



Diocese of Westminster Education Service

Critical Incident Management

Guidance for Headteachers and Governors in Catholic Schools

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Chair of Governors

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It is not a statutory requirement to have a Critical Incident Management Plan, but in the event of an incident it is useful to have reference to a list of actions and procedures. This plan would need to be discussed with staff and governors and reviewed at least annually. These notes should be read in conjunction with the Critical Incident Plans produced by your LA

Introduction

Definition of a Critical Incident

A critical incident is one where the normal life of a school is seriously disrupted, requires the intervention of the emergency services and prevents the school from carrying out its usual routines and timetable.

Examples of incidents could include:

- Death or serious injury however caused
- Major fire or building damage
- Natural or man-made disaster
- Terrorist attack
- Abduction of a pupil etc...

Incidents can occur:

- On the school site during or outside school hours
- On school transport,
- During school organized activities away from the school site
- In the local area.

Deciding whether an incident is a critical one

The headteacher in consultation with the LA will decide whether or not the incident is to be regarded as critical. A relatively minor incident may become critical if matters proceed to a point where normal routines are being seriously disrupted.

In the absence of the headteacher the deputy headteacher must take this responsibility.

In all cases of a critical incident, once immediate actions to contain the situation have been taken, the headteacher should inform the Diocesan Education Service (020 7798 9005) and arrange for a representative to attend the school as soon as possible.

The Critical Incident Plan

Schools sometimes have to deal with sensitive issues such as death, violent injury or crime and should already be prepared to address these matters. The existence of a well-known Plan is essential if everyone is to act in a coordinated and sensitive way. The low incidence of Critical Incidents in schools generally makes it essential that the Plan is

underpinned by normal school routines. In an emergency it is likely that no one has the time or, possibly, the initiative to consult a separate document.

Communicating

It is important that the Plan addresses the issue of communications.

The headteacher needs to obtain accurate and reliable information about the incident. Too often well-intentioned reports of a situation turn out to be false or fail to state the true seriousness of a situation. Headteachers need to balance a speedy response with a degree of certainty about the facts.

The Emergency Services are alerted in the first instance but it is essential to contact the local authority, which would normally advise if the incident should be regarded as a critical one and if Borough or County support teams would be needed. If the situation is a major one then the local authority normally organizes coordinated response teams. Your Plan should indicate who, apart from the CEO/Education Lead, should also be informed at the Borough or County offices so that the news is widely known. If you are an Academy you must ensure the Directors of the Trust Board are aware.

Placing a list of telephone numbers of critical officers in the authority, the local council, Emergency Services, the Diocese etc in a prominent place is an example of a way of ensuring the Plan is part of existing practice. Most schools have such lists as part of their office notice boards but not necessarily in one place. Contact numbers for the local hospitals, parish priests and social services should also be ready to hand and access to numbers for organizations such as bereavement counselors, Catholic Children's Society (0208 969 5305) etc. may ultimately be needed. The Plan will need to be tailored to the school and just who to contact first should be clear.

Communicating with parents

Where a child has died or been taken to hospital, the matter of informing parents is clearly a difficult issue. The Plan should make it clear that the Headteacher or his/her deputy has the responsibility for informing parents so as to avoid misunderstandings. Headteachers need then to consider whether they are best placed to inform the parent(s) or whether someone such as a class teacher, teaching assistant or the parish priest who knows the family may be more appropriate. The parent(s) must be informed as soon as possible, however, and, as always, the Headteacher must balance this with the need for a sensitive approach. Wherever possible the local parish priest should be informed and asked if he would visit the family.

Communicating with the media

As soon as possible prepare a statement agreed with the local authority, the Diocesan Education Service and, where appropriate or possible, the family and make it available to the media. The headteacher or Chair of Governors should be the sole spokesperson for the school. The Diocese has its own press office and can help with preparing a statement:

Marie Saba

Communications Officer

020 7798 9031

mariesaba@rcdow.org.uk

If the press or television interviews you do not depart from the prepared script or from matters of established fact. Do not venture opinion or share blame for the incident.

The Aftermath

It is not possible to extend the Critical Incident Plan to cover all eventualities after the event. It is important, however, to establish quickly the route back to normality. The Diocese is the first place to seek advice on rebuilding or repairing. They can often help with staffing issues too. It is important that you have a Diocesan officer who is your first point of contact. Diocesan support is important and you can expect an officer to call as soon as possible. As headteacher you are naturally the first point of contact and will come under a lot of pressure. It is therefore important to have a Diocesan officer working alongside you and taking on some of the responsibilities.

The effect of a serious incident on the school cannot be measured but certain actions by the headteacher, governors and others who have responsibility for the school can help to alleviate the immediate trauma. The Diocese would wish to be as involved as possible and your parish priest can be a valuable help.

Pupils

If a critical incident occurs there is no doubt that the security and safety of the pupils is the first priority. After the immediate incident has been resolved it will be important that pupils are reassured. In small schools it may be that an assembly is the best way. However, it can be counter-productive in bigger schools, to have large numbers of pupils on the move at a time of tension. Rather, your Plan could indicate that pupils return to registration bases and form tutors are kept in touch by a system of runners or

by means of the public address system, texts or emails... Pupils need to be reassured that the danger is past or that the incident has been dealt with effectively.

Make sure that pupils take home an unambiguous statement of the incident or the reason for the evacuation and an indication of when they should return to school. It is important that the telephone system is kept free for managing the situation and not swamped by anxious parents seeking information. Many schools have an already established system of contacting parents by phone where the message is given to twenty or so key parents who have each undertaken to ring ten or so others. Again, this could be part of routine procedure, which can easily be remembered and enacted in an emergency.

If pupils are able to return to normal lessons it will be important for the Headteacher to visit classes to reassure. He or she will need to target those classes which have been most affected by the incident. It is unwise, however, to immediately counsel affected pupils and much better to contact parents to come and collect their child. The family can be offered counseling by a professional from the school, the local authority, or via the parish priest. Apart from words of reassurance and comfort, the headteacher's role is clearly to manage the ongoing situation and not get too involved with a pupil. This is not meant to deprive the pupil of essential support but to ensure that professional help is used appropriately.

It is appropriate to gather the whole school together as soon as possible after the day of the incident itself to discuss the responses to the incident and to offer prayers for those who have been affected by it. Pupils need the opportunity to talk through the incident amongst themselves and describe their part in it. If the school is putting out a clear message based on the facts and that there is a desire and a schedule to return to normality as soon as possible, pupils will find it easier to come to terms with what has happened.

The Staff

If the school is unable to reopen and parents have been asked to keep children at home, it is important to gather staff together so that everyone can talk through their experience and offer mutual support. A Diocesan officer should be invited so that the headteacher can share counseling and has support themselves. It is also important that a local authority officer and a representative from the emergency service attend with an update on developments.

If the school is able to open, it is still important to hold such a meeting before school restarts. Whilst every effort should be made to re-establish normal routines, it is equally important that great sensitivity is used to ensure staff have been effectively supported. It may be necessary to make it possible for all or some of the staff to attend funerals for example or to visit people in hospital. Individual reactions vary; some may cope well but

others may need specialist counselling. Some can react in ways that appear strange or even rude and this will require great patience and tact on the part of the headteacher.

Checklist of Actions

Immediately:

Contact Emergency Services 999
Receive reports of incident and decide this is a Critical Incident
Telephone LA (CEO's Office) and give full information
Contact parents of affected pupils
Contact Diocese of Westminster Education Service 0207 798 9005
Make arrangements for pupils to either return to lessons or to be sent home
Contact Parish Priest/ Chaplain
Contact Chair of Governors
Contact the Directors of the Trust Board if an academy

As soon as possible:

Inform pupils and staff
Prepare letter for parents
Prepare press statement and seek approval from LA and Diocese
Arrange for pupils to be spoken to

Longer term:

Arrange meeting of governing body, LA officers and Diocesan officer to discuss the way back to normality
Consider plans for counseling support (see list of appropriate agencies)

Some Aspects of Curriculum, Security and Pupil Safety

As well as managing a Critical Incident some thought needs to be given to managing the school in ways which would seek to reduce the likelihood of an incident happening on or off the site.

Curriculum

Catholic schools deal with the issues of bereavement, tragic accidents and illness in a unique way. It is important, however, in these days of instant headlines and dramatic pictures that these issues are regarded as important to the teaching curriculum in the school. Should a Critical Incident occur, it will be easier for pupils to relate this to discussions they have had.

Secondary schools may wish to consider using pastoral time for aspects of grief management.

Staff too, need time to discuss their own feelings and experiences with colleagues. It may be appropriate to invite a professional counselor from the Catholic Children's Society to speak to and advise staff from time to time.

Security

Schools take different views of their security. Neighborhoods, clearly, can be very different. To reduce incidents occurring caused by unwanted visitors, schools should consider reviewing security at the same time as updating their Critical Incident Plan

Balancing security with a welcoming atmosphere for pupils, staff, parents and visitors is, inevitably, a compromise. However, all schools should have more than a simple sign asking visitors to go to reception. Visitors should only be able to access the reception area when they arrive and not have access to any part of the rest of the school.

Thought needs to be given to site security after school hours. Schools are often unsupervised at night and can be a target for vandalism or arson. Even small acts of vandalism can be distressing to the school community and thought could be given to ways in which the site could be supervised after hours.

Pupil Safety

Schools generally have an agreed set of expectations for behaviour. Schools need to consider Codes of Conduct for all areas of the school and all activities undertaken by the pupils. This is particularly important where activities themselves are potentially dangerous (e.g. sport) or are taking place in areas of the school that pose hazards (e.g. laboratories and technology facilities).

Well-publicised tragedies have occurred during out of school activities. There have been a number of serious incidents where teachers have been prosecuted for failing in their duty of care and it beholds schools to carry out a full risk assessment before embarking on off-premises activities. A school policy on codes of teacher and pupil behaviour agreed with parents and participants before the event will help to reduce the potential for serious incidents.

