Safe Schools: One School District’s Safety and Crisis Response Practices

by

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Abstract

This mixed methods research study aimed to investigate and improve district-wide practices for keeping students and staff physically and psychologically safe after school crises. To address the research questions, the author analyzed school vulnerability assessments, focus group questionnaires, and transcribed focus groups consisting of school personnel from five different representative groups (n = 30). School crisis preparedness was extremely important to the majority of participants (76.7%). Vulnerability assessments indicated weaknesses in emergency alert systems for both elementary and secondary schools. The top three human-caused crisis events that participants were most and least prepared to deal with included fire, power outage, and intruder; and hostage situation, mass contamination, and terrorism, respectively. It was extremely important to the majority of participants that there is a district-wide and individual school written crisis response plan (73.3%). The majority of participants indicated that the physical and psychological safety measures in the district are not effective (47% and 57%, respectively). Overarching focus group themes included staying calm during a crisis, ensuring consistent procedures, teaching students appropriate technology use, universally teaching students conflict resolution and communication skills, training for all staff (is needed), practicing and having drills (is a must), lacking clarity about the definition of a crisis and the role of teams/members, and lacking clear methods determining the level of crisis response needed. Limitations of the research were identified. Data generated practical recommendations for district-wide improvement of school safety and crisis response prevention and intervention policies and practices.