

HEADLINE - POLICE: BOY PLANNED ATTACK ON SCHOOL

June 11, 2003: WELLSBORO, PA. - A fifth-grader who committed suicide in a school restroom had planned an assault on the school but killed himself after his friends wouldn't go along with the plan, police said.

When I read this news release, I was so struck by the multitude of issues that this school will have to confront ... a learning technique in a Crisis Response Team training is to create such a scenario, and ask teams to take a few minutes and brainstorm the issues that might arise.

Let me start by saying that this was no practice scenario, but a real-life incident. Let's take a look at some of the issues ... First of all the people most involved will need extra Critical Incident Stress Management services. Someone must do triage to determine who needs what. The "who" certainly include the boy's friends who were in the bathroom with him, the Principal, the responding police officers, the paramedics, the boy's teachers, other students and staff at the school and, of course, any other students who might have heard him talking in the months prior to the incident. And what about the boy's "enemies"? Are there any who might have teased him in the past? The "what" might include one-on-one support, diffusing, debriefing, referral to further services, guided classroom discussion, or some other intervention. Who will provide these services? What type of training have they had? How is that coordinated, and who on the school's Crisis Response Team is responsible for mental health activities?

Other issues that might arise (in no particular order) are: The area of the school is now a crime scene, under the control of law enforcement and not usable until it's released. What do you do with that bathroom now? Who cleans up? And how do we notify all students parents? What about traffic control? Media attention? His parent's reaction? Other parents' reaction? Does he have any siblings at school and if so how do we care for them? Other issues might be what do we do the next day and the day after? Where do we put a safe room? Who oversees it? When do we remove his belongings from his desk? Or take his artwork down from the display wall? How do we say good-bye without glamorizing his cause of death?

A discussion will be held, on whether or not metal detectors should be installed. You can be assured the school policy about back packs will be examined, the need for further training in Suicide Prevention and Threat Assessment will be discussed. There will be talk about teaching students funeral etiquette, wonder if the school should do a memorial service in a suicide event, and questions about how the school should work with the family during a family sponsored memorial service. Someone is bound to be concerned with the cost and accounting of how the school responds should to be recorded, and when best to do a response evaluation to learn what worked and what needs to be improved ... These are just a few of the issues that a school experiencing this type of crisis must consider.

What would your school do? How would they handle this situation? Do you have a plan and process in place to effectively manage a crisis like this? Do you have an Aftermath Plan? What further training might you need to be better prepared? Where can you get help will these concerns?

Remember, in such a crisis the majority of staff are considered "secondary victims" and may be too close to the situation to be objective, with unusual needs of their own. Do you have an arrangement with neighboring schools to help? What community support is there to refer adults and children to if the need arises? Is there a Law Enforcement Chaplaincy group or community Critical Incident Stress Management Team available to help coordinate and provide some services?

The questions just keep coming ... I'm sure you've thought of some I haven't listed. Of course, the school that has this kind of an incident will handle it ... somehow. Schools always have and always will. The challenge is to handle it in a timely manner with the least amount of damage and chaos, and come through it with a better response process for the next one. Training and consulting with an experienced and knowledgeable expert is a proven solution that works. If I can help you be better prepared in some way please let me know.

What you do about preparedness can and will make a difference.

Mary Schoenfeldt

Mary Schoenfeldt is considered a National expert in school safety. She is the author of several books including [Crisis Response Teams: Lessening The Aftermath](#), [Picking Up the Pieces](#), [Responding To School Crisis](#), and [Conducting Effective Drills In School Systems](#). Mary is an Educational Wellness Consultant with over 25 years experience in law enforcement and education working extensively with schools and communities to develop and implement effective Crisis Response Programs; also, as technical consultant to the California Department of Education and the California Attorney General's Office in the area of school crisis response. Mary's work is credited with assisting schools across the country handle crisis of all types. She holds a Bachelors degree, has logged thousands of workshop hours in crisis management, prevention and safety subjects, and is Board Certified in School Crisis Response by American Academy of Traumatic Stress Specialists. You may contact here directly at: Schoenfeldt and Associates, 360-659-2271, www.safer-schools.com