**Responding to Crisis: Lesson Learned**

By Zac Rantz

The COVID-19 pandemic can be described as nothing short of a crisis. When we look at the response of school districts, the good news is that while we would like to think that things are new and unique, crisis situations generally have the same issues, just different situations. Learning from the past and planning for the future will help us plan for and respond to crisis situations both small and large. This article outlines lessons learned from past crises and how they can be applied to school districts working through the challenges of our current environment.

**Think one week and three months ahead at the same time**

A crisis teaches us that we must act now and plan for the future at the same time. You are going to need to have people responding to the immediate situation, but then you need to have people making lists of events or situations that will be impacted in the coming weeks and months so you can start planning for them in some way.

When an F5 tornado hit Joplin, Missouri, in 2011, they had to start planning for back to school in the middle of the first week of the tornado response. That didn’t change what immediately needed to happen, but it did let the district and community look to what they might face in the future so that one crisis didn’t become another due to lack of planning.

Right now, schools should be looking at their plans for the summer, fall, and then spring of 2021. Have those discussions now and start making notes. Assign someone to oversee this future planning and then revisit it regularly. Also, ask what other events or crisis situations could come up along the way. What if you lose the internet in your community? What if the flu season is horrible? What if you have a reduction in funding and must make cuts? What do you do if you need to have one week at school and one week at home on a regular basis?

Ask questions now and continue asking them. Asking how something could impact your district is a consistent conversation you should be having.

**Meet the basic needs first**

You must meet the needs of your community and school first. If people don’t feel safe or don’t have access to basic supplies, they won’t be able to function. A school can help with these through food programs, as we have seen, but they can also help with sharing information. Schools can have one of the greatest reaches in a community and should partner with local organizations when possible to use their communication program and resources to help people feel informed, which can help them feel safe.

**Rally your community**

Schools are one of the best organizations to rally the community. We do it for sporting events, so we can do it in the middle of a pandemic. Your community will either rally together or will rip apart in a crisis. But, what can you do to show your community or school pride in a way that gives people something to do? People need to feel connected, especially in situations when we are all at home and can’t interact like we usually do.

Ask your mayors or leaders to join in the fun. Have virtual gatherings and activities, such as school spirit weeks, and invite the community to participate. Be creative, have fun. and connect with people.

**Communicate, communicate, communicate**

In the middle of a crisis, people want to hear from their leaders. They want to know someone is in charge. They also need information, but just not too much at one time. No matter the crisis or tragedy, our ability to process information drops drastically. So, when in the past you may have been able to send a long email or video message to your district or school, that may need to change. Dividing up emails or videos into short bursts of information will allow your message to be seen, processed, and acted upon. Then in the next day or two, you can send another update. When distributing the information, make clear divisions between the items so people can process different points.

Communication should be real and genuine. A crisis is not the time to try to add polish to things if you don’t need to. A basic email with divisions will suffice. A video shot on a cell phone will do. People just want to be informed and hear from you. As the crisis continues, you can get back to your normal look and pattern, which helps people regain a sense of normalcy but work your way back there. The information is more important than how pretty it looks.

**You need communications systems now**

If you didn’t already have a formal communication program and systems set up that were consistent across the district, do that now. You are going to struggle with getting out information, but something is better than nothing. If you have someone dedicated to setting up a program and systems, you can have that in place for when something happens in the future or as you need to get information to your parents and student now.

If there is a lack of information, people will make it up, so just get on social media right now. Even if it is a small reach right now, communicate. You will build an audience and build trust over time. It won’t be perfect or pretty, but you are at least a part of the conversation.

**Find reliable sources**

The pandemic has shown us the need for reliable sources of information and connections with experts before an event happens. If you needed to, could you reach someone at your health department or local hospital before this pandemic? Can you do that now?

As you plan for crisis response, if you can determine the main events that you might face as a district and then create a list of who you might need to make contact with based on those events, you can save yourself a lot of trouble. A gas leak, chemical spill, tornado, the flu, etc. are all issues we could face. Many of the people and organizations you would need in those events that are likely to happen will be the same people you will need to work with in the middle of a major event like a pandemic, a superstorm, or an F-5 tornado. Have regular conversations with those on that list just to make sure you are connected, and then you can jump into action together when needed.

You also need these connections to help obtain and disseminate information. Social media can be full of inaccurate information, and in a crisis that will only be exacerbated. If you are connected to reliable resources, the district can be an avenue to provide that information to the community.

**Plan for and expect raw emotions**

One of the best lessons to learn is that emotions will be raw during a crisis. People will say things and act in ways that might not be normal. Just think about how people react when something impacts them personally. Now, take that and multiply it out across the community. In the pandemic, people have lost jobs and loved ones, can’t connect with others, and face a whole host of other situations. Stress decreases a person’s ability to appropriately respond to a situation. Things that were not an issue before may become one because that is the place people have chosen to focus their anxiety or fear. Learn to listen to what people are saying and see what truths you can find in the middle of the complaining or anger. Many times, they point out issues they may have ignored before. But if you listen your way to a solution, you will get better results.

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**Keep things real and sustainable**

One of the biggest crisis events happening under the surface is the reactions to the loss of events like graduation, prom, field days, etc. Districts are feeling the pressure to go above and beyond to “make up” for these events. The issue with these reactions is they could be setting a precedent for the future in the district or school. What are you going to do for future classes or grades? Will there be a feeling of needing to sustain or top the previous year’s events to make things special for the next group or class?

So, when making decisions on these events, ask if what you are doing is sustainable and is something realistic that the district or school should be doing. Is it something a parent group could do or is it something that shouldn’t be done at all? We ask a lot of questions and get answers from parents, but we forget to ask the students. Often, what students are really looking for is far simpler and more attainable than what adults would choose to do without their input.

When you get data on what people are really feeling, you can make informed decisions. Emotions are high, but we can’t let them take over our decision-making process.

**A crisis will happen again**

Something is going to impact your district in the future. It could be another pandemic, severe weather, an active shooter, a death, or anything else that will cause a disruption. If you didn’t have a formal crisis plan in place now, start putting one together.

This situation has shown the need for everyone to be on the same page. The National Incident Management System is the framework everyone from the federal government to your local fire department uses. Schools should take this time to make sure their crisis plans follow that system so when something happens, it is easy to plug in to the response framework that your community, region, or state will be using.

In closing, as we continue to take all efforts to support our students and communities through the midst of this pandemic, it is important to be remain reflective on our successes and challenges. Remember that it is never too early to begin preparing for the next crisis so that we can respond as quickly and effectively as possible.

**Zac Rantz** is the internationally award-winning chief communication officer for Nixa Public Schools, in Nixa, Missouri, and has worked in the district for 18 years. He is also the author of “Hindsight: lessons learned from the Joplin tornado and other crisis events,” written to share the knowledge gained from that experience and runs his own marketing/PR consulting business. Rantz was one of the founding members of and was elected president of the Missouri School Safety Association. He has also served on the board as well as one term as president for the Missouri School Public Relations Association.