Emergency Communications Within the School Environment
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A lesson learned when conducting annual school safety (lockdown) drills was that more often than not, while systematically working through the school to check the effectiveness of the response procedures, a lone person would emerge from a doorway or walk down a hallway. This person would have a bewildered look on their face because they walked blindly into a potentially bad situation. Luckily, this was just a drill. Oftentimes, this was an employee that let themselves into the school midmorning with a key or prox card and had no idea there was a drill in progress. Additionally, upon completion of the drill, there was often a parent with a student at the front door waiting for the office staff to answer. Had this been a real violent intruder with the intent to harm others instead of law enforcement conducting a drill, the individuals in both of these examples might have become additional victims.

Communication during a school emergency is a critical element. Effective or ineffective communication can be key to whether a successful response is initiated. A common theme when "lockdown" drills were starting to be conducted ten plus years ago was that the warning had to come from the public address system and from someone in authority, such as the principal. During the 1958 Our Lady of Angels Catholic Grade School fire in Chicago, evacuation was delayed because the procedure was for someone in authority to call for the evacuation. When that call did not come and some classrooms had remained in place, it was too late. One of the by-products of "lockdown" drills is that law enforcement and school staff members identify effective responses and improve their response procedures. One of the identified improvements was that anyone in the school can identify a threat and make an immediate notification if they are in a position to safely do so. More often than not, this meant they would make a verbal notification in a hallway using plain language, such as "Lock down, lock down, lock down! There is a threat in the building! Lock down, lock down, lock down!" If done loudly, others hear the immediate verbal notification, they can repeat the warning and someone can additionally notify the central office via a two-way intercom, phone, or other means.

Once a threat has been identified within the school environment, the message needs to flow throughout the school quickly to ensure everyone is able to utilize a response towards their physical safety (Run-Hide-Fight-WIN). There are a couple of considerations regarding the ability to deliver this message: what speed can we deliver the message and is the message being received by all the people needing to hear it?

The employees in the main office are often the people tasked with receiving the notification, broadcasting the notification throughout the school, calling 911, and then choosing an option to keep themselves safe as well. Imagine, if you will, what stress and pressure they might be under to complete some of these tasks. They might have to use several mediums in order to push the information out. A simple analogy is much like everyone's residential living room. You have several remote controls for your television, cable service, and perhaps a DVR. Each one has its own remote control. It is much simpler when you buy a universal remote that can be used to control all three. Using the same thought process, some systems, including alarms,

emergency notifications, push messaging, 911 notification, surveillance systems, etc., can be integrated together for ease of use during crisis situations, such as an active assailant, fire, bad weather event, etc. Part of the success of an integrated system is having pre-recorded messages that can be broadcast over the school public address system, desktop computers, intranet, and push SMS. The message goes out quickly to all the necessary recipients and gives immediate notice so that everyone is accurately informed and can initiate an appropriate response. For example, under stress, a school administrator might notify everyone via the public address system, but forget to send out a push SMS message. Without that notification, what if several school busses return from a field trip not knowing there is an emergency situation that has developed at the school? Additionally, parents often arrive to pick-up or drop-off students for appointments throughout the school day. Ensuring everyone receives immediate and accurate notification of an incident assists in preventing more potential victims from arriving at the school.

When sending out push SMS messaging to parents and the community, it would be a positive practice to not only include the details of what type of emergency is happening, but also list the expectations of their response. By this I mean, tell parents what you want them to do. If an incident is ongoing, we most likely do not want them to respond to the school. If this is the case, then you should tell them where you want them to go, what you want them to do, and when they will receive more information. If these details are not listed at some point early in the incident, parents will take it upon themselves to respond to the school. In some cases, an overwhelming parental response has slowed the ability of the emergency response as streets, entrances, and parking lots fill quickly with responding parents who get in the way of fire, law enforcement, and EMS operations.

An example of a pre-recorded message is as follows:

"Studentville Middle School is responding to an intruder in the building. Studentville is currently in lockdown. DO NOT respond to the school. Authorities have been notified and are responding. Parent/student reunification is located at Studentville Library at 123 Middle St. Respond to the library. Updates will be given as soon as possible."

Radios can assist in immediate communication throughout a large school. Where radio communication can be critical is when there are staff and students outside the school (e.g., sports fields, recess/playground, marching band practice, etc). If buying radios, seek a professional communications vendor versus buying retail style walkie talkies. The radios used will be of higher quality, have a better scope of coverage, and can be programmed so that your radio traffic will not be immediately available to everyone else near the footprint of the school. Some schools may require a repeater system, as the school building can be a physical barrier to effective radio communication. Ensure there are no radio "dead spots" within the school. As a side note, have your police agencies ensure their radios will work within your school as well. If not, work together to find a positive remedy before a crisis occurs.

Oftentimes during a "lockdown" drill, classrooms that have a lot of noise, such as the band room and shop classes, do not hear the verbal "lockdown" or the public address system.

Therefore, visual alarms may be appropriate in these classrooms. Several schools have installed a flashing strobe light, much like a fire alarm strobe, that is specific to incidents other than fire emergencies. This strobe light, when activated, draws the attention of the teacher and students, who then are afforded the ability to respond to the specific emergency. Schools that have outside activities, such as marching band practice, gym class, and other activities, often experience the same issue and could benefit from an exterior strobe, claxon, or other type of warning alarm. Some schools have installed blue strobe lights throughout the school that can be remotely activated or activated by specific and additional pull stations.

A consideration regarding school safety and notification systems might be the age of the school and available funding. Older school buildings may not have the available infrastructure to support some of the modern notification systems, such as strobe lights. Conversely, newer schools may be able to easily add additional safety notification systems or even have them built in with new construction. One point to remember regarding technology is that it can fail for a variety of reasons. For example, during a bad weather event, such as a tornado, the school loses power and does not have an auxiliary power source. We must then revert back to the human component of notification, training, and prior drills.

Schools vary in size and structure (e.g., single story, multiple story, single building, multiple buildings) and monetary resources, so mass communication within the school may not be a "one size fits all" solution. However, the ability to effectively communicate is a central theme that must be addressed for the continued safety of all people present during the school day, as well as after school and other events. The school administration should find the best solution for their school with their given resources. Also, ensure the communications systems are integrated into school safety drills. This will give an opportunity to both practice and train using the system, but also ensures it will effectively work in times of crises. An illustrative example is that under stress and pressure, some people who have to dial out before dialing 911 forget to do so. With practice, they are able to better react under pressure. (Note: if dialing 911 during a drill, ensure your local law enforcement has contacted the dispatch center to let them know the call is a test and conducted as part of a drill. If not, you may receive a lot more company than intended...)

A key to effective response for emergency situations is communication. As we have discussed, sometimes barriers to effective communication exist. Verifying the functionality of the technology and processes we have in place via testing, drills, and continued maintenance will help to ensure that the occupants of the school, the community, and emergency responders are all quickly notified, provided information regarding the situation at hand, and are able to respond effectively. Ensuring effective emergency communication is one more aspect of safety and security that, if used correctly, will keep our schools that much safer.