

## **Emphasizing School Safety**

By PAUL MULLINS

Starting a new academic year commonly involves discussions about facility maintenance, budgeting, transportation, class scheduling, and professional development for first-year teachers.

Tragedies like Newtown often bring public scrutiny of school safety practices. Every student should feel safe in a school building and it is the responsibility of the staff to know what to do during times of crisis.

Parents expect staff members and other school employees to understand and practice school emergency plans. These procedures will help school staffs know what to do during a number of possible emergencies including fires, earthquakes, tornadoes, and threats of violence. Our school was actually visited by KCSS for a review and used the feedback to develop our safety plans for our school.

Our SBDM Council added a “safety” committee as one of our standing committees several years ago. This group’s focus was on evaluating and enhancing the practices in our school that would make it safer and more efficient. This group is led by a certified staff member in our building and met regularly and work closely with school administrators to inform all stakeholders about routes, drills, and relevant laws. The group also met with local authorities advising them of the procedures that were in place at the school.

It is important for the Safety Committee to play an integral role during the first teacher work day in August. Staff members knowing lockdown procedures as well as day-to-day expectations in our building is a must to ensure day to day safety. We also instituted “class” meetings the first days of school and we always reviewed expectations of our students.

### **Emergency Management**

A critical aspect of emergency management involves evacuation routes. Students need to be informed about where they should go when facing natural disasters and threats of violence. Students also need to be checked for injuries, and some students may need special assistance. Student attendance should be kept in mind and attendance procedures should be followed.

Emergency management also includes other aspects including surveillance, student roles, and documentation. Student parking can impact school safety and our administration team at the high school emphasized that all students should park in one area. The decision also helped us monitor the area thanks to teachers reporting for parking lot duty before and after school hours.

It should not be overlooked how important students are in emergency management. Students should be informed not to let strangers in school buildings, and they need to know that all guests should visit the office to check in with school officials. School safety is a vital component of a school’s culture and students must be properly briefed about roles and expectations.

## **The Day The Storm Came**

All the days of practice became a reality in February 2012, when there was a tornado outbreak in the Ohio Valley region. At the time, I was the principal of LaRue County High School in Hodgenville. We monitored the weather early that morning and realized that potentially dangerous weather was headed our way. The forecast was a strong potential for danger due to the duration and strength of the storms in our area. We made the call to get the students in the hallway and then as the tornado warning was lifted we began to send students back to class when the weather agency issued another tornado warning that led to the students back into our hallways. This time the weather model let us know that the storms were headed our way and that the severe weather was going to be close to LCHS.

The staff was tested during the outbreak by several developments. The school lost power as the tornado neared the school campus. The students were located in the hall for the majority of the day, and the generator was working not working at full capacity. Without proper training and knowledge of procedures, the developments could have caused nightmares for staff members. The communication that occurred after our drills helped us better prepare for the unknowns that occurred that scary February day.

The tornado came within 400 yards of LaRue County Middle School, which is located across a parking lot from the high school. I'll never forget being that close to a funnel cloud and how for a moment I wasn't sure what was going to happen.

This incident shows how danger can emerge during any month of the school year. By planning and practicing emergency procedures, students and staff members will know evacuation routes and the safest path to shelter during times of crisis. As the school year begins I encourage you to organize for success and this includes, reviewing procedures, completing all required drills, and empowering staff to make your school a safer place.