





The Other First Responders

Crisis supports for principals
and vice-principals dealing with
traumatic events

By Protective Services Team
Illustration by Jeannie Phan



Our schools seem to be under relentless siege.

Increases in the number and severity of violent incidents, more reports of bullying and an onslaught of traumatic events challenge school leaders' responsibility to keep schools safe. Principals and vice-principals often find themselves in the position of providing "first response" to significant crisis events that occur in their schools, communities or on a more global front, but that nonetheless spill into schools, impacting those within.

Administrators are required to ensure a safe, healthy, positive learning environment. When a traumatic event or a crisis occurs, it is expected that they will provide leadership, support and compassion to students, staff, school families and the community to get them through.

From the beginning to the end of traumatic situations, principals are expected to be strong, compassionate, clear-thinking decision-makers who protect students and staff, while trying to re-establish a normalized learning/working environment.

"A crisis or critical incident can be defined as an event outside of the range of normal human experience that would be markedly distressing to anyone: the death of colleagues or children or a near-fatal traumatic event, often witnessed by those involved" (Cole, Hayes, Jones, & Shah, 2013). While it might be considered uncommon for schools to be untouched by such events, crisis and trauma often occur in the form of deliberate acts of violence such as assaults, stabbings or the use of other weapons, and may also include events such as student suicide, the death of a student on a field trip, or trauma or death in the community.

Whether it be from daily incidents of conflict, dealing with students with violent behaviour, critical events such as student suicides, physical attacks and even deadly assaults, administrators are responsible for reacting in a quick, calm, decisive manner when responding to a crisis event.

84%

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In times of crisis, it is critical that immediate support be provided to students and staff, and that communication starts immediately to notify parents and community partners, such as police services or child protection agencies. Leadership has very defined protocols that must be followed to ensure that students, staff and the school are safe, and are able to recover from a tragic event.

Research continues to examine how school staffs are impacted by trauma. The effect of crisis events on staff is extremely stressful as it contradicts the school's ability to establish safe, secure learning environments that have predictable routines and promote student learning. Of significant concern is that this stress may also be exacerbated by having to return to the scene of the crisis every day, and to have to carry on as if all were normal in an effort to re-establish feelings of safety in students and staff.

School boards are instrumental in providing support to principals and vice-principals in the aftermath of a crisis event, and most have well-defined crisis management policies and safe-school practices in place to provide direction to school leaders, teachers and other staff.

What is lacking in board policies, procedures and safety plans is the inclusion of **extended crisis supports** that also address the mental health and well-being of principals and vice-principals who are charged with leading their schools through a crisis, regardless of personal trauma.

Increasing incidents of violence and of physical, emotional and cyber-bullying, as well as "blame and shame" responses from the public/media that often appear after these incidents, have contributed to the creation of a climate of anxiety, stress and fear for administrators who scarcely have time to recover from one incident before another conflict occurs. Many leaders then suffer from the effects of dealing on a sustained basis with heightened events, and their own mental health and well-being are overlooked as they care for those whom they supervise.

We intend to work with our Members and their boards to include valuable crisis supports for administrators in board policies and procedures.

It is imperative that school administrators receive the tools necessary to help manage their own stress before, during, and after a crisis event. "Everyone who experiences a disaster is touched by it, including crisis response workers and managers. Good planning can limit health and psychological consequences, minimize disruptions to daily life, and contribute to the growth and empowerment of the individual experiencing the disaster" (*A Guide to Managing Stress in Crisis Response Professions*. US Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Centre for Mental Health Services, 2005, p. 7).

Recently, we have addressed some of these issues and concerns in two papers shared with

Members: [Violent Incidents in Schools](#), *Crisis/Trauma Support for Principals and Vice-Principals: Exemplary Practices*, and the Winter 2018 PST article in *The Register* [Traumatic Events](#) by John Bowyer and Ken McNaughton.

Dealing with Violent Incidents in Schools

Over the past several years, an increase in the number and severity of violent incidents in and around schools involving students has been reported by educators and in the media. With a combination of violent behaviour from students with identified special education needs and violent assaults by students struggling with issues of mental health, it is quite evident that classrooms and teaching face greater safety risks.

Results of a [2018 survey of members of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario](#) (ETFO) noted that

- 79% of ETFO members said the number of violent incidents has increased
- 75% said the severity of violent incidents has increased
- 70% have personally experienced violence and witnessed violence against another staff member.

In response to concerns raised by parents and the ETFO data, we conducted a survey of our Members to collect data on the increase of violent incidents from the perspective of the school leader. The response from almost 25% of principals and vice-principals from across Ontario looked at data from the 2017/18 school year, and found

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- 84% of principals and vice-principals were directly involved in an incident in their school in which a student acted in a violent way or threatened violence
- 87% of principals and vice-principals intervened directly in an incident in which a student acted in a violent way or threatened violence at the request of another staff member
- 40% of principals and vice-principals were involved in such incidents more than 10 times that year
- 45% of principals and vice-principals were hurt during such incidents.

The data from the two surveys demonstrates an increase in the number and severity of incidents, and underscores the degree to which principals, vice-principals and teachers have been involved, intervened and injured by students during these incidents. Support staff, particularly educational assistants who often work with students who struggle with aggressive behaviours, are impacted both physically and emotionally when they are hurt.

Safe working conditions must be available for all staff, including principals and vice-principals, who are not only administrators but are also “workers” entitled to protection under the [*Occupational Health and Safety Act*](#).

The government is required to ensure safety is provided. We have made several recommendations on how to proceed, both at provincial and local district levels. We will continue to insist on exemplary practices in crisis/trauma support for administrators. School boards must also understand the need for this support in maintaining the mental health and well-being of their staff.

In the fall of 2019, three administrators from a secondary school in the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board found themselves managing a significant crisis event, with the stabbing death of one of their students on school property. Among the first

to arrive on the scene, these administrators not only viewed the devastating injuries suffered by the student and responded to the tragic assault, but were required/expected to follow protocols, and manage both students and adults on the scene in a calm and assertive manner.

Police arrived quickly, as did paramedic assistance, and a flurry of events took place within a two-hour time frame. Throughout it all, the administrators remained composed, attending to all who needed assistance, providing support to police services and communicating immediately with the board’s Senior Staff.

Despite not having specifics defined in their policy for crisis management supports for administrators, the board was quick to offer supports for their school leaders, with three supply administrators and 15 supply teachers deployed to the school. The board’s Director, Superintendent of Schools, Communications Director and Wellness Manager moved on site for short-term wrap-around support, as the administrators prepared to lead their students, staff and school families through the crisis.

Arrangements were made for access to counselling for students, staff and, specifically, the administrators. With our Protective Services on site to support the principal and vice-principals, as well as to support board efforts to assist these administrators as they dealt with the crisis, the school was able to respond to the crisis while allowing the administrators to acknowledge their personal stress.

Currently, most board policies regarding Crisis Management fail to recognize the devastating impact that school tragedies have on administrative teams. The provincial working group struck to consider best practices in crisis management found that, while there were some existing good practices in some boards, these were informal and highly variable de-

pending on the composition (and experience) of the senior leadership team. At the time, there was not a single policy in the province that provided guidance for school board personnel to ensure that their principals and vice-principals were supported through a crisis at their school. Policies focused on how other staff, students and school communities ought to be supported, including by the school’s administrative team, but there were no policies that contemplated support for principals and vice-principals, despite the emotional upset and additional stress and pressures placed upon them during a crisis.

One board with exemplary practice in the area of inclusion of crisis supports for administrators is the Durham District School Board. It has included the following in the resource provided to both principals/vice-principals and other staff:

“An important consideration when dealing with a traumatic event is identifying and implementing supports for students, staff and the ‘caregivers,’ including administration. Administrators are expected to manage the traumatic event as well as taking care of others during and after the event; both in the short-term and long-term. Often there are little to no supports in place for the administrator to help them deal with the emotional and psychological toll of the event. As compassionate caregivers, administrators, support staff and school staff need to be aware of the impact on their own well-being (‘vicarious trauma’) when dealing with a traumatic event.”

“Support of administrators needs to occur as they progress through the stages of recovery; both in the short-term and the long-term. While dealing with an emergency, administrators run on ‘instinct.’ Once the situation stabilizes, emotions return, including any feelings of distress associated with the event. Administrators need the time necessary to talk through the traumatic event with

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a professional. In addition, connecting with and talking to a 'trusted' colleague helps the administrator continue the process of addressing his or her negative emotions. Having a colleague check to ensure that the administrator is looking after himself or herself is an effective well-being strategy. Taking action allows the administrator to restore a sense of control and counteracts the feeling of powerlessness. Interacting and working with others in a positive way allows administrators to regain control

and begin to heal" (Recovering from Trauma, *Psychology Today*, Ellen McGrath, 2016).

We continue to advocate on behalf of our Members, for the following exemplary practices to be embedded into existing school board policies on Crisis Management, or addressed in a separate, stand-alone policy that addresses specifically how principals and vice-principals should be supported in a school crisis. Included in our recommendations for specific supports are detailed checklists that look at

- managing workload during the crisis
- support from senior staff and access to mental health services for principals and vice-principals
- administrative teams that have the flexibility to support school staff
- board should debrief events to consider whether the policy is working to support administrative teams.

We are also committed to supporting our Members in prioritizing their mental health and well-being by providing resources such as the [Starling Minds](#) program. This online resource is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, an evidence-based practice that can help you overcome and manage anxiety, depression and stress. It is a valuable addition to your mental health kit. You can participate in your own space, at your own pace.

We continue to work to develop and implement consistent, exemplary practices that will ensure our principals and vice-principals remain healthy and feeling strong enough to cope with the challenges of leading schools. Our fervent wish is that our students are able to learn in secure, positive learning environments, free of violence and trauma. ▲

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A vibrant advertisement for a 'Bucket List' contest. The background is a bright teal color. On the left, a large white bucket is tilted, with a stream of white liquid pouring out. Inside the stream, various travel and lifestyle items are depicted: a hot air balloon, an airplane, a yellow kayak, a blue scooter, a pink piggy bank, a graduation cap, and a silver car. A red and white prepaid Mastercard is also shown. The text 'Win a chance to check something off your Bucket list' is written in a white, distressed font across the middle. Below this, a dark banner contains the text 'Enter today: otip.com/OPC-win' in white. At the bottom, a dark grey banner contains the text 'Enter now for a chance to win \$10,000 in cash or one of five \$1,000 Prepaid Mastercards®!' in white.

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