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Bringing Families Together:

Parent-Student Reunification Procedures in School Crisis Planning

Ashleigh Welko

Wright State University

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“Knowing how to respond quickly and efficiently in a crisis is critical to ensuring the safety of our schools and students. The midst of a crisis is not the time to start figuring out who ought to do what. At that moment, everyone involved – from top to bottom – should know the drill and know each other.”

Margaret Spellings

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate and review current best practices with regard to parent-student reunification procedures following crises in schools. No national recommendations for school crisis planning exist, resulting in varying degrees of completeness in school planning. Parent-student reunification is one of the most frequently ignored or underdeveloped aspects of school emergency planning, yet a poorly developed reunification plan has the potential to become an enormous source of chaos in the aftermath of school crisis. Expedient reunification reduces the potential for lasting trauma to both children and their parents. A best practices review of existing literature was conducted to evaluate the current recommendations for reunification procedures in school crisis plans. In addition, West Central Ohio school district emergency plans were submitted for analysis. Numerous recommendations were made in the literature, from the structure and function of reunification sites to suggested ancillary documentation to assist in the reunification process. As suggested in the literature, the actual school plans analyzed varied in the topics addressed and the degree to which reunification procedures are planned. It is recommended that steps be taken in the future to standardize reunification planning on a state or national level, thus ensuring that children are returned to their parents/guardians expediently following a school crisis.

Keywords: school preparedness, school emergency, protocol, student release, lockdown

Bringing Families Together: Parent-Student Reunification Procedures in School Crisis Planning

Children's Unique Needs in Disasters

Children are more vulnerable to the physical and psychological impacts of trauma than are adults (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002; Gausche-Hill, 2009; National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). Younger children may be incapable of making decisions and finding safety during a disaster (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). Due to their smaller size and other anatomical differences, they are more prone to injury through blunt trauma, fluid loss, toxicity from chemical and biological agents, and environmental stressors (Gausche-Hill, 2009). Their treatment requires medications, dosages, and routes of administration different from those used in routine adult medicine (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010).

Children are emotionally less able to comprehend traumatic events than are their adult counterparts (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002). They may experience long-term behavioral problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, confusion, and academic failure as a result of exposure to such upsetting events (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). Children consistently rely on adults for protection and are often unable to adequately protect themselves (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010).

For these reasons, children are likely to have unique medical and mental health treatment needs that require care from pediatric professionals when crises arise (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002). Pediatric issues in disaster preparedness demand particular attention and must be considered when local, state, and federal disaster plans are formulated (American Academy of

Pediatrics, 2002). Children are not merely miniature adults and their unique needs must be accounted for if the impact of trauma in this vulnerable population is to be minimized.

Role of Schools and Daycare Centers

Children nationwide spend dozens of hours each week away from their families when enrolled in schools and daycare centers, and often more people gather in schools than anywhere else in a community on any given weekday (Graham, Shirm, Liggin, Aitken, & Dick, 2006). They spend approximately 2,340 days attending school between kindergarten and 12th grade, more if they attend daycare programs as infants and toddlers (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). There are 67 million students nationwide enrolled in K-12 schools with just under 90% attending public schools with the rest attending private schools (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2013). Nearly 12 million infants, toddlers, and preschooler attend daycare facilities on a regular basis (National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, 2009).

During these hours, their care is entrusted to schools and childcare providers who must be prepared to keep children safe during the routine school day as well as during and after unforeseen events (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). All schools serve in the *in loco parentis* role that requires school personnel to assume a guardianship role while students are in their care (Graham et al., 2006). The gravity of this role also means that if the school, district, or state does not adequately prepare for basic crisis management, it could be prone to legal action for negligence (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

The probability of an external or internal crisis occurring while a child is at school or daycare is relatively high, and emergency situations could also occur while in transit to or from

school or during extracurricular activities on or off campus (Foltin, Tunik, Treiber, & Cooper, 2008). In the context of school emergency planning, the nature of a crisis can range from an isolated incident such as a pregnant teenager to an event as drastic as an active shooter on school grounds (Foltin et al., 2008). While federal agencies often make recommendations on the matter, there is not currently a federal requirement for school emergency planning (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). As a result, the breadth and depth of such plans vary across the country (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). While most elementary and secondary schools have some sort of crisis plan, only 17 states mandate that schools and daycare centers develop written emergency plans (Save the Children, 2010). Many of the nation's school districts currently require not only mandatory fire drills, but also evacuation and lockdown drills (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

Gaps in the disaster plans of these institutions, while potentially dangerous, are not uncommon (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007). A 2006 survey of 3670 school superintendents nationwide showed that only 86.3% had an emergency response plan for their respective institutions and 30% had never conducted a real-time drill (Graham et al., 2006). The United States Government Accountability Office estimated that more than two-thirds of all of schools do not train with their partners in the community, and about 25% have never conducted a drill involving first responders (2007). In some states, such as Iowa, school officials are not required by the state to work with emergency management officials in planning the school emergency procedures (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). School administrators are also not used to collaborating with police, fire, and EMS in creating and training for crisis situations (Erickson, 2001; Graham et al., 2006). These weaknesses can result

in varying degrees of disconnection and coordination between school districts even within the same state (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010).

Importance of Planning for Parent-Child Reunification

Children who become separated from their parents or guardians are at much higher risk of secondary sequelae in the aftermath of a crisis, including emotional trauma, abuse, malnutrition, infection, and abduction (Brandenburg, Watkins, Brandenburg, & Schieche, 2007; National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). This is both because kids are less able to recognize and understand maltreatment and because they are less able to protect themselves from it (Curtis, Miller, & Berry, 2000). The risk of secondary trauma increases with the duration of separation and the distance of evacuation (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). Younger children and the developmentally delayed are at greater risk of prolonged separation because they are cognitively unable or too afraid to provide officials with their own names and contact information to assist in the reunification process (Chung, Mario Christoudias, Darrell, Ziniel, & Kalish, 2012).

Vernberg and Vogel (1993) found that separation from guardians during a time of such uncertainty and anxiety affects the way children psychologically process, and recover from, such disasters. The return of children to the security of their own homes and families will help minimize the psychological impact in the aftermath of the disaster (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). It is widely agreed that one of the primary goals dealing with children in emergency situations is the efficient reunification of children with their families as early in the situation as is safely possible (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

Reunification can be a daunting task that involves an incredible amount of work and planning in order for the process to be successful (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2011). Parent-child reunification procedures are frequently one of the most often underdeveloped or undeveloped facets of school emergency plans, despite the fact that managing anxious parents is one of the biggest after-crisis issues schools must deal with (Philpott & Serluco, 2009; Trump, 2011). Approximately 75% of superintendents in a nationwide study reported having a written protocol releasing students back into the care of their parents or guardians (Graham et al., 2006). Only 14 states require schools to have active, written disaster plans that address protocols for reunification, and there is no such requirement from the federal government at this time (Save the Children, 2010). However, the National Commission on Children and Disasters strongly recommended in their 2010 report that reunification procedures be addressed universally in school plans throughout the country (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010).

The Federal Response Plan currently contains no guidelines for addressing school preparedness plans, referring to school plans only with regard to their potential to serve as community centers and sources of food during a crisis (FRP). While there are no universal federal guidelines or mandates for developing such crisis plans, the U.S. Department of Education does highly suggest that all schools and daycare centers have written preparedness plans (Schools and Terrorism, 2004).

Developing an efficient reunification process becomes even more critical when the situation requires an off-site evacuation. This was famously demonstrated after the evacuations from New Orleans during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, where 5,000 of the evacuees were children who had become separated from their families (National Commission on Children and

Disasters, 2010). Officials lost the ability to effectively track the changing locations of the 400,000 people displaced around the country (Gausche-Hill, 2009; National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). As a result, it took 6 months for the last child separated during this incident to be reunited with her mother and siblings despite the efforts of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (Gausche-Hill, 2009; National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). This is why implementing a method of tracking the students' whereabouts in the aftermath of the crisis and only allowing their release to previously authorized individuals is crucial (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

After an on-site school crisis, parents who are desperate to get to their children can often further complicate the ongoing crisis response by EMS, fire, and police departments. Frantic phone calls to the main school phone lines and traffic along main access roads can all act to impede crisis response (Trump, 2011). Officials involved in emergency planning at the schools tend to underestimate the overwhelming process of working with parents and releasing students back to their families (Trump, 2011). During the events of September 11, 2001, anxious parents flocking to the four elementary and three high schools within six blocks of Ground Zero contributed to gridlocked streets, compounding the logistical issues facing first responders (Schools and Terrorism, 2004). The same issues faced Washington, D.C. area schools when another plane crashed into the Pentagon and during the school shooting at Columbine High School (Schools and Terrorism, 2004; Erickson, 2001). The aforementioned examples demonstrate the importance of developing a plan for efficient student retrieval, and communicating it to parents, in order to reduce the potential for added chaos in the aftermath of a school incident.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to review the current best practices for parent-student reunification following a school crisis. The secondary goal of this paper was to compare the current best practices for parent-child reunification to those protocols outlined in actual school district emergency preparedness plans in West Central Ohio. Finally, recommendations are made to improve the reunification protocols in future school district crisis planning.

Methods

Articles and committee reports dealing with the parent-child reunification process were obtained from various online repositories via PubMed and Google Scholar. Relevant articles, reports, and school emergency plans were retrieved through Google searches using the same keywords; these articles were subsequently evaluated for relevance and legitimacy prior to inclusion in the study. Search keywords were also used to locate pertinent books at the Wright State University Library. Keywords that were used in all searches included the following: school crisis; school preparedness, school emergency; response; plan, procedure, protocol; parental notification; reunification; student release; evacuation, early closure, lockdown.

Each of the 53 k-12 school districts in Montgomery, Greene, Clark, Darke, Preble, and Miami Counties was contacted individually using a combination of e-mail and telephone communication. Due to the sensitive nature of school crisis plans, only the section(s) pertaining to the district's parent/child reunification procedure, as well as pertinent sections of the parent handbook, were requested. After school plans were obtained, each was critically analyzed based on the subjective criteria listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Criteria Used in Evaluating School Crisis Plans

Complete or partial plan submitted	Availability of parent handbook
Section on reunification present or absent	Extent of individual role designation
Designated media channels for communication	Preparation of relevant documents
Plan storage and accessibility to staff	Frequency of parent information distribution
Designation of on-campus reunification site	Designation of off-campus reunification site
Arrangement of off-campus transportation	Description of reunification area structure
Description of reunification area procedures	Addresses students unavailable for release
Addresses absent guardian scenario	Addresses lockdown, shelter-in-place, quarantine, and decontamination

Only those school emergency plans updated within the last 10 years were included and the inclusion range for all other publications was limited to a 15-year range (1998-2013). This range was chosen because earlier publications would not account for the substantial influences of widespread internet and cellular phone usage as tools for parent communication, and thus would not hold relevance in modern crisis planning in student release after a school crisis.

With the exception of the actual school emergency plans analyzed, resources not containing direct references to parent-child reunification or student release procedures were excluded from this study. The search was limited to those pertaining to, analyzing, or making recommendations on school plans in the United States.

Results Part I: Best Practices in Parent-Student Reunification Plans

Resources Available for School Emergency Planning

A number of resources are available to school districts who wish to compose or update a school emergency plan. All Head Start institutions are provided with the *Head Start Emergency*

Preparedness Manual, which walks program staff and administrators through the process of writing and implementing a preparedness plan that fits each school (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). The Federal Emergency Management Agency has also assembled a sample school crisis plan for use as a template in creating plans for any K-12 school (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2011).

All-hazards emergency preparedness plans offer simple, catch-all plans that theoretically provide guidance in all types of scenarios. While all-hazards plans are occasionally recommended, one-size-fits-all guidelines are often not useful in school districts that cover 100 or more schools (Erickson, 2001). These considerations mean it is generally better to conduct community-specific needs assessments and compose an individualized plan that fits the needs of each school site (Erickson, 2001; Foltin et al., 2008; National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). One author even suggests that in the event of a mass-casualty incident, the plan should be comprised of general principles that can be adapted to any situation rather than use a plan that is stepwise and inflexible (Peleg, Michaelson, Shapira, & Aharonson-Daniel, 2003). All schools should also prepare a portion of the response plan addressing the reunification procedures in the case of a large-scale crisis that may occur (Erickson, 2001).

Regardless of the content, preparedness plans should be developed with collaborative input from not only school officials, but also from first responders, local emergency management agencies, parents, and other community stakeholders (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010; Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). All stakeholders should also be kept updated on any changes to the plan and involved in any training exercises that are conducted (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2011; Philpott & Serluco, 2009; Trump, 2011). It is imperative that any reunification plan be taught and trained along with the school

crisis plan to minimize confusion and panic should an incident occur (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2011).

Student/family reunification team.

Trump (2011) suggested a number of steps that school officials are able to take in order to lay the groundwork for an expedient and efficient student release procedure during the crisis planning phase. A Student/Family Reunification Team should be established and specific school personnel designated and trained to operate the reunification area in a safe and orderly manner (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2011; Trump, 2011). The members of this team have primary responsibility for setting up and maintaining a secure reunification area, completing and keeping track of all release paperwork, ensuring the continued safety of all students in their care, and overseeing the release of the student into the hands of an authorized adult (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2011; Trump, 2011).

The team should include at least one person with decision-making authority to handle any issues during the process and to coordinate with the crisis Public Information Officers (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2011; Trump, 2011). Other roles do not require specialized knowledge or ability and may be assigned to any members of the school staff (Trump, 2011). A minimum of two staff members should be available at each point of reunification to ensure adequate family assistance and student security (Trump, 2011). Runners on the team are charged with shepherding the students and their parents/guardians to appropriate zones of the reunification area as well as officials designated to verify parent/guardian identities and assist with the required paperwork (Trump, 2011). If they are available, volunteers with the Red Cross can be integrated into the team in order to improve staffing and communication in the

reunification areas as well as provide comfort to the anxious students, parents, and staff (Trump, 2011).

Each team member supervising the students should be equipped with a list of the students assigned to him or her, complete with the names of the students who were absent at the start of the school day as well as those who left prior to the incident (Trump, 2011). Optimally, the team would include at least one counselor or other mental health professional as well as staff to handle phone traffic to and from parents (Trump, 2011).

Selecting a reunification area.

A number of factors should be taken into consideration when selecting sites that could potentially serve as reunification areas. This is because the reunification center will ideally operate as a smaller version of the incident command center that will be active on the scene of the crisis (Trump, 2011). The first, and most important, point of consideration should be accessibility and the ability to quickly and safely move the students to the designated point. School administrators should also evaluate the communications abilities of any potential reunification center, including fax, phone, and internet capabilities (Trump, 2011). Additionally, any facility must be safe for all students and able to accommodate the needs of those students and staff with disabilities (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008).

Both on- and off-site locations must be considered, as the school grounds might be rendered unsafe by the crisis. Any on-site locations should be flexible, as the primary designated space may be rendered uninhabitable by an aspect of the ongoing crisis; yellow “Caution” tape or mobile barriers are recommended for easy relocation of the reunification area (Trump, 2011). The off-site location should also be within walking distance of the school if it is feasible, as acquiring rapid mass transportation may be impractical if the incident is ongoing or if the roads

are congested by first responders, media, or parents (Trump, 2011). Any potential reunification area must have sufficient numbers of entry points and available parking to curtail traffic congestion (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). If students must be evacuated further than a safe walking distance, school transportation officials must be included in all planning and drills, the chosen reunification site must be safely accessible to school buses, and the bus communication system should be routinely tested (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008).

Documentation.

Copies of all student rosters—including absence and early sign-out lists for the day— and emergency release authorization cards should be in easily accessible, designated locations both on and off campus (Trump, 2011). Sign-out forms for the students are strongly recommended by Philpott & Serluco (2009) and an example of this form can be found in Appendix A. It is vital that every step of the process be documented, including all damage and expenditures incurred, and that the school officials are able to trace all specific information regarding the release after the incident has been resolved (Trump, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

Plan Accessibility and Distribution

This written emergency protocol, including all Student/Family Reunification Team member designations, must be easily available to staff members at any time. A full student roster, a list of absent students, and all student emergency and release information should be available in hard copy on the premises and should also be accessible, electronically or via hard copy, from an off-campus location in case of evacuation (Trump, 2011).

All relevant information pertaining to parents and families, including anticipated modes of communication and emergency release information, should be updated and distributed at the start of each school year or after a new student is registered at the school (Philpott & Serluco, 2009). This includes a completed Emergency Information Form to be completed by the child's family in conjunction with the primary physician detailing the child's baseline physical condition and behaviors as well as information of the child's medications and allergies (Foltin et al., 2008). A specific Emergency Authorization Form should also be included, providing contact information for several authorized adults able to retrieve a child in the event of an incident (Philpott & Serluco, 2009). A sample copy of this form can be found in Appendix C. All materials should be individually translated into the languages understood by the parents of every child attending the school (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

Parental Communication

Because parents tend to arrive on scene very quickly following a school incident, it is essential to have a previously agreed upon method of contacting them with information detailing how, where, and when to retrieve their students and that the information can be distributed quickly (Trump, 2011). Notification should not be delayed, and the chosen method(s) of mass parental notification should be established and updated each year (Trump, 2011).

Dedicated emergency phone lines are recommended, and the parents should be discouraged from calling on the school's main phone line so as not to jam the lines and prevent calls to or from those responders who are actively managing an ongoing crisis (Henrico County Public Schools, n.d.; Trump, 2011). They should also be discouraged from using cell phones near the school site, as first responders often use cellular phones to communicate and the phone

circuits could become overloaded (Henrico County Public Schools, n.d.). This instruction is especially important in the event of a bomb threat because bombs may carry a wireless trigger that activates at specific frequencies, and this point should be communicated to parents (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). Parents should be instructed to remain close to the phone listed as the emergency contact number for the duration of the incident (Henrico County Public Schools, n.d.).

Television channels, radio stations, and websites designated for use in disseminating such information to parents should be communicated to parents both at the beginning of each school year and early in the evolution of the crisis, if possible (Schools and Terrorism, 2004; Henrico County Public Schools, n.d.). It is also wise to consider writing template letters and press releases addressing a variety of possible incidents; this will save the designated staff members the confusion and risk of speaking extemporaneously when a crisis does occur (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

When communicating with parents or guardians, school officials should be prepared to answer immediate concerns about a child's health and safety, and all communication with parents should be effective, efficient, and delivered with the appropriate level of reassurance (Schools and Terrorism, 2004). Information should be provided to parents as soon as it is possible to do so through school officials or through the incident command system's designated Communications/Public Relations Director (Henrico County Public Schools, n.d.). If direct communication with parents is not possible, school officials should use the agreed upon mass communication channel to reassure parents that they are doing everything possible to keep their child(ren) safe, that children will be reunited with families as soon as it is safe to do so, and that

parents will be contacted by the school with further details at a later time (Henrico County Public Schools, n.d.).

If an off-site reunification area is possible, families should be directed away from the school's main campus (Trump, 2011). Should the reunification process occur on-site, parents should be instructed not to report to the school's primary entrance if viable, as this may interfere with easy accessibility to first responders (Trump, 2011). School officials should develop plans to utilize any gates, fences, or access roads already present on campus in order to advantageously redirect traffic and assist parents in reaching the reunification area (Graham et al., 2006). All reunification areas should be preferentially located at a distance from the media staging area if it is feasible (Philpott & Serluco, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

Parents should be made aware that if a school emergency should occur and the reunification plan activated, the child will only be released to the individual(s) designated on the child's emergency information card on file with the school. Therefore it is recommended that the school have contact information on file for at least one non-parent adult who would be able to respond in case a parent is unreachable or unavailable (Henrico County Public Schools, n.d.). They should also be notified that they will need to present a government-issue photo ID for their child to be released into their custody; considering this, individuals not possessing such identification should not be listed on the child's emergency release card (Henrico County Public Schools, n.d.; Trump, 2011).

Reunification Area Structure

The reunification area should ideally be comprised of three zones (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). Students should be kept in the designated Holding Area with

designated teachers while waiting for their parents (Philpott & Serluco, 2009). The second area will be the Report Point, the area at which parents present to claim their child(ren), and the third area, the Student Release Point, is where the child(ren) can be released back into their custody (Philpott & Serluco, 2009; Washington State School Safety Center, 2008).

The spaces themselves should be distinctly separate areas but located nearby, and can be located in existing rooms within the school or may be demarcated with mobile barriers and/or plastic barrier tape and labeled with signs (Philpott & Serluco, 2009; Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). To reduce crowding, the Report Point and the Release Point should be separated by a moderate distance (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). The structure of the reunification area can be seen in Figure 1.

Reunification Area Procedure

When adults initially arrive to retrieve their children, they will be directed to the Report Point where members of the Student/Family Reunification Team will assist them. Caregivers will undoubtedly have additional questions concerning the incident that do not pertain directly to the retrieval of their own children, and all requests for additional information should be directed to the Public Information Officer (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). Members of the Student/Family Reunification team should wear vests, nametags, or other identifiers when available (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008).

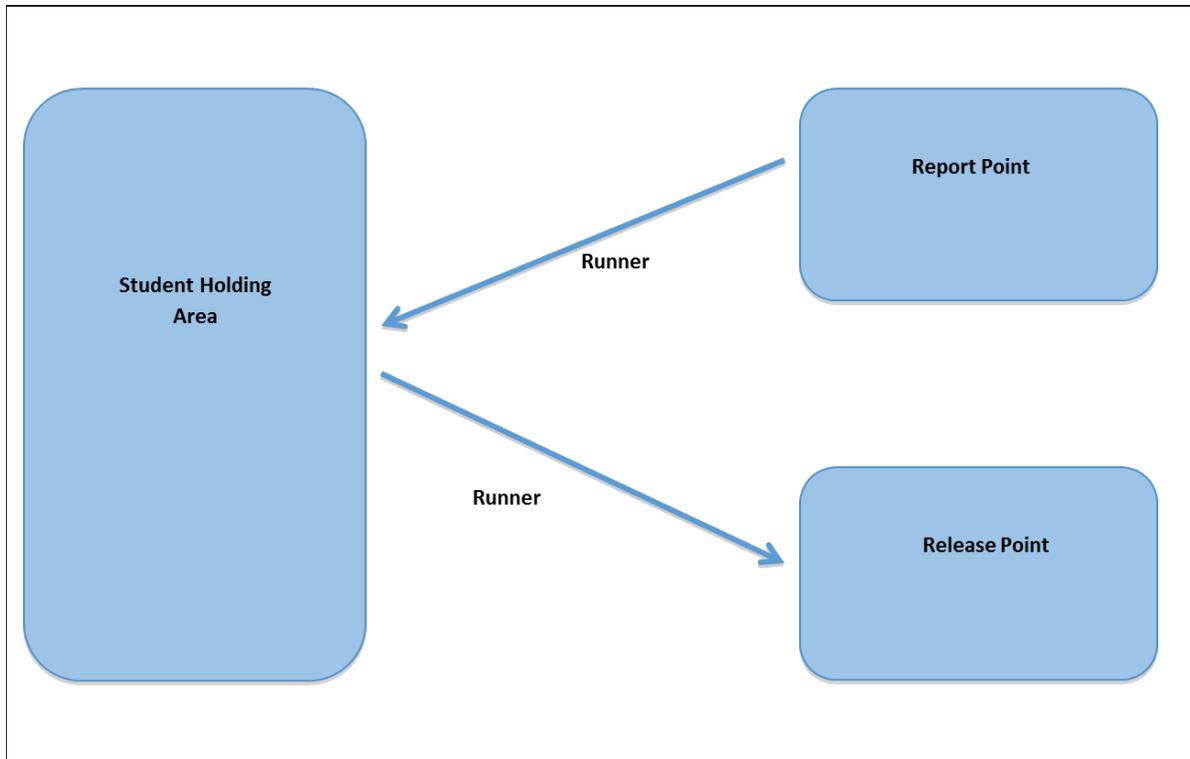


Figure 1. Ideal layout of a student-family reunification site, as described by Philpott and Serluco (2009).

Adults will then provide the name of the student(s) they wish to retrieve and the staff members will cross-check the ID card of the adult with the name listed on the student's emergency release authorization card (Philpott & Serluco, 2009; Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). Staff will provide the adult with a copy of the Student Release Form and instruct him/her to fill out the top portion of the form (Philpott & Serluco, 2009).

When the caregiver has completed his/her section of the form, a staff member will complete the second portion of the form, documenting proof of ID and confirm that the emergency card gives permission for the adult to retrieve the child (Philpott & Serluco, 2009). The form will then be given to a runner who will then take it to the Student Holding Area and the adult will proceed to the Student Release Point to wait for his/her charge (Philpott & Serluco, 2009; Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). A staff member there will document the

student's present condition on the form and, if the child is ready for release, the child and his/her release form are transported by the runner to the Student Release Point (Philpott & Serluco, 2009; Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). If the child is not ready for release at that time, this will be indicated on the student's form, which will be sent back to the Release Point with the runner for further processing as detailed below (Philpott & Serluco, 2009).

The staff member at the Student Holding Area will then indicate on the student roster that the student has been sent with the runner for release and initial the student form sent with the runner (Philpott & Serluco, 2009; Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). The student and release form will arrive with the runner at the Student Release Point, at which time the responsible adult is called and ID re-checked (Philpott & Serluco, 2009). Finally, the adult will sign the release form and will be free to take the child into his/her custody and depart from the school campus (Philpott & Serluco, 2009).

Additional Scenarios

Students unavailable for release.

If a student cannot be released when the parent arrives to claim him or her, that parent should be led to a designated "Notification Room" to await further information (Philpott & Serluco, 2009). This situation could occur for a number of reasons, including injury still requiring treatment, detainment by the police as a witness, arrest of the student, or even the death of a student. The Washington State School Safety Manual suggests that a separate "Notice of First Aid Care Given" form be prepared for this purpose (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). Because parents may receive sensitive information at that time, it is recommended that the room be staffed by a Mental Health Team that includes counselors and other mental health support staff (Philpott & Serluco, 2009). Parents should be updated on the

status of the child as soon as the information is available and they should be reassured at each step that every effort is being made to help the child (Philpott & Serluco, 2009).

In the event of a child's death, the Columbine Review Commission recommends that the procedures generally followed in the process of victim identification be relaxed (Erickson, 2001). Providing for the immediate psychological needs of the deceased child's family should take precedence in this tragic scenario (Erickson, 2001). The Mental Health Team and other staff members in contact with the family should take every opportunity to provide reassurance that every effort is being made to safeguard the child's remains and deliver them back to the family (Philpott & Serluco, 2009).

Guardian not present.

In the event that a child's parent or guardian has not retrieved the child by the end of the regularly scheduled school day, remaining staff members will attempt to place phone calls to those adults (Philpott & Serluco, 2009). If none of the adults on the child's emergency contact card can be reached or are available to pick up the student, it is recommended that a personnel member from the school district personally transport the student to his or her home (Philpott & Serluco, 2009).

Lockdown and shelter-in-place orders.

The nature of the crisis will help determine whether it is necessary to activate school lockdown or sheltering in place for a prolonged period of time, delaying reunification with families. Such scenarios include inclement weather that renders transportation to and from the school a hazard, an armed hostage situation, nearby hazardous materials spill, etc. If children will be held at the school to protect his/her safety, parents should be expediently notified of the decision and be reassured that this is in the interest of the child's safety (Henrico County Public

Schools, n.d.). Parents will be alerted by school officials when it is safe to lift the orders and allow students to leave school grounds (Henrico County Public Schools, n.d.).

Quarantine or decontamination of students.

Only one of the reports in this study mentioned the possibility that an in-school crisis could require the students to be quarantined for an extended period of time for observation, treatment of known contagion, or decontamination. While the authors mentioned that this could involve significant time separated from parents, no procedure was recommended to prepare for such a scenario (Schools and Terrorism, 2004).

Reunification following evacuation from campus.

If evacuation to an off-site location is deemed necessary to protect student safety and to expedite reunification, all parents will be notified of the location change and provided information on accessing the site (Philpott & Serluco, 2009; Trump, 2011). The basic infrastructure and procedures in place for student release will still be implemented as they would be for an on-site reunification center (Philpott & Serluco, 2009).

There is no effective system active in the United States geared toward expediting the reunification of families separated during a disaster, especially because reunification can be hindered by the developmental limits of infants and younger children (Burke, Ryutov, Neches, & Upperman, 2010). In addition, there was no literature uncovered addressing the process of sudden and longer-distance mass evacuation from a school or daycare center.

Results Part II: Existing Reunification Plans in Ohio Schools

Of the requests submitted to the 53 k-12 public school districts in Montgomery, Greene, Clark, Darke, Preble, and Miami Counties, four provided complete or partial school safety plans for analysis. Eight of the districts declined outright on the premise that the material included in their school crisis plans is sensitive in nature, and one deferred sending a plan because the

district is in the process of updating its school emergency plans to better reflect the Ohio Emergency Operations Planning guidelines. The school districts have been de-identified at their request.

School District A

While this school district representative did not provide a complete plan for analysis, the abridged reunification section of the official plan and verbatim sections from the parent handbook were submitted, as well as comments on the plan provided by the contact person at the school. No indication was made as to whether the plan was formulated with input from local emergency services professionals.

Specific sections pertaining to parent-student reunification were present in both the official safety plan and in the school district's parent handbook, distributed at the start of each school year. Both the official plan and the parent handbook specified that parental notification of an incident will occur via the District Automated Notification "ONE CALL" system, as well as via mass e-mail. Appropriate announcements will also be made using local radio and television stations, though the precise stations to be utilized were not identified in either the plan or the handbook.

The school district emergency plan does specify alternate routes with bus pickup near each school or in nearby neighborhoods in case of normal route disruption. Specific sites have also been designated for off-site reunification if necessary depending on the proximity or nature of the threat, and an evaluation of the adequacy of the facilities was absent. The parent handbook did not include specifics of reunification sites, but stated that information would be released through designated communication channels at the time the incident occurs. The

handbook also included a copy of emergency release paperwork required for each student at the start of each school year.

Whether other documents relevant to crisis response were previously formulated and included with the official district plan was not specified. The storage location of the plan, accessibility to staff, and designation of staff as members of the Student/Family Reunification Team were also not mentioned. Neither procedures for reunification nor the structure of the reunification site were addressed. There was also no indication that procedures were in place for addressing students unavailable for release, absent guardians, or extended sheltering in the school building.

School District B

The complete crisis response plan was obtained from the superintendent of the school district. A detailed reunification plan was alluded to but not included in the information submitted for analysis.

The District B crisis plan is an all-hazards plan that encompasses every scenario from a student pregnancy to a mass-casualty incident. Specific roles are assigned to staff members based on current positions in the institution. A clear chain of command is laid out within the plan as well, with variations included to specifically meet the needs that may arise with each situation addressed in the policy. No specific Parent/Child Reunification Team is described in the plan, but individuals within the school staff and administration are assigned to such tasks. For example, the responsibility of contacting parents falls to school administrators, the task of fielding phone calls from concerned parents falls to the school secretaries and counselors, and teachers are in charge of keeping track of their students until they are able to reunite with their

families. There was no specific mention of a reunification area setup, specific reunification area procedures, or of how best to communicate sensitive information to parents.

Reunification in the face of a possible hazardous materials emergency went only as far as to state the students would not be released until cleared by the fire department. If a student is 18 years of age or older, the protocol stipulates that they may sign themselves out of the school's custody unless further medical treatment or decontamination is required. Students will be transported home by school bus if a lockdown keeps them on campus beyond the regular school day.

The District B school emergency plan not only made prior arrangements for transportation to an off-site location if necessary, but it also includes an extensive section detailing the procedures in the event of a crisis involving a school bus. This was the only plan submitted to do so. Among the school bus situations addressed were plans for tornadoes, violent intruders, abductions from the vehicle, students with weapons, and evacuations. While thoroughly addressing several scenarios, no reunification procedures were included in the school bus emergency protocols.

The authors also include addresses, phone numbers, website addresses, and contact people for relevant community organizations and other stakeholders whom it may be important to contact should an emergency arise. These include local first responders, the local chapter of the American Red Cross, and numerous emergency shelters and crisis counselors. It is clear that local stakeholders, particularly first-responders, collaborated with school officials in the writing of the plan.

Very little information regarding parental communication during a crisis situation was included in this school district's plan. There was no mention of a parent handbook, designated

media or web channels to be utilized for parental communication, and no mention of student emergency or release cards.

School District C

The complete school emergency response plan was obtained from the school district representative. Sections addressing reunification procedures and parent communication in the face of multiple scenarios were present. The plan was compiled with input from local police, fire, and rescue squad representatives.

The plan did not include designation of individuals for the Student/Family Reunification Team, but indicated that teachers would remain with and responsible for their students until the situation resolves or they are released to their parents. There is not a specific location designated to serve as the on-site reunification center, but there is a designated off-campus location to serve as a joint student release location and incident command center. In the event of early dismissal or if evacuation is necessary, the Transportation Director will arrange appropriate transportation for students, though a protocol for emergency student and staff transport does not exist in the current plan.

No information pertaining to parent communication or an explanation of emergency student release procedures was present in the District C parent handbook, including designated media channels or other modes of communication in case of a school crisis. The school does plan to ask the general area media to assist in notifying parents of when and where children will be released in case of an evacuation. It is specified that the parents/guardians will not be called until allowed by the overall Incident Commander. The school district's protocol does state that a fact sheet be prepared to assist in fielding phone calls from parents and concerned community

members, but does not indicate whether such a fact sheet, all-hazards or situation-specific, has already been developed. The plan also outlines plans to have an interpreter on-hand if necessary.

Pertaining to emergency documentation, student rosters are kept in hard copy in a designated location for use in case of an emergency. The plan designates that the attendance roster will serve as a checklist when releasing students back into the custody of their parents. Any other documentation involved in the reunification process was not mentioned in the emergency plan. District C has not outlined the specific procedure for a parent/student reunification process in the official crisis plan.

In the event that children are injured, those students' emergency contact information will be compiled into a list for use in case of hospital admission. If injured children are evacuated, arrangements will be made to allow them to speak with a parent or guardian if possible. The school district does not have a written plan in place to handle the death of a student or staff member during a school crisis. While the emergency plan specifically states that no student will be released unless a parent or guardian has been notified and appropriate transportation has been arranged, there is no statement addressing a protocol in the event that an adult cannot be contacted. The plan also does not address the parental notification process in case of prolonged sheltering-in-place or quarantine event.

School District D

The complete crisis plan was obtained from the District D representative. Sections addressing parental communication and parent/child reunification were present in the plan.

The school district specified the use of a sign-out sheet for use in releasing parents to students. Students will not be released unless signed out, but no further details elaborating on the sign-out procedure were included in the school plan. No documentation for use in parent

communication or reunification was included in the submitted materials. The superintendent of the school district reported that the reunification protocols are largely planned and executed by local law enforcement professionals, who are entrusted with these specifics.

The school district plan includes a parental communication plan that includes specific local television stations utilizing a live feed to convey necessary information. The plan also incorporates the use of unspecified local radio stations and the school website when appropriate. No other information on parental communication prior to or during a crisis was located within the plan that was submitted for this study. No parent handbook was available for evaluation.

One particular strength of the District D emergency plan was that a specific set of duties is designated for each staff member based on his/her job title. This ensures that there is no confusion or scramble to assign responsibility during an already chaotic time. There is no Student/Family Reunification Team included in the school district plan, however a number of staff members are assigned to relevant roles by the plan.

For example, the curriculum director will plan to coordinate communication with local hospitals if a child is sent for treatment and to accompany the child(ren) to the hospital, waiting with them and communicating with parents/guardians on arrival. The school superintendent will organize and maintain a center for calls and requests from parents, working with pupil services to refer them to the appropriate resources. The director of transportation is responsible for developing and maintaining a plan for student and staff transportation if evacuation is deemed necessary, and teachers are charged with taking possession of class rosters for verification of student attendance.

Reunification site evaluation, structure, and procedures were not included in the submitted materials. Plan storage, accessibility to staff, and mechanism of distribution during a

crisis were not discussed in the emergency plan. Also absent was a discussion addressing students unavailable for release, guardians who do not come to claim students, or protocols for student release following shelter-in-place procedures.

Discussion

This study was conducted in an effort to review the current best practices for parent-student reunification following a school crisis. The secondary goal of the study was to evaluate and compare the student release procedures of active school emergency plans in West Central Ohio with recommendations made in the literature. Recommendations will be made in this section for the improvement of reunification plans in future school emergency preparedness efforts.

Best Practices for Parent-Student Reunification

Developing and communicating the plan.

There are no federally mandated student release guidelines for school safety planning currently available in the United States. The National Commission on Children and Disasters, a temporary commission established by President Bush in 2007 to publish recommendations pertaining to the specific needs of children in disasters, was disbanded in early 2011 and a similar organization does not exist. However, federal organizations such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the United States Department of Education have published outlines to assist school districts in planning for student-parent reunification after a crisis occurs. These documents are easily located on the internet and are readily accessible to lay individuals. It also goes without saying that local emergency responders, emergency management officials, and other community stakeholders are generally willing and available to assist in developing all aspects of school crisis plans.

The scope of school preparedness plans is a point of contention among the authors included in this review. Some authors, such as Trump (2011), Peleg et al. (2003), and Philpott & Serluco (2009), believe that developing an all-hazards blueprint is the best way to approach school emergency planning. Others, such as Erickson (2001), Foltin et al. (2008), and the National Commission on Children and Disasters (2010), support a more methodical approach, utilizing specific risk-assessment techniques to determine and subsequently plan for those issues most likely to arise in each individual region, district, or school. It is of note that the report of the Columbine Review Commission is a supporter of the risk assessment approach to school crisis planning, despite the observation that the Jefferson County School District in which the high school resided did not consider their risk for an active shooter event to be particularly high. The Columbine Review Commission was one of the only local reports to state that reunification planning should be conducted by all schools in the event of a large-scale crisis, conceivably because parent-student reunification was particularly difficult following the active shooter on their own campus.

Assembly of a specific reunification team to oversee all aspects of the student release process was recommended by FEMA and Trump. These authors described the ideal composition of such a team and they specifically recommend assigning roles and responsibilities to designated staff members. Including a team member with the authority to make critical decisions is a particularly valuable insight that may otherwise be overlooked in the context of a more daunting crisis. Designating a counselor or other school mental health professional in advance takes steps to ensure that one is involved in the reunification process rather than being haphazardly assigned to an area of crisis management in which his or her skills go unused.

A particular strength of the Trump publication is its acknowledgement of community stakeholders, such as Red Cross volunteers, and the potential benefits they may provide in crisis management. This foresight allows school crisis planners to incorporate such volunteers into the protocol, simultaneously providing additional manpower and decreasing system congestion from unanticipated do-gooders.

These individual responsibilities should be designated at the beginning of the school year and should be revisited with each school emergency drill in order to minimize confusion should a true emergency occur. The role of the Parent-Student Reunification Team within the greater structure of the crisis' Incident Command System is lacking in the existing literature; the only reference uncovered in this study was FEMA paper allusion to the Reunification Team coordinating with the incident Public Information Officer in releasing information to concerned parents.

Proper documentation is necessary to release any student into the care of his/her responsible adult, regardless of the type of incident occurring at the school. For this reason, all authors state that parents must fill out emergency information cards for their child(ren) and should be impressed with the importance of keeping this information up-to-date at all times. The school should keep all student release cards and enough copies of the student release form in a secure location, with additional copies stored off-campus. These student release forms are vital because even in a crisis situation, the school staff must keep accurate records of when, to whom, and in what condition students are released back into the custody of their parents. Though an important consideration, only the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools mentions the consideration that slack documentation in the face of a crisis makes the school district subject to litigation in addition to potentially exposing the students to unnecessary harm.

Parental communication must be as efficient, expedient, and complete as possible. Concerned parents have the ability to inject quite a bit of chaos into the management of any crisis with the actual or imagined potential to harm their children, even with the best of intentions at heart. All authors suggest using multiple, specific, and previously designated communication channels to convey information regarding the crisis to the parents and guardians of the students. Information should be released through the incident's Public Information Officer or other designated school official. Two authors recommend that schools utilize translators to make all information accessible regardless of a family's primary language. This is an excellent idea and is of particular importance and should be anticipated in school districts where high proportions of the population speak a language other than English.

Multiple authors suggest drafting press releases addressing most likely school crisis scenarios to include with the school emergency plan. This will minimize confusion during the crisis, satisfy the media craving for immediate information, and reduce any media propagation of false information that may induce parental panic. It is also recommended that in addition to the emergency plan and student rosters, multiple copies of absence reports and early sign-out sheets be made and kept in a secure location throughout the day. This would allow the rapid dissemination of student attendance information in the event of a crisis and reduce the likelihood that time and manpower be wasted looking for a student who was absent that day. Trump was the only author in the study to suggest that copies of student rosters be kept in an accessible off-campus location. In this technological age, it is also feasible to keep such electronic rosters on a secure server accessible remotely via the internet should the hard copy be destroyed or inaccessible.

Reunification area.

In selecting a site for the reunification center, the literature states that safety, accessibility, and adequacy of the area to accommodate the needs of the students and the reunification team are essential. All authors included in this study emphasized the importance of establishing both on- and off-campus locations for the reunification area, as well as the need to organize transportation for the entire student body in the planning, if applicable. The Washington State School Safety Center publication addressed the importance of accommodating sufficient motor vehicle access points in order to minimize traffic, and Philpott & Serluco recommend that the reunification area should always be as far from the media staging area as possible.

The only point of disagreement between authors regarding the reunification area structure pertains to the distance separating the Report Point and the Release Point. The Washington School Safety Center suggests separating the two points with a moderate distance, while Philpott & Serluco recommend that the two areas be in close proximity. Given the potential for crowding, and the subsequent decrease in communication and increase in chaos, logic suggests that the former approach be designated as the best practice.

Concerning the operating procedures, all authors addressing the issue concurred on the most effective way to run the Reunification Area. The unfortunate point here is that the majority of authors who discuss the importance of including a parent-student reunification procedure in school crisis planning do not suggest specific protocols for establishing and executing a Reunification Area.

The importance of releasing a child only into the custody of an individual designated on the student's Emergency Information Card cannot be understated. The only method proposed by

the authors in this study for ensuring this is the use of government-issued identification cards and no alternate mode of identification was mentioned in any of the reviewed literature. Possession of a photo ID is of such importance that the Henrico County Public Schools plan suggests that adults without ID should not be listed as emergency contacts. A study conducted by the Brennan Center for Justice demonstrated that up to 11% of American citizens do not have a government-issued photo ID, a number that increases when undocumented citizens are considered (Brennan Center for Justice, 2006). It is also conceivable that in the panicked haste of rushing to retrieve a child from a crisis area, responsible adults may also misplace the ID card. One potential solution to this problem would be to keep photos of emergency contact individuals, taken on the student's enrollment in the school district, in each student's file. While this is an imperfect solution, the increasing prevalence of computer technologies increases its feasibility.

Preparation for additional scenarios.

A list of additional scenarios affecting parent-student reunification procedures following a school crisis were discussed in the literature. These circumstances include students unavailable for release, guardians who do not arrive to retrieve their charges, student retrieval following lockdown or shelter-in-place orders extending beyond the school day, need for quarantine or decontamination, and the event of evacuation from the school grounds.

Of these scenarios, the one most extensively considered by the authors in this study is that of students unavailable for release. These recommendations are understandably detailed because of the potential for emotional upset among parents who are told that their child cannot be immediately released back into their custody. Reasons for detaining students are varied and range from acting as a witness in a law enforcement interview to a student death. Regardless of the rationale for keeping a student in the custody of the school, parents will tend to assume the

worst case scenario and will be significantly prone to panic. It is for this reason that Philpott & Serluco (2009) recommend that a designated Notification Room be used for sharing this sensitive information with families. These authors state that mental health support staff should be present in the Notification Room.

The death of a child is the most tragic possible outcome of a school crisis. For this reason, the Columbine Review Commission suggested that the process of victim identification be relaxed in favor of the psychological needs of the deceased child's parents. Philpott and Serluco (2009) state that mental health staff should continue to reassure the parents that their child's remains are being safeguarded and will be delivered back to them as soon as possible. These measures may seem trivial in the event of a child's death, but every effort should be made to provide emotional support to a deceased child's family in any way possible. Developing a plan addressing the possibility of a child's death on campus is an unpleasant task, but doing so will alleviate some confusion and ensure that families feel supported by the school during such a tragic time.

The model reunification plans seen in this study operate under the assumption that every child at the school will be retrieved by an authorized adult, and there is a question of what should happen with a student in the event that nobody comes to claim him/her. Only Philpott and Serluco (2009) addressed this scenario, stating that if contact cannot be made with an authorized adult, the child should be personally transported home by a school district representative. This suggestion attempts to address the problem, but is fraught with potential complications. Should the school district representative attempt to transport the child to the homes of each of the emergency contacts listed on his/her emergency authorization card? What should be done if no authorized adult is present in the home? Under what conditions should the school district contact

Child Protective Services for emergency and temporary placement of a child with no other custodial options? These questions are all left unanswered by the literature included in this study.

Also not addressed in the literature is the procedure for releasing students 18 years of age and older. While Henrico County Public Schools (n.d.) states that no student will be released without a parent, guardian, or other authorized adult present, the school district does not account for students of adult age. These students are able to make legal decisions for themselves in the eyes of the state, and as such may be able to release themselves from the school after an event. Given the potential for physical and emotional trauma following a crisis at school, some school districts may decide that the safest course for students of adult age is to be released to an authorized individual. Other districts may allow these students the authority to release themselves independently.

In the event of a school in lockdown or sheltering-in-place beyond the normal length of the school day, reunification must be delayed until internal and external conditions are safe. The Henrico County Public School plan addresses this scenario and states that parents should be promptly notified of the decision to delay reunification, provided with an explanation, and alerted when students are allowed to leave the school campus. As with every crisis situation, families should be reassured that the decision is in the student's best interest and that every effort is being made to provide for the student's needs.

No procedures were recommended in the literature to address possible quarantine or decontamination of students. Included in this scenario are the possibilities of extended periods of time separated from parents for symptom observation and subjection to painful or uncomfortable treatment or decontamination procedures deemed necessary by a public health

authority. The possibility of the aforementioned scenarios occurring is remote at best, which is the likely reason why it is not addressed by any of the authors in this study. The circumstances involved in releasing students involved in quarantine or decontamination may be as varied as the infectious or chemical agents that trigger the scenario, and thus may be better dealt with on an individual scenario by public health officials. That being said, any school located near a nuclear reactor or major highway should be sure to include, at minimum, a basic hazardous materials component in its school emergency plan.

Concerning reunification following evacuation from campus, all authors recommended that off-campus reunification procedures be considered in school emergency planning. If the reunification site is off-campus, parents should be notified of the change and all reunification operations would be implemented as they would be for on-campus student release.

There was no literature present addressing the possibility of sudden and long-distance mass evacuation and no effective national system is in place for reunification of families separated by large-scale disasters. Fortunately, this degree of separation is unlikely to happen during the course of the school day. Children evacuated from a school due to unforeseen events, such as flash flooding or spread of forest fires, will likely be accompanied by teachers who know them or by a member of the school staff with access to each child's emergency contact information.

Reunification Plans in West Central Ohio Schools

A very small sampling of the reunification plans currently utilized in West Central Ohio school districts was obtained and analyzed. One plan each was submitted from four school districts representing a range of community sizes and settings.

Each plan submitted for analysis contained parent/child reunification procedures to varying degrees. The most consistent element found among these plans is the requirement that students not be released until signed out by a specified parent or guardian. As is recommended in the literature, both District A and District B clearly included input from local first responders when writing their plan.

Specific off-campus reunification sites were mentioned by the District A and District C plans, though the criteria used in selecting these sites was not explained in either plan. Detailed plans for the reunification area setup and procedures were absent from all four of the plans analyzed, though it is possible that the more developed reunification plans do exist and were simply not submitted for use in this study.

While the District D plan briefly mentions a developed reunification procedure in the school crisis plan, the superintendent stated that reunification is planned and executed by law enforcement rather than by school officials. Allowing law enforcement professionals to have free reign over the reunification procedures alleviates some responsibility from school officials while increasing the active role that local law enforcement has in safeguarding the community's children. One potential downside is that increasing fragmentation of responsibilities leads to an elevated susceptibility to errors from miscommunication, particularly if the two organizations do not conduct relatively frequent emergency drills. This approach appears to be unique among the West Central Ohio school districts, but with only four plans submitted for this study, this conclusion cannot be made with a high degree of certainty.

None of the school plans submitted included a designated Student/Family Reunification Team, though all plans included at least some staff members assigned to relevant roles by each plan. The most complete plans in this regard were those from District D and District C, which

ensured that staff members are assigned to each crucial roles of the reunification framework, from accounting for each student to fielding phone calls from concerned parents. The District A, District B, and District D school districts assign staff members to precise roles in their school emergency plans according to their job titles within the school, with the District B plan also including a clear chain of command to be followed.

The District C plan designates that teachers should remain with and responsible for their students, but does not designate other staff members for any additional reunification roles. One role that District C has built into its plan is a kind of guardianship for children who are injured and require transportation to a hospital. Should this occur, one staff member—not previously designated—will take the child’s emergency card and ride with the child to the hospital, remaining with the child until his/her parent or guardian arrives. This is a very thoughtful role that was not mentioned in any of the literature, but the positive psychological benefits to both the child and his/her parent or guardian during such a traumatic time cannot be understated.

The District A and District C representatives submitted parent handbooks for analysis. The District A parent handbook containing a section on the parental role in reunification procedures and is distributed to families at the start of each school year. Both state that media channels that will be used to disseminate information in the event of a school emergency but neither designates specific channels. No specifics on the reunification procedures were included in either the District A or District C handbooks, though the documents both state that relevant information would be released at the time of the incident.

Parent communication information for the District D was included within its school crisis plan. The plan specifies which local televisions will be used to broadcast important information to parents, the only plan to do so. The parental communication protocol for District D also

includes a number of unspecified local radio stations as well as the school website. No additional information on parent communication was included, and no parent handbook was submitted for this school district.

District A schools included a copy of the emergency release paperwork with its parent handbook. District A may or may not have developed other potentially helpful documents for use in the aftermath of a school crisis; no such documents were included in the school plan. The District B, District C, and District D plans do not include ancillary documents within the context of the emergency plans.

Each plan evaluated included a transportation component in case the need for evacuation arises, with the exception that the District C plan does not address emergency transportation. Only the District B plan included a section planning for a variety of emergencies that could occur during bus transportation, the only plan of the four to do so. None of the plans analyzed addressed the potential changes in reunification procedures should a school bus route be disrupted by an emergency situation.

District B's school emergency plan is the one that best addresses the alternative scenarios preventing smooth reunification that were discussed previously in this study, including the approach internal and external hazardous materials incidents.

Future Recommendations

Considering the literature and existing school crisis plans presented in the previous sections, there are a number of opportunities for both praise and for improvement.

The first and most ubiquitous recommendation is that nationwide standards for crisis planning be instituted in all daycare centers, preschools, and K-12 schools be instituted. This is not to say that all plans should be identical, but that each and every educational institution in the

nation should be required to address a standardized set of elements in the course of its crisis planning. All should include sections to address each agreed-upon component in a way that best fits each school district. These national standards should include a minimum degree of interaction with first responders, parents, and other community stakeholders in the development of the plan. Specifying a minimum number of tabletop and real-time drills within the national recommendations would also be prudent.

The second major recommendation of this study is that all schools compose a reunification plan, completed in as much detail as possible, to be added to the existing crisis plan. For all of the reasons addressed above, it is essential that every school prepares for a large-scale reunification procedure. Worried parents, potential for miscommunication, and the possibility of a continued threat can all contribute to chaos if not dealt with properly. A large part of handling such situations smoothly is to plan for them.

The literature is currently in conflict regarding whether school emergency plans should be developed using an all-hazards template or a risk-specific one. To some degree, all plans should be risk-specific; for example, it would be counter-productive for a Nebraska school to include hurricane planning or for a school in Indiana to include plans for a large-scale earthquake. The ideal approach to school planning seems to be striking a middle ground between the two, in which the largest risks are planned in the most detail but the more unlikely scenarios are addressed. An important example of this is the 2012 active shooter incident at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. In order to be prepared for unforeseen events, officials must first acknowledge that such risks exist and are worthy of attention.

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Appendix A
Sample Student Release Form from Philpott & Serluco (2009).

STUDENT RELEASE FORM			
First section to be completed by the adult picking up a student			
Please Print			
Student's Name _____			
Teacher _____		Grade _____	
Name of Adult Picking up the Student _____			
To be filed in by the Report Point Staff			
Proof of ID	Yes _____	No _____	
Emergency card gives permission for pickup by this adult	Yes _____	No _____	
To be taken by runner			
Student's Status			
To be filled in by the Holding Area staff			
Sent With Runner			
Not Available for Release	Absent	First Aid	Hospital
	Missing	Other	
Comments: _____			

To be filled in by the Release Point staff			
Confirm the student is being matched with the correct adult. Have the requesting adult sign for the student.			
Parent/Guardian/Caregiver Signature _____			
Parent/Guardian/Caregiver Printed Name _____			
Date _____		Time _____	

Appendix B

Sample Site Student/Staff Status Report for use in documenting and monitoring the status of individuals present on school grounds during incident management (Philpott & Serluco, 2009).

Student/Staff Status Report								
To: _____				From: _____				
Location _____				Date: _____		Time: _____		
Message Via:			Two-way Radio _____		Telephone _____		Messenger _____	
EMPLOYEE/STUDENT STATUS:								
	Absent	Injured	Sent to Hospital	Missing	Dead	Released to Parents	Under Supervision	Unaccounted for
Students								
Site Staff								
Others								
Comments:								

Appendix C

Sample Emergency Authorization Form including a brief explanation to parents regarding the importance of emergency release authorization (Philpott & Serluco, 2009).

Authorization to Release Children in an Emergency

Our school has developed an emergency plan in case of any disaster that might occur. The emergency plan is devoted to the welfare and safety of your child during school hours. The plan is available for inspection in the school office.

We are requesting your assistance at this time:

Should there be an emergency, such as a fire, tornado, explosion, and so forth, your child may be required to remain in the care of the school until it is deemed safe by an emergency services authority that the child can be released. At that point, children may be released only to properly authorized parent and/or designees. Therefore, please list as many names (with local telephone numbers and addresses) as possible, of those persons to whom you would allow your child's release in the event of an emergency. Be sure to notify those persons listed that you have authorized their supervision in case of an emergency.

In the event that you should be unable to come to school, it is essential that others be designated to care for your child. No child will be released to the care of unauthorized persons. We appreciate your cooperation in this important matter.

Child: _____ **Grade:** _____

Teacher: _____ **School Year:** _____

Please release my child to any of the persons listed below

Name	Relationship to Child	Address	Phone
			Home: Cell: Work:

Parent/Guardian: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature

Home Phone: _____ **Work Phone:** _____ **Cell Phone:** _____

Appendix D

Sample annual letter to parents and guardians, outlining the school district emergency program and parent/guardian expectations (Philpott & Serluco, 2009).

Dear Parents/Guardians,

We want you to be aware that this school has made many preparations to deal effectively with emergency situations that could occur in or around the school, both during the school day and during after-hours activities. While we hope that a natural disaster or other serious incident never occurs, our goal is to be prepared for any potential emergency. At all times, our first priority is to protect all students, staff members, and other visitors from harm.

In order for our emergency response plans to be effective, we depend on the cooperation and assistance of many people, such as the police and the fire department. We also depend on you, as parents and guardians, to support our disaster preparation and response efforts. Your cooperation is vital to helping us protect the safety and welfare of all children and school employees.

Therefore, we ask parents to observe the following procedures in the event of a school emergency.

1. Do not telephone the school. We understand and respect your concern, but it is essential that the telephone system is available for emergency communications.
2. Make sure that we have emergency contact information for each of your children at all times. We must be able to contact you or your designated representative in an emergency.
3. Tune your radio to [provide list of stations] for emergency announcements and status reports. You will also receive instructions on where you should go and how/when you may be able to pick up your children. Our school emergency plan includes evacuation procedures with several alternative destinations. When appropriate and safe, students may be released to their parents/guardians from these shelter locations. Under those circumstances, we will be prepared to implement procedures for confirming the identity of individuals who arrive to pick up each child. When arriving to pick up your children, please make sure you have a government-issued photo ID.
4. Do not come to the school or alternate destination until instructed to do so. It may be necessary to keep the streets and parking lots clear for emergency vehicles. If evacuation is required, students may be transported to a location away from the school. You will be notified of this through the media bulletins.
5. Talk to your children and emphasize how important it is for them to follow instructions from their teachers and school officials during any emergency.
6. Parents and other adults must stay calm and focused in an emergency, mindful that their actions and comments will be the example that, to a great extent, determines the children's response.
7. Carefully read all information that you receive from the school. You may receive updates about our safety procedures from time to time.

We are proud that [school name] is a safe school, and we are doing everything possible to keep it that way. We appreciate your cooperation and support. If you have any questions about this letter or other aspects of our safety procedures, please contact me at [phone number].

Sincerely,

Principal/Superintendent

Appendix E
List of Competencies Used in CE

Tier 1 Core Public Health Competencies

Domain #1: Analytic/Assessment
Use methods and instruments for collecting valid and reliable quantitative and qualitative data
Identify sources of public health data and information
Recognize the integrity and comparability of data
Identify gaps in data sources
Adhere to ethical principles in the collection, maintenance, use, and dissemination of data and information
Collect quantitative and qualitative community data (e.g., risks and benefits to the community, health and resource needs)
Describe how data are used to address scientific, political, ethical, and social public health issues
Domain #2: Policy Development and Program Planning
Gather information relevant to specific public health policy issues
Gather information that will inform policy decisions (e.g., health, fiscal, administrative, legal, ethical, social, political)
Domain #3: Communication
Communicate in writing and orally, in person, and through electronic means, with linguistic and cultural proficiency
Solicit community-based input from individuals and organizations
Participate in the development of demographic, statistical, programmatic and scientific presentations
Domain #4: Cultural Competency
Recognize the role of cultural, social, and behavioral factors in the accessibility, availability, acceptability and delivery of public health services
Domain #5: Community Dimensions of Practice
Identify stakeholders
Collaborate with community partners to promote the health of the population
Describe the role of governmental and non-governmental organizations in the delivery of community health services
Identify community assets and resources
Gather input from the community to inform the development of public health policy and programs
Inform the public about policies, programs, and resources
Domain #6: Public Health Sciences
Discuss the limitations of research findings (e.g., limitations of data sources, importance of observations and interrelationships)
Domain #7: Financial Planning and Management
N/A
Domain #8: Leadership and Systems Thinking
Incorporate ethical standards of practice as the basis of all interactions with organizations, communities, and individuals

Concentration Competencies

Emergency Preparedness:
Demonstrate the understanding of model leadership in emergency conditions
Communicate and manage information related to an emergency
Demonstrate the mastery of the use of principles of crisis and risk management
Use research and/or evaluation science methodologies and instruments to collect, analyze and interpret quantitative and qualitative data