

Developing Protocols for Students with Disabilities During Active School Shooter Drills: What Principals Need to Know

By Dr. Robert ? Isherwood, Dr. Eric ? Sparkenbaugh and Dr. Anne ? Rose



About the Authors: Dr. Robert ? Isherwood is an Associate Professor and the Coordinator of Graduate Programs in the Special Education Department at Slippery Rock University of PA. He is also the Director of Special Education and Pupil Services in the Montour School District. He works throughout Pennsylvania in school districts providing professional development and consultation in school special education compliance.

Dr. Eric ? Sparkenbaugh is the Assistant Superintendent for the Montour School District and serves as their School Safety and Security Coordinator. He has been a counselor, principal and administrator for the past 28 years. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in psychology from Bucknell University, a Master of Science in Education from Duquesne University and his Doctor of Education from the University of Pittsburgh.

Dr. Anne ? Rose is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Slippery Rock University of PA. She has been a special education teacher, administrator and professor for over 10 years. She also provides educational consulting services, focusing on special education processes, procedures and compliance to K-12 public and private education systems in Western Pennsylvania.

As school districts begin to plan for the upcoming 2021-22 school year, many districts will attempt to get back to “business as usual” as we welcome students back to campus after almost a year and a half of them being away from school. Part of that process will be picking up where we left off with school initiatives. Prior to the pandemic, many school districts were engaged in creating safer campuses and increasing school security as a result of the Parkland Shooting that happened in Florida in February 2018. There is little doubt that mental health and mental illness played a role in that horrific event. At no other time in the history of American education have we been more concerned about students’ mental health and wellness and student safety.

In 2018, there were 24 incidents of violence involving firearms in American schools. Thirty-five people were killed, and 79 people were injured. These statistics provided by a year-long study done by Education Week suggest school administrators need to have effective and appropriate protocols in place if an active shooter appears in the school building or on campus. Schools have a responsibility to protect the physical and psychological well-being of their students and staff. Effective crisis planning, prevention, response and recovery capabilities are essential for schools to meet this responsibility (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013). Although situations involving an active, armed assailant on school property are extremely rare, schools are increasingly considering how to best prepare for and respond to this type of event (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020).

A significant challenge that school administrators face today includes how to prepare children with disabilities for these unfortunate events. Today’s schools are made up of diverse populations including children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), anxiety disorder, depression and physical disabilities to name a few. Schools should plan for the rare possibility of an armed assailant as part of a comprehensive crisis/emergency preparedness effort but should also be aware that armed assailant drills not conducted appropriately may cause physical and psychological harm to students. When adopting practices and procedures for active shooter drills an examination of individual students’ cognitive and developmental level should be made as well as their personality, history of traumatic experience and psychological make-up. It is essential for the school to include Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) team members including parents in the discussion of how best to prepare students with disabilities for these active shooter drills.

Two years ago, the Montour School District like so many other school districts in Pennsylvania, made a commitment to student safety by hiring armed police officers to protect and patrol the schools as well as to adopt an active shooter response training program for all staff and students. Two commonly used programs in Pennsylvania include the ALICE program and the Run, Hide, Fight Program. ALICE is an acronym that stands for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter and Evacuate. The Run, Hide, Fight Program is one recommended by the Pennsylvania State Police. Montour School District chose the ALICE Program which included numerous lockdown drills and active shooter response drills that progressively increased in intensity throughout the year, especially at the secondary level.

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As the intensity increased, school administrators in both the middle school and high school began to field phone calls from the parents of children with disabilities expressing concern over the drills. In many instances parents described their children as anxious, fearful and frozen in fear as the drills were being conducted. Several of the parents that expressed concern were families of children diagnosed with anxiety disorder and with ASD. At one point, at least three families requested that their children be exempt from the active shooter drills and lock down drills. All families questioned the need for these drills.

The National Association of School Psychologists recommends that schools conduct drills to ease the stress reaction and ensure an adaptive response in the event that an actual lockdown occurs (Erbacher and Poland, 2019). However, these drills must be carefully planned to reduce the risk of psychological trauma occurring in students who already have trauma in their background. In addition, students with disabilities must be taken into consideration. Rich and Cox (2018) contend that when drilling is done with care, it can protect students from physical injury in a real-life emergency. These drills provide an opportunity for students, staff and first responders to practice procedures, identify challenges and make corrections for future real-life events. The question now is, “How do principals and school leaders set these drills up to accomplish the goal of ensuring student safety while accommodating students with disabilities and special needs?”

Several suggestions are presented by administrators from the Montour School District using the research they conducted as well as from their experiences carrying out these drills. First, it is essential that when conducting these preparedness drills the school psychologists and guidance counselors are included as active team members on the crisis planning committee. These professionals can help to identify students that may need special consideration when carrying out the drills. Counselors and psychologists also typically have a background in trauma-informed practices as well as in crisis mitigation and response. Schools should lean on these professionals for guidance and suggestions.

Second, when conducting the preparedness drill, an orientation should occur so that all participants know what to expect. Drills should be announced in advance including letting parents know about the date and time of the drill as well as the intended purpose of the drill. Reminders of the drill can be posted on social media by the district and sent

to parents by teachers using cell phone applications such as Classtag, Reminder, Class Dojo and Seesaw.

In addition, the developmental level of the students should be considered when planning the drills. Students’ emotional and cognitive levels are different at each level in a school district and these differences should result in the preparedness drill looking different at each level. There is little research to support the effectiveness of an active shooter drill with simulation components at the elementary level. At the primary elementary level, it is developmentally normal for young children to not understand time and to not be able to distinguish between something happening now versus something happening in the future. It might not be clear that the drill is not real and could result in psychological trauma. At all levels, it is recommended that staff and children who already have experienced trauma (especially involving guns) be excused from participating or have very close support before, during and after the drills.

Moreover, planning preparedness drills for children with disabilities needs to be thoughtful and detail oriented. For example, children with ASD can have negative reactions to changes in routines and can be oversensitive to sensory stimulation. These drills can be noisy and appear to be chaotic for a child with autism. This may lead to high levels of anxiety and create a less than productive outcome for

these children. IEP teams should be included in helping to plan for these drills. They may also need to incorporate protocols and procedures for drilling in the form of a safety plan in the student’s IEP. Students with ASD and other types of disabilities may need frequent and direct skills-based practice in the implementation of the safety plan. At Montour, we have utilized student iPads to video evacuation routes and to practice the evacuation plan by playing the video multiple days in advance of the drill. Additionally, special education teachers and school behavior therapists conduct social stories related to school safety with our students with autism as a teaching method. Finally, in Montour High School, we have assigned para

educators to students with physical disabilities to assist with evacuation plans. Para educators are provided with detailed directions including meeting locations depending on the floor the student is on when the drill occurs, evacuation exits, procedures for medication administration if necessary and communication procedures to account for the students with physical disabilities during the drill.

As school district administrators prepare for students to return to campus in the fall, it is essential they have plans in place for student safety. This includes all students. Simply excluding children with disabilities from crisis drills

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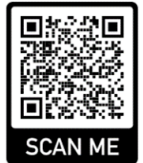
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cess, that youth will feel included, and that their sense of safety and well-being will be enhanced by the opportunities they have to voice their preferences and concerns. Our vision is that we all will listen to youth, learn from them and welcome them to the table as equal partners as we move forward.

You can sign onto a letter to the U.S. Department of Education about the future of education and learn more about our Coalition by visiting: <https://www.edimprovement.org/coalition-future-education>

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For additional information, contact the authors at: chrismason@edimprovement.org or **@Edimprove on Twitter**; pliabenow@gmail.com or **@PaulLiabenow on Twitter**; or MPats@spring-ford.net or **@MelissaPatschke on Twitter**.



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Developing Protocols for Students with Disabilities During Active School Shooter Drills: What Principals Need to Know

Continued from page ?

is neither prudent nor legal. The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) clearly states that excluding or denying people with disabilities from emergency sheltering and crisis response because of a specific disability is not legal according to Chapter 7 Addendum 2 of the act. Administrators should remember to communicate with families, use the IEP process to develop specific procedures in safety plans, allow students with disabilities opportunities to practice

those safety plans, include psychologists and mental health experts in the district crisis planning team and make sure preparedness drills are developmentally appropriate. Doing these things can help to make schools a safer and more supportive environment for all children...including children with disabilities.

For further information, you may contact Dr. Isherwood at robert.isherwood@sru.edu

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