

Preparing for Crisis

Coping with accidents, natural disasters,
student or staff death

SESSION: *PREPaRE Your School for Crisis with Trauma in Mind* | **Presenter:**
Kathryn Bush, school psychology consultant, Department of Public Instruction

Kathryn Bush, school psychology consultant for the Department of Public Instruction, had some advice for school leaders: now is the time to “PREPaRE” for a school crisis.

Thanks to a new grant from the U.S. Department of Education, workshops on a special curriculum for school crisis prevention and intervention are now being offered to Wisconsin school districts to help them improve their emergency plans. Bush described the training called PREPaRE (Prevent, Reaffirm, Evaluate, Provide and Respond and Examine) and offered tips about dealing with school crises in general.

Although all schools are required to have emergency plans for dealing with crises, they are too often developed then ignored and forgotten until an emergency situation occurs, Bush said.

“You’ve got to deal with your crisis plan being a living, breathing document,” she added.

She defined a crisis as an event that is perceived as extremely negative. Although people frequently think of school shootings when a school crisis is mentioned, the truth is that shootings are very rare. More often, a school crisis is an accident, a student or staff death, or even a natural disaster such as a flash flood

or tornado.

School crises are different than crises in other settings.

“One thing we have determined is that children are more vulnerable than adults in a critical incident,” Bush said. “We also know that trauma can have a lasting impact.”

The first PREPaRE workshop focuses on comprehensive school planning for a crisis. It offers school officials a chance to review and update their emergency plans and consider special elements they may not have prepared for such as how to evacuate a child in a wheelchair from a second story classroom.

Because of its emphasis on preparing for school crises, a district that wants to take the first workshop should send a team of people that could also include community members such as first responders, Bush said.

The focus of the second workshop is on recovering from a crisis and is designed for school mental health professionals such as nurses, counselors and special education teachers.

Most students involved in a crisis will recover without special assistance. For others, however, there will be a lasting trauma that will require more intervention. It is critical for school staff to learn how to identify those students who will need extra



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help and what resources to use to assist their recovery.

The workshops also examine how to respond during a crisis including how to deal with communication in the age of social media and how to develop a strict protocol and chain of command for crisis response.

“There is a chain of command when there is a critical incident,” Bush said. “We follow the rules in order to get the best results we can.”

The federal grant has reduced the cost of both workshops, which can be offered on site or through a local CESA. Schools can sign up for the training by going to the Wisconsin Safe and Healthy Schools Center website, www.wishschools.org. ■