sandy Hook, that school personnel buzzed him in and that there was a second shooter. None of that was true, but that’s what the news accounts said. You have to knock that sort of thing down.

The Sandy Hook parents whose surviving children were out of school over the holidays were desperate for information. We held a meeting for them, where I introduced the former Sandy Hook principal, who would be leading the school when it reopened, and Jim Agostine from Monroe. They got a standing ovation.

Staff and family members also needed emotional support. We’ve provided abundant mental health resources at our schools. And if we were worried about the emotional needs of particular individuals, we made sure the mental health professionals knew about that.

Of course, you have to maintain your own stability, too. My coping style is to go to work. A lot of us are like that. So that helps. But here was a situation where I couldn’t be in two places at once, and I had to be out in the community and helping families cope. So I accepted help from a retired superintendent who came to the office on a temporary basis.

I told my staff: “She is here to make the decisions that I would make if I were on hand. I will stand behind any decisions she makes.” That was a hard thing for me to do, but it permitted the district to function while I did what I had to do.

Finally, of course, as a community leader, you have to let the community know you share its grief. We had lost children and staff. We had a communitywide interfaith event that the governor and President Obama attended. During some days in the week following, I attended up to three wakes and funerals. I couldn’t get to all of them, but I got to every one I could. This support is very meaningful to traumatized families.

A Model Statement

On the day after the Sandy Hook shootings, Newtown’s then-Superintendent Janet Robinson spoke of the “incredible acts of heroism” by school staff that helped save many students’ lives. James Harvey, who conducted the accompanying interview, believes Robinson’s statement is a model for how school leaders can help a traumatized community deal with its grief.

You can find video of her statement at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpop3pRHxIo.

“This support is very meaningful to traumatized families.”

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