

Tragedy Response and Healing

Dealing With a School Shooting Disaster: Lessons Learned From Springfield, Oregon

by Cathy Kennedy Paine and Jeffrey Sprague*

Public concern for school safety in the United States intensified following a series of high profile school shootings during the late 1990s. Between 1992 and 1999, the homicide rates for students killed in multiple-victim events increased, although the rate for single-victim student homicides decreased significantly (Anderson et.al, 2001). In spite of this, most schools in the nation are relatively safe places for today's children and the adults who serve and support them (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education [U.S. DOJ & DOE] Annual Report on School Safety, 2000). Since 1992, the total number of school-associated violent deaths has decreased. There is less than a one in a million chance of violent death in school; fewer than 1% of all juvenile homicides are associated with schools. The most common crime in schools is theft, which has been decreasing since 1993, as have student weapon carrying and physical fighting. These entire declines mirror drops in the overall crime rate in society. Ninety percent of American schools report no serious violent crime and 43% of schools report no crime. There has been a steady decline (from 12% to 7%) in the percentage of students in grades 9-12 who reported carrying a weapon to school, and thefts at school have declined from 95 per 1,000 to 58 per 1,000.

However, it also is true that some of our schools have serious crime and violence problems and many schools are dealing with more problem behaviors, such as bullying and harassment, drug and alcohol use, the effects of family disruption, poverty, and so on (U.S. DOJ & DOE, 2000). In light of these issues, we must consider the full range of safety concerns in our schools (e.g. weapon carrying, threats, fighting). Reducing the prevalence of school violence to near zero in our nation is a most worthy goal for our schools as we begin the 21st century (Walker & Eaton-Walker, 2000).

Ensuring the safety and security of students and staff members in schools is a daunt-

ing task that requires a comprehensive approach. It is essential that school officials address multiple areas systematically in order to create safe and effective school environments, including prevention of, and response to violent events. This article focuses on a specific aspect of school safety planning, crisis response and intervention. The tragedy at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, in 1998 is reviewed, outlining the immediate and long-term responses by the community. A number of lessons were learned in the weeks and months following the school shooting—lessons that may be applied to any major crisis or traumatic event.

learn what had happened and, in many cases, trying to find their own children. It was a scene filled with sirens, ambulances, stretchers, police cars, blood stains, yellow tape, flashing lights, frantic faces, crowds pressing, and a media helicopter overhead.

An eerie quiet prevailed inside the school. The shooting had ended when several students tackled the gunman as he paused to reload. Teachers and students provided immediate first aid to the wounded and most other students were in their classrooms in a lockdown. Three hundred students who had witnessed the shooting and survived gathered in the darkened library. The nightmare intensi-

On the morning of the shooting, we quickly organized a “core team” of school psychologists, administrators, and counselors, and together we developed the school district’s mental health response.

The Shooting at Thurston High

May 21, 1998, began like any other day at Thurston High School, with students chatting noisily in the cafeteria, eating breakfast and trading tales of youthful innocence. That innocence was brutally shattered at 7:55 a.m. when a 15-year-old freshman walked calmly into the cafeteria and sprayed 50 rounds of ammunition from a semiautomatic rifle into the crowd. What was first thought to be a prank turned into a nightmare in which two students were killed and 25 others were wounded. In seconds, the students and staff members were transformed from innocent, unsuspecting individuals to victims of a school-shooting spree. Life forever changed.

The school district administrators and Crisis Response Team members received the emergency call just minutes after the shooting and rushed to the school, not really believing that this was happening. Throngs of frightened parents and neighbors filled the sidewalks and pressed past the gathering media and emergency vehicles to reach the school. It was a chaotic scene of parents, reporters, police, and emergency workers all trying to

fied when both parents of the shooter were found dead in their home, each shot and killed by their son the evening before the cafeteria rampage. Bill and Faith Kinkel, both Springfield School District teachers, were long-time residents of Springfield whose deaths were mourned throughout the community.

The issues that made this crisis difficult were (1) the nature of the crime (homicide) that destroyed the safety and security of the school district; and (2) the pervasive, community-wide impact of the event. The issues are complex in supporting homicide survivors. Debra Alexander, trauma expert, has stated,

Grieving the loss of someone who has been killed suddenly, violently, and senselessly is different from any other form of grieving. The anguish is intense and long lasting. The physical and emotional reactions to the trauma are only the beginning. Criminal justice systems, insurance companies, settlements, and media can present a multitude of frustrations and often repeatedly cause a return to initial trauma reactions. (Alexander, 1999, p. 186)

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The impact of this trauma blanketed the community. In addition to the shooting victims, there were so many others who were affected: the students and staff who were in the courtyard and in the adjacent hallways; the friends and siblings of the critically wounded; cousins, aunts, and uncles; grandmothers and grandfathers; nieces and nephews; coaches, teachers, and neighbors. When the President of the United States phoned the District Superintendent that morning, it was clear that this tragedy would affect not only the 11,000 students and 1,200 employees of the Springfield School District, but the entire Eugene-Springfield community and the nation.

Before a Crisis: Preparation Needed

In an ideal world we would never need a crisis plan to respond to an emergency. In the real world, however, we do. There are actions a school and community can take to minimize the impact of a trauma and aid the recovery of the victims if a crisis does occur. In this and the following sections we discuss the key concepts that contributed to the effectiveness of the Springfield community's response to this tragedy.

Crisis Plan and Trained Personnel Essential. Having a crisis plan and trained personnel turned out to be the single most important element of our response. The Springfield School District has a written crisis plan (Paine & Lau, 2000) that specifies procedures to follow in emergencies and is updated periodically. The plan contains suggested roles and responsibilities of crisis team members; phone tree directions; activities to help students deal with a loss; information regarding grief and loss reactions in children and adults; guidelines for media; communications, memorials, and healing events; handling specific situations; and long-term follow up suggestions. In addition, school administrators, emergency personnel, and city officials had previously collaborated in drafting the district's plan and, coincidentally, a mock emergency drill to test the plan had been conducted at Thurston High just a year prior to the actual shooting.

When forming a crisis response team it is important to select people who can think clearly, who are able to see alternative solutions to problems, who can handle multiple tasks simultaneously, and who react calmly under stress. Exhibit 1 lists suggested staff responsibilities. Crisis personnel should receive annual training and updating in response procedures.

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Exhibit 1: Staff Responsibility Guide

PRINCIPAL

- Receive notification of death
- Verify information
- Notify Superintendent
- Notify Crisis Response Team, call meeting
- Notify media liaison
- Schedule special staff meeting
- Hire substitute teachers
- Write announcement to be read in classes
- Write phone inquiry statement
- Attend special staff meetings
- Make announcement to school
- Write and send letter to parents
- Notify other principals
- Grant release time for funeral attendance
- Condolence note to family
- Attend funeral if desired

PHYSICIAN

- See students
- Make assignments
- Make referrals
- Contact parents
- Attend funeral if desired

CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM

- Initiate phone tree
- Notify family liaison
- Call outside consultants
- Contact community resource people
- Contact student leaders
- Open crisis centers
- Distribute literature
- Notify librarian to put grief books on reserve
- Attend faculty meetings
- Plan community meeting

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST/ SOCIAL WORKER

- Primary referral
- In-school treatment of students
- Staff counseling and education
- Complete student assessments
- Make referrals to physician to community agency
- Contact parents
- Attend funeral if desired

TEACHERS

- Read announcement

- Modify class, if needed
- Talk with students
- Clarify misinformation
- Activities to encourage expression of feelings
- Express own feelings
- Give grief information
- No judgment of grief
- Activities to encourage remembering deceased
- Referrals when necessary
- Support students
- Use support services for self
- Condolence note to family
- Have in-school and outside resources talk with classes
- Attend funeral if desired

SCHOOL NURSE

- Care for physical needs
- Allow students to express emotions
- Provide comfortable location
- Make assessment of students
- Make referrals
- Attend funeral if desired

GUIDANCE COUNSELORS

- Man crisis centers
- Talk with students
- Clarify misinformation
- Encourage students to express feelings
- Express own feelings
- Give grief information
- No judgment of grief
- Give priority to referrals
- Support students
- Use support resources for self
- Make referrals to psychologist, M.D.
- Contact parents if necessary
- Attend funeral if desired

FAMILY LIAISON

- Contact family
- Offer help
- Obtain needed information
- Inform school of procedures
- Help to gather personal items of the deceased student
- Attend funeral
- Keep in contact with family after the funeral

Source: Paine & Lau, 2000

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While nothing in our previous experiences with individual student and teacher deaths prepared us for the magnitude of this horrifying event, our crisis plan gave us the basis for our response. On the morning of the shooting, we quickly organized a “core team” of school psychologists, administrators, and counselors, and together we developed the school district’s mental health response. That response was an on-the-spot modification of procedures we’d used in dozens of “smaller” crisis interventions over the previous years. Simultaneously, the Superintendent’s team and City of Springfield staff formed a joint “command post” away from the school from which to direct their part of the response.

County Network of Trained Crisis Personnel. Within the first hour of the shooting, counselors and mental health workers from other Lane County school districts and the community responded to Thurston High. This existing county network allowed us immediate access to counselors from many school districts (through an agreement signed annually by the school superintendents), as well as from our local mental health agencies. By the end of the first day over 125 counselors had volunteered to help.

Crisis Response

Coordinated at District and City Level.

While the mental health response was being implemented at the school, the Superintendent’s team and City of Springfield managers jointly staffed their post at City Hall, which became a clearinghouse for inquiries from both the press and the public. Additional phone lines set up by 10:00 a.m. the day of the tragedy were staffed 24 hours a day through the weekend by both city and school-district employees. This coordination was essential to the success of our response. By holding joint press conferences on a regular basis we were able to avoid discrepant information being disseminated by different agencies, a problem that sometimes occurs following large-scale tragedies.

Flexible and Continuous Planning Critical. We worked hundreds of hours developing and revising plans for the schools and the community through the Memorial Day holiday weekend and for weeks following the shooting. The principal, superintendent, and law enforcement personnel participated in the planning as needed and provided valuable input. The district Crisis Response Team met daily for the first week, and frequently throughout the rest of the school year. The summer was filled with grant writing, activities at the school, and plans for the fall reentry of students.

Handling Intense Media Coverage and Communication Needs a Formidable Task.

This required the combined efforts of communications specialists from the school district, city, two hospitals, and several law enforcement agencies. Throughout the first day and night the media vans arrived from across the nation. Before the first hour had passed, a CNN helicopter hovered overhead, transmitting images of our newfound horrific “fame.” Reporters from as far away as Japan, Portugal, England, and Australia quickly took on a larger-than-life presence in our normally quiet community. Reporters from ABC, NBC, CBS, NPR, PBS, *USA Today*, *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, *People*, and *Rolling Stone* all appeared on the scene.

pus until after school resumed, and then only briefly, with no students present. This was done to minimize the filming of traumatic images and to allow the students’ first view of campus to be in person, not on television. Six days following the shooting, the media vans finally crept silently away as abruptly as they had arrived, leaving the school to stand free of lights, cameras, and sound bites.

Students’ Reentry to School Requires Careful Planning. The high school was closed for 4.5 days following the shooting, first while police gathered evidence, then for the Memorial Day weekend. Returning students and staff to the scene of such horrible trauma required considerable planning. An important step in the return to school occurred

When a crisis occurs many students can be impacted to the point where functioning in normal school routines is impossible. It helps to set up a support room or “safe room”—a location in the school that is staffed by counselors trained in the dynamics of child and adolescent grief and loss.

Following the shooting, all school phone lines jammed so no calls were possible either to or from the school for several hours. Thus, cell phones and radios were critical for relaying fast, accurate information. Communication was handled through daily press conferences at City Hall, staffed jointly by school district, city, and hospital employees. Although the reporters were intrusive at times, as the days passed we found them to be helpful in disseminating important information regarding healing events and assistance. With hindsight, we realized that we could have communicated more thoroughly with the other schools in the community, many of which had staff members whose children or family members were at Thurston High. We recommend using email, websites, or other means frequently as events unfold.

We also did not anticipate the level of security that would be needed at the school and hospitals in the days following the shooting. We were amazed to observe that some (national) reporters tried posing as doctors and counselors in their efforts to access hospitals and schools; therefore ID badges became essential for all volunteers (donated by a local business). Local and national television crews filmed live reports in front of the school, but no media were allowed on the Thurston cam-

when many students, their families, and staff members visited the repaired Thurston campus during an Open House on Memorial Day. This allowed students to enter the school supported by family, friends, “comfort dogs,” and counselors prior to attending classes the following day. Although many of the 2,000 visitors sat or stood in the repaired cafeteria, not all were able to do so.

The next step of the students’ reentry occurred on the first day of classes. After students ate a free breakfast in the school courtyard or cafeteria, they attended a half-day of classes; then hundreds attended the funeral of one victim. Volunteer counselors were present in every classroom that day. When a crisis occurs many students can be impacted to the point where functioning in normal school routines is impossible. It helps to set up a support room or “safe room”—a location in the school that is staffed by counselors trained in the dynamics of child and adolescent grief and loss. Regular classes were held for the remainder of the school year and students accessed the support rooms as needed.

Care of the Caregivers Critical. The support teams held numerous debriefings that were essential for the emotional well being of the counselors and other service providers. Many caregivers, as well as members of the

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media, were emotionally impacted by hearing and seeing the effects of the trauma on the victims and their families. Exhibit 2 lists a number of suggestions for caregivers to aid in their own emotional recovery.

After the Crisis: Recovery

Post-Trauma Support Provided in a Variety of Ways. Support came from many sources including private counseling agencies, county mental health, other school districts, the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA), and the National Association of School Psychologists. The Red Cross provided meals and counselors during the day following the tragedy when we gathered students, teachers, parents, counselors, and administrators at a nearby middle school. NOVA volunteers, who had arrived the afternoon of the shooting, held community debriefings, news conferences, and training sessions for local counselors for seven days. Our district psychologists managed the monumental task of screening, scheduling, and monitoring over 200 counselors who assisted during the remaining three weeks of school.

When a number of students/staff have witnessed a traumatic event, specially trained counselors may be needed to debrief survivors to aid them in normalizing their feelings and dealing with the trauma. We consulted outside resources such as NOVA and the National Association of School Psychologists for assistance with these debriefings because the event had such a large impact on the community.

While many people are able to go on following a trauma without assistance, some find it helpful to discuss the event with someone who is trained in critical incident debriefing (CID). Some trauma experts believe it is important to address the effects of trauma through debriefings and counseling in order to mitigate the potential for a post-traumatic stress reaction (Plaggemars, 2000). The likelihood of a post-traumatic stress reaction is influenced by the person's initial reaction to the trauma, his or her closeness to the original event, and continued exposure to pictures or talk of the event. CID is a form of psychological first aid and as such is not a sufficient intervention for the most severe of psychological trauma victims (e.g., those with post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]). These individuals require professional mental health interventions. One goal of debriefing is to identify and refer these individuals for further assistance. People who have been exposed to a traumatic event may show

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Exhibit 2: Caring for Caregivers

Talk to family or friends about how you are feeling/doing.

Write poetry.

Get into art.

Play a game or sport. Get lots of exercise.

Snack on healthy foods. Take vitamins.

Sing loud.

Enjoy a bubble bath.

Care for your pets and houseplants.

Get lots of sleep.

Spend time in prayer or meditation.

Write letters of regrets and appreciation about anything in life.

Treat yourself to a massage.

Draw pictures.

Listen to soothing music or dance!

Drink water.

Light a candle.

Read a favorite story.

Let yourself cry.

Ask for a hug. Ask for another hug.

Write your thoughts and feelings in a journal.

Exhibit 3: Manifestations of Grief in Youth

Behavioral/Social

- Regressive behaviors (bed wetting, thumb sucking, clinging, tantrums, immaturity)
- Aggressive behaviors (hitting, demanding)
- Rebellious or defiant behaviors
- Withdrawal or passivity
- Hyperactivity
- Increased need for reassurance (i.e., not wanting to initiate or go home, clinging)
- Hoarding (food, toys, etc.)
- Changes in eating patterns (more or less)
- Lowered grades (due to difficulty in concentration and attending)
- Drug use increase
- Sexual promiscuity
- Reckless or self-destructive behavior
- Crying
- Non-stop talking—attention getting

Emotional

- Self-blame and guilt ("I caused it to happen, I could have prevented it.")
- Fear ("Who will take care of me? Will it happen to me, too? Will people remember or care about me? I have to pay the price.")
- Numbness
- Withdrawal
- Demanding
- Helplessness or hopelessness
- Despair
- Yearning and pining

• Unaccepting

• Pensive

• Anger

• Sadness

• Anxiety

• Boredom

• Apathy

Physical

- Changes in appetite
- Sleep disturbances or changes
- Bowel and bladder disturbances/changes
- Temporary slowing of reactions
- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Rashes
- Breathing disturbances
- Exaggeration of allergies
- Increased number of colds and infections

Cognitive

- Impaired self-esteem
- Disturbances in cognitive functioning (attention span deficit, hyperactivity)
- Exaggerations in "magical thinking" ("I made it happen.")
- Avoidance and denial of the loss
- Idealization of the past
- Idealization of the future
- Increase in nightmares

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campus and a sea of flowers represented the community's outpouring of grief. For days, vehicular and pedestrian traffic was non-stop as thousands passed by to pay their respects.

Although "the fence" served as an important symbol of our community's recovery and healing, school staff soon faced the task of deciding what to do with all the momentos. A simple but effective closure activity was designed by students and staff. On the senior's last day the students in each class removed all the items and carefully saved many of them. In their place they left a giant "Thank You" sign to the community. In addition to the fence, a candlelight vigil was held outside City Hall, prayer services were held in many churches, and the Springfield Firefighters' "Blue Ribbon of Promise" (end school violence) campaign began. Students, staff, and parents later collaborated in designing a permanent memorial to those killed and injured in the attack.

School memorials or memory activities serve an important function in the grief process for students and staff. A memorial promotes the healing process by providing an opportunity for students to join together and participate in a ritual. A school memorial also brings closure to a period of grieving and serves as a clear statement that it is time to move on with regular school activities. The memorial may take many forms including a tree or flower planting, dedication of a plaque or picture, fund raising for a scholarship, charity, purchase of a piece of equipment, or books, or a more traditional "service."

Long-Term Follow Up Requires Time, Staff, and Additional Resources. The Thurston event was not over the day after the shooting, the last day of school, or the following school year. On the first day of school in the fall following the shooting reporters and media trucks surrounded the school once again, as students entered the campus filled with much excitement and some apprehension. Although the majority of students and staff members were able to move on with life and learning, it was not so simple for the people who were in the cafeteria that fateful day. In addition to many of the bystanders, 20 of the 25 injured students returned to Thurston High, some with the physical evidence of scars, and bullets still within them; some facing surgeries and lengthy rehabilitation. The prevailing atmosphere that day, however, was positive as students looked forward to another school year. The atmosphere was best reflected in the words of one student who said, "Though we were inevitably affected by tragedy, we are looking forward to what

life has to offer us next. We have learned how very precious, yet circumstantial, life is. Now, more than ever, our eyes are open wide, our ambitions are high, and we are ready to live."

Our approach to follow-up was two-fold: to recapture the school's normal activities, and at the same time, to promote a healthy recovery for the students and staff members. As described above, their reentry to Thurston High was carefully planned and supported. The Springfield School District Superintendent and the school board members made a

high school campuses; trauma counselors were added to Thurston High, funded by a three-year grant; and plans were made regarding the anniversary date of the shooting and a permanent memorial.

The days leading up to the one-year anniversary were filled with anticipation, anxiety, rumors of copycat violence, and daily doses of media attention (all intensified by the Columbine incident one month prior to our anniversary). The day began with bomb-sniffing dogs searching the campus

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commitment to begin each succeeding school year with thoughtfulness, planning, and training in response to this tragedy. Experts instructed our teachers, counselors, and school staff members in post-trauma reactions. The Thurston Assistance Center was established to provide one location for counseling support and information to Springfield students and families affected by the shooting. In addition, the cafeteria was painted and brightened in order to minimize the traumatic reminders; uniformed police officers were added to both

and dozens of parents patrolling the area, and continued with counselors and police officers supporting and reassuring those who attended classes. The day ended as over a thousand people gathered to remember the families of the victims in a "Community Gathering for Remembrance and Renewal" at Thurston High School.

Dealing With Reaction to Related Legal Process

Although our community had previously endured high-profile murder trials, we had never experienced anything that attracted the attention of the media as did this case. In preparation for the trial we sought the advice of experts and held planning meetings involving the staff of the school district, City of Springfield, and District Attorney's office; victim's assistance workers; public information directors and trauma counselors. According to Alexander,

Homicide creates a different kind of grief because of the rage it evokes. Often the criminal justice system slows down the grieving process when closure around a case is not made or appears to be made unjustly. Children need continued support and understanding as the legal case unfolds" (Alexander, 1999, p. 95).

Sixteen months after the shooting we were ready to face the suspect's trial. Then suddenly, just before jury selection was to begin, he pleaded guilty to the charges, avoiding a trial. During a seven-day sentencing hearing many of the victims spoke of the impact of this tragedy in emotional,

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heart-wrenching testimony reflecting anger, hate, sadness and sorrow. On November 10, 1999 the perpetrator was sentenced to 112 years in prison, without parole, and our community breathed a sad sigh of relief.

Looking to the Future

We can't go back to the way we were; we are no longer innocent, unsuspecting individuals unaffected by youth violence. The nightmare has ended, and the recovery of the students and staff of the Springfield School District continues. With the passage of time the task grows easier—all students who were present on the day of the shooting have now graduated, and (primarily due to retirements) approximately one-third of the teachers and administrators at Thurston High are new. We have analyzed the physical safety of all Springfield schools, although we have not added metal detectors as some might suggest. One thing we have added is ID badges for all district staff.

Following the shooting the desire to promote peace and a violence-free atmosphere spread to schools throughout our district. For example, at one elementary school a fifth-grade student wrote a "Peace Pledge" which, to this day, is recited by all 500 students of that school each morning as follows:

To honor those students who have lost their lives to school violence, the students of Centennial School pledge to be violence-free. We will not be verbally or physically mean to other. We will not gossip or spread rumors. We will respect everybody and their abilities. We will show respect by using kindness.

We are more cognizant of the elements of school safety now, and have implemented a number of procedures through a federally funded, "Safe Schools, Healthy Students" grant project. The project is a joint collaboration of three school districts and the University of Oregon's "Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior" and includes five components:

1. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design;
2. School-Wide Effective Behavior Support plans ;
3. Crime Prevention Specialists in middle schools;
4. Mental Health Specialists in high schools; and
5. "The Turnaround School" for students expelled due to violence or threats of violence.

There remain a number of unanswered

questions in the area of crisis and intervention. Some issues that arose following the incident included:

- What is the effect of debriefing procedures (such as the Critical Incident Debriefing procedure which we used) on the participants?
- Could other approaches be more helpful?
- Can the impact of the media on victims be tempered? How can caregivers be better prepared to handle the emotional impact of trauma response?
- Are there steps that schools can take to prevent violence such as this?
- And today, we might ask, "What will be the impact of an event, such as the terrorism of September 11, on a generation of school children?"

The lessons learned in Springfield may be applied to any major crisis or traumatic event in a community. Most important, every school should be prepared with a crisis response plan and trained personnel who can provide both immediate and long-term support. Marleen Wong, Director of District Crisis Teams for the Los Angeles Unified School District advised us to "work hard to find that balance between mourning the past, treasuring the present, and keeping hope for the future" (Wong, 1998). In today's world, that is good advice for us all.

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