

# PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED

BY PATRICIA B. MUTCH



ew nightmares could be worse than the sound of gunfire within a school or a young student screaming that someone (or several people) with guns have been seen walking

down a corridor toward a classroom. Truly, we live in troublous times, and school safety has become a more complex challenge for school administrators and teachers. While we continue to rely on divine guidance and protection, God also rewards diligence in those who plan for trouble. Jesus clearly advised His disciples about what they should do—flee into Judea—when they saw “the abomination of desolation” (Matthew 24:15-20, KJV) and admonished them to be ready for the unexpected thief (Matthew 24:43-46, KJV). This article will share some ways that schools can better prepare themselves for threats from human agents bent on violence and mayhem.

For a Christian school in a quiet neighborhood, facing an emergency such as school violence and terrorism may seem unimaginable. But even these schools may be faced with the unthinkable, and all schools can prepare their personnel for quick and useful actions, even under conditions of shock and terror. How? By making good plans and then practicing



these plans until everyone who might be affected is ready to respond, and the environment is prepared for secure shelter.

This principle has guided attempts to prevent loss of life in school fires. Such efforts have paid off—during the years 2002-2005, although there were 6,560 structural fires in educational buildings in the U.S. that caused \$99 million in damage, there were no deaths reported in these fires.<sup>1</sup> During the same period, however, 121 children, teachers and others died in school-related incidents of violence.<sup>2</sup> Not all of these incidents receive national attention; therefore, many adults are unaware of the prevalence of such threats.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is



actively researching primary and secondary school-related homicides and has concluded that: (a) most violent deaths occur during transition times such as the start or end of the school day or during a lunch period; (b) homicides are more likely to occur at the start of a school term; (c) nearly half of the perpetrators gave some type of warning signal (threat, note) prior to the event; (d) among students who committed a school-associated homicide, 20 percent were known to have been victims of bullying, while 12 percent were known to have expressed suicidal thoughts

or shown suicidal behaviors.<sup>3</sup> These findings suggest that being aware and alert to threat signals can facilitate early intervention, which can help prevent school-related violence.

Increasingly, state and municipal laws are requiring all schools—private and public—to prepare for emergencies involving human threats to the safety of children and employees. They are similar in intent to regulations that require schools to conduct fire drills and comply with fire-prevention regulations. These laws are important safeguards for Christian schools and should not be viewed as unwarranted government interference in religiously affiliated schools. Further, many resources have been created to help schools develop emergency-operations plans. Many of these have been posted on the Internet, making them available worldwide.

#### **Initial Steps Toward Readiness**

As a first step, it would be wise to make contact with local emergency-management resource persons who work with the community. These are usually experienced first responders such as law enforcement, fire services, and emergency medical personnel. Many school administrators already have a coopera-

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tive relationship with the local fire department. It is time to develop a similar rapport with the local emergency manager at the county law-enforcement office or fire department. Most counties in the U.S. now employ professionally trained persons who are knowl-

edgeable about school safety and ready to assist in developing plans. They will be invaluable in identifying potential hazards at your school and in helping you develop a plan to deal with such hazards. Inviting this professional to visit the school is a good first step in your emergency response planning.

If your school doesn't presently have a school safety committee, creating one is another important initial step. This group can ensure good emergency plan development since it can pull together employees and volunteers with a variety of skills and knowledge. Include people such as:

- Principal
- School board member or chair
- A building supervisor or maintenance person who knows the building systems and utilities
- The health or physical education teacher, who knows first aid
- Science teachers who know about hazardous chemicals and weather hazards
- Teachers who work with students having disabilities and special needs
- The English teacher/school newspaper sponsor, who understands how to deal with media
- A parent representative
- Any teachers or staff with experience in volunteer firefighting
- A ham radio operator who can assist with communications when telephones fail
- Someone with training in counseling who can assist with student risk assessment and crisis counseling
- A pastor or local church elder who can provide spiritual support
- Members of local church or community with special knowledge or skills

The principal may be the leader of this committee or may delegate this responsibility to a teacher.

The school's safety committee should spend time familiarizing themselves about emergency planning for schools. Helpful information may be obtained from the resources in this issue of the JOURNAL. The emergency manager should meet with the school safety committee and may recommend local training

events that may be helpful. Often, this person is also willing to hold a school-wide briefing for teachers and staff, as well as parents, in order to raise awareness about the importance of school emergency preparedness. Although this article focuses on manmade emergencies, a similar process should be used in preparing for natural disasters and is thus referred to as all-hazards planning.

In the U.S., many schools in the public sector are presently engaged in this planning process. The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has a very useful free, independent-study learning module, IS 362 *Emergency Planning for Schools*, which can be taken either electronically on the Internet, or by using a downloaded self-study manual. Those who enroll in this program can download questions and take an open-book examination to demonstrate their knowledge of the module's content. By passing an exam with 70 percent accuracy, they can receive a FEMA certificate.<sup>4</sup> Another useful resource is the local Red Cross chapter, which is often able to provide low-cost training for emergencies, including courses in First Aid and home safety.

### Creating a School Emergency-Operations Plan

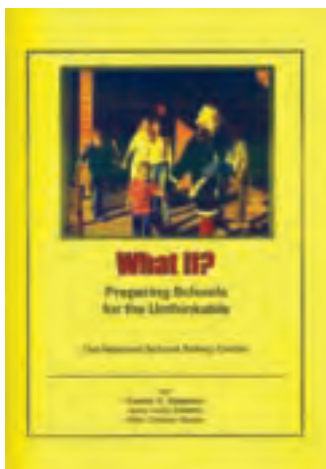
Once a planning team, such as a school safety committee, has been formed and has gathered information about planning for school emergencies, the next step is to assess both school assets as well as risks and hazards. Details on how to do this are found in the resources already mentioned.

**Assets** would include faculty and staff or nearby parents with specialized skills or experience (volunteer firefighters, health-care professionals, amateur radio operators). Does the school have a public-address system available for making school-wide emergency announcements? Does it have its own power generator in case community power supplies go down? Does it have its own well to supply clean water to the campus? Are there places in the school classrooms or other buildings where students and staff could take shelter from natural disasters such as tornadoes or hurricanes?

A map of the school should be available for handy reference in case of an emergency, showing not only all rooms, windows, and entrances, but also utility entrances and shut-offs, stored chemicals (in laboratories and farming areas) and other hazardous materials, as well as the location of fire extinguishers and first-aid equipment.

All **risks** to the school community, both natural hazards and manmade threats, should also be identified. Questions to use in making this identification are shown in the sidebar *Assessing School Hazards* on page 8.

With an updated understanding of existing risks





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and available assets and resources, the planning team can develop an emergency-operations plan. In making your plan, consider the location of nearby roads, neighboring commercial or civic facilities, parks, and other schools. If you had to evacuate your students and staff, where would you send them?

Be sure to put the plan in writing, and include specific information about everyone's tasks and responsibilities during a variety of emergency conditions. The National School Safety Center's manual, *What If? Preparing Schools for the Unthinkable* (see resource list), provides detailed guidance for developing such a plan.

Because of the possibility of targeted violence in schools, the emergency-operation plan should include how to determine the appropriate response to a spoken or written threat. The National School Safety Center recommends the creation of a threat-assessment team to guide the most appropriate response. The FBI has also created a guide to effective prevention and intervention in the case of a school threat (see sidebar on page 9). Threats should be taken seriously. A trained counselor should be available to help assess the level of risk in incidents involving threats.

Once the plan has been developed, it must be communicated to several groups of people. Not only teachers and staff, but students, too, must be given instruction regarding specific and immediate actions to take when the school issues an emergency alert. This can be done through a combination of announcements in assemblies and classrooms, and emergency lockdown drills. Posted directions in all classrooms and offices are helpful tools.

Parents also must be briefed on the elements of the plan to keep their children safe and informed of school expectations for their involvement. In the event of a threat of a school shooting, local law enforcement will create a perimeter around the school and

will not permit parents and bystanders to enter the unsafe building until it has been secured. Parents need to know where they can go to receive further information about their child(ren). This place should be a safe area a short distance away from the school property. If children must be evacuated, parents must be directed to the location where their child(ren) can be picked up. The school can also take a leadership role in providing education for parents in how to ensure family readiness for emergencies. Many resources exist for families through Red Cross materials, local government



brochures, and FEMA modules. If a wider emergency, such as a terrorism incident or a community-wide disaster occurs during school hours, such as happened in the World Trade Center bombing, families need to have agreed-upon contact points and know how to reassemble in safe locations outside the immediate area.

# ASSESSING SCHOOL HAZARDS

## **Preliminary Steps – Obtain answers to these questions:**

1. What hazards are listed in emergency plans for your community? This list may be available from the police or fire department or a nearby government office. Such lists relate to general environmental and manmade risks.
2. What hazards are structural – related to your school building(s)? These relate just to your immediate building environment.
3. What hazards may relate to your neighborhood? Are you situated next to a busy highway? Is your neighborhood at high-risk for property and personal-injury crimes? Are you located some distance from emergency responders who might provide assistance?

## **Weather-Related Hazards**

1. Flooding.
2. Earthquakes.
3. High winds (cyclone, tsunami, cumulus downburst, hurricane, tornado, severe thunderstorms).
4. Wildfire/lightning strikes.
5. Winter storms.

## **Manmade Hazards**

1. Violent crime: roving gangs, civil unrest, crime against persons or property (school shootings/bombings, rape, mugging, arson, burglary, kidnapping, student strikes/riots, threats of violence).
2. Pandemic or food poisoning.
3. Nearby commercial or industrial hazards: fuel storage or gas station, nuclear power plant, chemical plant, transportation-related risk of hazardous material spills.
4. Nearness to high-voltage electrical lines or underground gas lines.
5. Threat of terrorism (including bio-terrorism) or political conflict.

## **Building-Related Hazards**

1. Soundness of roof (snow load capacity and wind resistance), walls (unreinforced masonry may collapse in earthquake or high winds), and other structural components.
2. Electrical/chemical fire or gas explosion.
3. Lack of sheltered areas for refuge from high winds.
4. Blocked or inadequate avenues for rapid evacuation of a building.
5. Storage and use of hazardous materials such as laboratory chemicals and cleaning supplies.
6. Overgrown shrubbery that could provide cover for criminals.
7. Unregulated access to school property.

## **Hazard Identification**

1. Do systematic and regular “walkarounds” to look for potential hazards.
2. Prepare a map of the school and school grounds that notes potential hazards and location of utilities, emergency equipment, and supplies. The map should also identify evacuation routes and open-air assembly points away from school property, as well as “first-responders” in the local community (fire, police, ambulance, utility companies).
3. Prepare a hazard-analysis worksheet to index school risks. A sample worksheet is shown on page 9. All hazards whose analysis yields a “Medium” or “High” Risk Priority should get attention within the school’s emergency operations plan.
4. Once hazards have been identified, develop an action plan that deals with prevention, roles and responsibilities of participants, dissemination of information, appropriate response, and update and testing of the action plan.

# SAMPLE RISK INDEX WORKSHEET (add items as needed)

HAZARD	FREQUENCY	MAGNITUDE	WARNING	SEVERITY	RISK PRIORITY
Severe Winter Storms (without power loss)	4 Often	4 Catastrophic	4 Minimal	4 Catastrophic	3 High
	3 Occasional	3 Critical	3 6-12 hours	3 Critical	2 Med
	2 Seldom	2 Limited	2 12-24 hours	2 Limited	1 Low
	1 Never	1 Negligible	1 24+ hours	1 Negligible	
Structure Fire	4 Often	4 Catastrophic	4 Minimal	4 Catastrophic	3 High
	3 Occasional	3 Critical	3 6-12 hours	3 Critical	2 Med
	2 Seldom	2 Limited	2 12-24 hours	2 Limited	1 Low
	1 Never	1 Negligible	1 24+ hours	1 Negligible	
Earthquake	4 Often	4 Catastrophic	4 Minimal	4 Catastrophic	3 High
	3 Occasional	3 Critical	3 6-12 hours	3 Critical	2 Med
	2 Seldom	2 Limited	2 12-24 hours	2 Limited	1 Low
	1 Never	1 Negligible	1 24+ hours	1 Negligible	

## Practice the Plan

No matter how good the plan may be, only by practicing it will students and staff learn well what to do in the case of an emergency. Therefore, regular drills for school lockdowns should be scheduled. An emergency manager can advise how to conduct drills (for securing classrooms) and school-wide lockdown exercises for sheltering and securing the entire school family. Such lockdowns are learning opportunities in which things in the plan that did not work well can be identified and improvements made. Different hazards should be dealt with in such emergency exer-

cises, including how to safely evacuate several school buildings at the same time.

Administrators can involve students in emergency preparations. In the U.S., Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training is now being recommended for all communities. The required 20-hour program prepares volunteers to do light search and rescue, give first aid, and follow directions to safely assist emergency responders. Many schools, both private and public, are now making such training available to their junior high and secondary students, forming school-based CERTs. Such

## IMPORTANT RESOURCES FOR SCHOOL EMERGENCY PLANS

**FEMA.** IS 362 *Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Schools*. Available at <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is362.asp>.

**U.S. Department of Education.** *Action Guide for Emergency Management at Institutions of Higher Education*. Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. 2009. Available at <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/index.html>.

**O'Toole, Mary Ellen.** "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective." Available from the Federal Bureau of Investigation at <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/school/school2.pdf>.

**Citizen Corps.** "Introduction to Community Emergency Response Teams (C.E.R.T.)" Available at <http://www.citizen corps.gov/cert/index.shtm>.

**Red Cross.** "Preparing for Events, Terrorism." Available at <http://www.redcross.org/portal/site/en/menuitem.d229a5f06620c6052b1ecfbf43181aa0/?vgnnextoid=fd71779a32ecb110VgnVCM10000089f0870aRCRD&vgnnextfmt=default>.

**Stephens, Ronald D., June Lane Arnette, and Hilda Clarice Quiroz.** *What If? Preparing Schools for the Unthinkable*. The National School Safety Center, 2006. Available at <http://www.schoolsafety.us> (\$24.95 each, discounts for bulk orders).

**U.S. Department of Homeland Security.** "Ready Kids." <http://www.ready.gov/kids/index.html>.

**Adventist Risk Management, Inc.:** Contact John Dougan at [jdougan@adventist.risk.org](mailto:jdougan@adventist.risk.org) for information regarding a variety of safety measures for schools.



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students are an asset to any school. This is a good way to teach them a service orientation as they obtain practical knowledge and skills that will be of lifetime benefit. CERTs are trained through programs sponsored by the Citizen Corps (see sidebar on page 9).

**Summary**

While violence from manmade causes cannot always be predicted, it's possible to take steps that ensure everyone is ready to respond if such a crisis strikes your campus. Working in cooperation with local emergency response professionals in the local community, Adventist schools can develop School Safety Committees that arm themselves with knowledge about preparedness, assess the assets and hazards, and prepare an emergency operations plan. Further, they can involve older students in service by training them to become members of Student Emergency Response Teams.

Calling on God for courage and wisdom to do such preparedness is an appropriate course of action for believers, combined with prayers for divine protection in the perilous times around us. As Christ assured His disciples prior His crucifixion, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, NKJV).<sup>5</sup>



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Jennifer D. Flynn, "U.S. Structure Fires in Educational Properties" (Quincy, Mass.: National Fire Protection Agency, August, 2007).
2. School Deaths and School Shootings. National School Safety and Security. <http://www.schoolsecurity.org>. Accessed December 6, 2007.
3. *School-Associated Violent Deaths 2007-2008*. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/YVP/SAVD.htm>. Accessed June 21, 2009.
4. Go to <http://training.fema.gov/IS/crslist.asp> for further information about the Independent Study Program (click on ISP). To receive a certificate, students must provide a U.S. Social Security number, but the ISP training is available (without certification) to anyone with access to the Internet.
5. The text credited to NKJV is from The New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers. All rights reserved.