



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own practice, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218 FAX
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
www.LucienCanton.com

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School Shooting Response

Pre-planning is essential

One of the current hot buttons with the public is the response to incidents of violence on school campuses. Because many of these incidents are of relatively short duration, there is a tendency to think of the response as solely a law-enforcement issue. However, the dynamics of such an incident are complex, particularly if the incident turns into a prolonged siege involving barricaded suspects and hostages.

School shootings can rapidly escalate to a multi-agency response. Anytime you have multiple agencies responding to the same incident, pre-planning becomes essential to an effective response. Facilitating the planning of a coordinated multi-agency response is the one of the primary functions of the emergency manager.

Why a Multi-Agency Response?

To understand why the response to a school shooting calls for a multi-agency response, we need to look beyond the immediate response to the active shooter and consider the bigger picture. One way to look at this is by dividing the incident into several zones.

The first zone is tactical. This is where law enforcement is engaged in locating and neutralizing the shooter or shooters and where emergency medical services are treating and evacuating patients. These tasks are complicated by the presence of students and teachers who may be spontaneously evacuating or are directed to evacuate.

The second zone is operational. This includes staging areas for arriving resources, emergency medical triage, and holding areas for evacuees.

This last task is often overlooked but it can be of critical importance to an ongoing incident. Evacuees need to be isolated initially for several reasons:

1. It provides an opportunity for teachers to take a head count and identify anyone who may be missing.
2. It helps identify anyone in need of medical assistance.
3. It allows law enforcement to gather immediate information about the shooter or shooters that may be of use to tactical teams and to begin an investigation into the incident by identifying potential witnesses.
4. It can identify suspects attempting to use the evacuees as cover to leave the scene.

Depending on the length of the incident, it may be necessary to provide support services to the evacuees, such as canteen services, restroom facilities, and initial counseling services.

The third zone is a reunification zone. This is where parents will gather waiting on news about their children. It will also include the media and onlookers. One of the difficulties in reunification is that both evacuees and their parents are eager to reunite and may do so spontaneously. However, the school has a duty to ensure that the adult picking up a child is authorized to do so. If the school does not have a good reunification plan or a plan that is supported by local authorities, the situation can become chaotic.

Thinking Beyond the Incident

The three zones relate to the incident scene but an event of this sort places other demands on government. For example, it will generate media interest well beyond the capacity of the on-scene public information officer to deal with. It may be necessary to support the PIO with additional resources or by activating a Joint Information Center. The demand for information will continue well beyond the end of the incident and maintaining a single point of contact can sustain the image of a coordinated response.

Mutual aid coordination is one of the major support tasks that is can be handled outside the incident scene, either through a department emergency operations center or an emergency operations center. While the incident commander identifies the needed the resources and handles on scene staging and deployment, there are a lot of behind-the-scene tasks that must take place to get those resources to the incident . Having a plan to coordinate and

support mutual aid resources prior to the incident commander assuming operational control lifts one more burden from the shoulders of the IC.

One of the ripple effects that might occur is the reaction at other schools in the system. Parents may elect to remove their children from school or administrators may decide to close schools as a safety precaution. Establishing a single policy and communicating this to the public can go a long way to avoiding confusion and heightened concern.

One other area to consider is the need for mental health support. These types of incidents take a toll on both victims and responders, particularly if there are fatalities. A comprehensive plan should include provisions for critical incident stress debriefing and long-term counseling, even if it is only to fix responsibility.

Getting Started

One of the starting points for any contingency plan is the question, “Who owns the problem?” For many jurisdictions, schools fall under a special district that is independent of the local government. Therefore, an important starting point is agreement on responsibilities and strategies and the development of the appropriate memoranda of agreement necessary to implement the agreed upon strategies.

No one expects an incident of school violence, but given the increased frequency of these events, it is one of the many contingencies we must plan for as emergency managers. We need to go beyond single-agency thinking and be prepared to scale up to a multi-agency response if circumstances demand it. 

