

**CHAPTER**

**5**

**CRISIS PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT  
IN NEW YORK CITY**

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**Abstract:** Over the past three years, New York City public schools have experienced at least four events that have highlighted the importance of planning and crisis management: the 11 September 2001 World Trade Centre attack, the 14 August 2003 power failure, the shooting of City Council Member James Davis in July 2003 and Hurricane Isabel in September 2003. This paper describes the nature and impact of these events on schools, students and staff, and the role of the New York City public school system in promoting and maintaining a safe and secure school environment.

## Introduction

The New York City Department of Education operates the largest public school system in the United States, serving children of all levels of education, from pre-primary to secondary education, as well as special education and home-schooled students. It is composed of over 1 200 schools and 1.1 million students in five boroughs in the city of New York: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and the Bronx. Of these students, 134 100 are learning English – approximately 120 languages are spoken by students and their families – and 137 400 are in special education settings. On any given school day, there are at least 55 300 classes in session, taught by 91 600 teachers. In addition, 275 200 students attend 914 religious schools and others attend charter and independent-private schools. The Office of Pupil Transportation oversees the transportation of roughly 170 000 young students and students with special needs every day (Lukin, 2003).

The Office of School Safety and Planning, which was established following the restructuring of the New York City Department of Education in September 2002, has primary responsibility for the department's policy development, planning, implementation and management of school safety and security. The office also oversees attendance, discipline, emergency preparedness, and prevention and intervention initiatives.

## World Trade Centre attack, 11 September 2001

### During the event

On 11 September 2001, a balmy mayoral primary day in New York [City], only the fourth day of school – when teachers and students were still new to one another – the city learned two very poignant and profound lessons: (1) that its school staff are quick-thinking, resourceful and instinctively protective of their students, and (2) that the times demand revisiting all we thought we knew about school safety and public preparedness. (Lukin, 2003)

The events of the day were as follows:

- At 8:46 a.m., a plane hit Tower 1 of the World Trade Centre.
- At 9:06 a.m., a plane hit Tower 2 of the World Trade Centre.
- At 9:17 a.m., the Federal Aviation Administration shut down all New York City area airports.
- At 9:21 a.m., the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey ordered the closure of all bridges and tunnels in the New York area.

- At 9:50 a.m., the south tower of Tower 2 of the World Trade Centre collapsed.
- At 10:29 a.m., the north tower of Tower 1 of the World Trade Centre collapsed.
- At 11:02 a.m., the area south of Canal Street was evacuated.
- At 2:49 p.m., subway and bus services were partially restored in New York City.
- At 5:20 p.m., the 47-storey building located at 7 World Trade Centre collapsed.
- At 9:57 p.m., Mayor Giuliani announced the Chancellor's decision to close New York City schools on Wednesday, 12 September.

There are seven public schools, serving over 5 600 students, located within 800 m of the World Trade Centre site, an area that is now known as "Ground Zero": PS 150 (175 students), Stuyvesant High School (3 041 students), PS 89 (239 students), IS 89 (255 students), PS 234 (613 students), Leadership and Public Service High School (586 students), and the Economics and Finance High School (720 students) (Thomas, 2001).

Students began to evacuate all schools, starting with PS 234, after the second plane struck Tower 2. School staff walked students away from the towers. In addition, 3 000 students from the Murray Bergtram High School, which was located several blocks to the east of the towers and across the street from the New York City Police Headquarters, were also evacuated as there was concern that the police headquarters was also a potential target. School staff safely evacuated almost 9 000 students from schools located in or near Ground Zero. Staff also ensured that all students returned safely to their homes.

### **After the event**

Chancellor Harold. O. Levy extended the school day and cancelled after-school programmes in all schools. The next day, all schools were closed. On 13 September 2003, students from these seven schools were temporarily assigned to other schools: students from Stuyvesant High School were sent to Brooklyn Technical High School, students from the Leadership and Public Service High School to the Fashion Industries High School, students from the Economics and Finance High School to Norman Thomas High School, students from PS 89 to PS 3, students from IS 89 to IS 70, students from PS 150 to PS 3, and students from PS 234 to PS 41 (Thomas, 2001).

The school relocations presented challenges as class sizes doubled and even tripled in some schools. For students from Stuyvesant High School, who were sent to Brooklyn Technical High School, the school had to split classroom sessions: Brooklyn Technical students attended classes from 7:15 a.m. to 1:47 p.m., and Stuyvesant students attended classes from 11:00 a.m. to 6:11 p.m. During the three-hour overlap period, Stuyvesant students attended classes in the auditorium. In response to parents' concerns about overcrowding, the daily class schedule was further modified. Class times were shortened for both Brooklyn Technical and Stuyvesant students, allowing students from each school to attend classes separately (Thomas, 2001). Stuyvesant High School re-opened for classes on 9 October 2001 (New York City Department of Education, 2001a), IS 89 on

22 January 2002, and PS 150, PS 234 and PS 89 on 4 February 2002. The Economics and Finance and Leadership and Public Service high schools re-opened in early February 2002 (New York City Department of Education, 2001b). Students from Murray Bertram High School returned to their school within days of the event. The Board of Education also acted swiftly to provide mental health services to children, staff and administrators.

While the evacuation effort was remarkable, it is important to note that in the case of almost every school, the specific protocols for School Safety Plans outlined in the *Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act (Project SAVE)* (Butterworth, 2001) – which from November 2000 required New York City boards of education to develop district-wide and building-level school safety plans that provide for crisis response and management – were not followed. For example, the recommended evacuation route for students at Stuyvesant could not be used due to the dangerous conditions.

## **Regional power failure, August 2003**

### **The potential impact on schools**

On 14 August 2003, New York State, parts of Canada, Detroit and a number of other states on the east coast experienced a large power failure, which left approximately 50 million people without electricity. A subsequent report to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg on “Enhancing New York City’s Emergency Preparedness” recorded that:

In New York City alone, 8 million residents, as well as countless numbers of tourists and commuters, were affected...Police officers, fire fighters, emergency management personnel and health professionals worked tirelessly to get the city safely through the crisis...Although the blackout was a serious emergency it could have been far worse. The city was fortunate that the loss of power occurred in nice weather during daylight hours, was of limited duration and occurred at the end of the work week, providing a weekend for business recovery by the city and private and non-profit sectors. Many New Yorkers were out of the city on vacation and the schools were not in session. (Alper and Kupferman, 2003)

The report also stated that had the power failure occurred during the school year, the city would have had to ensure the safety of 1.1 million students in 1 200 public schools. As explained above, every public school must have a safety plan that addresses such issues as evacuation, sheltering-in, fire drills and meals. Activating and implementing these plans is dependent on the nature and duration of the emergency. In an emergency of longer duration, for example, sheltering-in and feeding students and staff could be an issue. On a routine day, schools in New York City serve 145 000 breakfasts and 640 000 lunches, and typically have a two-day supply of food. However, they do not store potable water, medication or blankets, and most do not have generators. Other types of emergencies on the other hand may require evacuation, as was the case on 11 September 2001.

Independent, religious and charter schools would face similar safety and security issues in the event of a power failure or other city-wide emergency. In 2002, the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and the New York City Department of Education met with representatives from independent schools to discuss emergency plans and protocols.

## Emergency response

In New York City, the OEM is responsible for co-ordinating the city's response to emergencies. In the event of a crisis such as the blackout, the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) serves as the office's co-ordination centre, gathering and distributing information and co-ordinating staff from the Division of School Facilities and the Office of School Safety and Planning. During the blackout, city-wide emergency response mobilisation protocols worked effectively. Staff from the relevant city agencies reported to the EOC immediately after the blackout, and city-wide contingency plans were activated. Five schools were also used as "cooling centres" for citizens seeking relief from the heat. However, the Department of Education found it difficult to communicate with agency staff as cell phones and other communications networks were not operational. In addition, schools were only equipped with generators with sufficient energy for temporary use of elevators.

On the Monday following the blackout, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg convened an Emergency Response Taskforce. The taskforce was directed by Andrew Alper, President of the New York City Economic Development Corporation, and co-chaired by Susan Kupferman, Director of the Mayor's Office of Operations. The purpose of the taskforce was to review the city's response to the blackout and to make recommendations on how the city can be better prepared in future emergencies. To ensure independent review, the taskforce members were largely drawn from outside the administration, and, in addition to city officials, included representatives from both the private and not-for-profit sectors with broad experience and responsibilities.<sup>1</sup>

The taskforce focused on six areas: emergency response, business continuity, "the city as employer", communications, transportation, and public health, safety and preparedness. To understand the scope of the city's response, the taskforce began its work by contacting every city agency – including agencies that provide meals to the elderly, enforce health-code violations, manage traffic and free people from elevators – to discover how they perceived that their own response and that of the city to the blackout could have been improved. It also conducted a public outreach survey, which was posted on the city's Web site in English and Spanish and at the 311 Citizen Service Centre. More than 3 700 survey responses were received. Many respondents cited lack of communication as the most pressing problem, followed by transportation.

The taskforce's final report included 35 recommendations (Alper and Kupferman, 2003). The recommendation that relates specifically to the school system states that the Department of Education should "assess the comprehensiveness of existing school safety plans and continue to provide a resource to independent and other non-public schools for emergency preparedness". While the city's response was impressive in many respects, it concluded that "it is important to learn from our experiences and find ways to improve current practices", acknowledging that "although there are common themes to many emergencies, every event is unique, and the next one could be significantly more challenging. It is impossible to prepare contingency plans for every eventuality, to model every permutation of disruptions or to stockpile the resources required to respond to an infinite number of worst-case scenarios".

## **The shooting of Council Member James Davis, July 2003**

In late July 2003, City Council Member James Davis was shot and killed on the balcony of the City Council Chamber during a public event. His assailant was immediately shot and killed by one of the police officers assigned to security who was standing on the chamber floor just beneath the balcony. This event is relevant to the Department of Education because it occurred in City Hall, and the Department of Education central headquarters is located in the Tweed Building, a few steps from the back entrance to City Hall. In addition, the City Hall Academy, a school, is located on the first floor of the building. Fortunately, there were no children on the premises in the month of July, although a group of school principals participating in leadership training were in the building, in addition to several hundred people, including staff and visitors.

The first reports of gunshots being fired in or around City Hall reached the office of the Chief Executive for School Safety and Planning from staff and the news media. As sirens from police and other emergency vehicles reached the area, the First Deputy Commissioner of the Office of Emergency Management was contacted and confirmed reports of the shooting. As early reports indicated that the perpetrator had escaped and could still be in the area, the Chief Executive immediately locked all entrances and exits to the Tweed building, and every floor of the building was searched by New York City police officers. No suspects were found. After one hour and 40 minutes, confirmation was received that the perpetrator had acted alone and had been killed.

After a debriefing with the building security team from the Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) and feedback from staff and visitors, the Department of Education conducted a thorough review of its safety and security protocols for the building. The morning after the shooting, additional scanning equipment had been installed, and all staff had been notified that everyone entering the building would be screened, not only visitors.

## **Contingency planning for Hurricane Isabel, September 2003**

On 16 September 2003, the New York City Office of Emergency Management (OEM) posted weather warnings that powerful Hurricane Isabel was moving north-west across the Atlantic and would likely make landfall in the eastern United States later in the week. Isabel was being tracked as a Category 3 hurricane, meaning that it would be accompanied by winds up to 130 miles per hour, which could cause extensive damage.

Unlike the other events discussed in this paper, advance warning of the hurricane allowed the New York City Department of Education to make plans to mitigate harm. The OEM immediately organised a city-wide planning briefing for all staff. All information received about the hurricane was transmitted to schools, students and their families. Members of the public were advised to call 311, or to log on to the Emergency Management On-line Locator System (EMOL) to find out if their residence, office or school was located in a city evacuation zone.

However, the storm became weaker as it moved closer to the New York City area, and other than strong winds, the effects of the hurricane were minimal. As the city continued to monitor the storm's movement, the department identified potential flood areas. School bus drivers were stationed outside schools and remained on-call in case students needed to be evacuated. At the end of the day, the storm caused little or no disruption to schools.

## **Conclusion**

The four events described in this paper show that the citizens of New York City and the employees of the school system are exceptionally civic minded when responding to crises. Even in the absence of a specific plan or when the existing plan cannot be executed, the people of New York City emerge as leaders. These events also illustrate that planning a response to an emergency is best done before the emergency occurs. While there are cases where no amount of planning can prevent the crisis, preparation and planning are essential to mitigation and recovery.

The principal challenge of the New York City Department of Education is to discern how to address the myriad of elements that threaten schools. Results from a recent survey highlight the importance of improving upon both the knowledge and practice of emergency preparedness in schools (National Centre for Disaster Preparedness, 2003). Survey results indicate that many Americans are unaware of emergency plans in schools. Only 58% of parents in the United States and 53% of parents in New York City are aware of the emergency or evacuation plans at their child's school, and 19% of parents nationally and 15% of parents in New York City are familiar with the details of the school plan. The New York City Department of Education has recently won a grant award from the United States Department of Education, which will be used to create a comprehensive state-of-the-art Web-based training programme designed to educate parents, teachers, students and other members of the community in all aspects of emergency preparedness. This recognises that emergency planning is a community process implicating preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation as the essential elements.

## **Note**

1. In addition to Andrew Alper and Susan Kupferman, other taskforce members were Lilliam Barrios-Paoli, Senior Vice-President, United Way of New York City; Stanley Brezenoff, President and COO, Continuum Health Partners, Inc.; John Gilbert, Executive Vice-President and COO, Rudin Management, Inc.; Charles Maikish, Executive Vice-President, JP Morgan Chase; Gino Menchini, Commissioner, New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications; Virginia Mewborn, Senior Director, Emergency Services, American Red Cross in Greater New York; Sam Schwartz, President, The Sam Schwartz Company; and Ben Tucker, Chief Executive, School Safety and Planning, New York City Department of Education.

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