**A Parent’s Guide to Critical Incidents**

One of the most fundamental responsibilities of the school system is to ensure the safety of everyone at school, and school districts have a Duty of Care for those attending school. This short guide is intended to assist parents in understanding the terminology and planning around emergency situations and their aftermath in the school setting. While every effort is made to have accurate and up to date information, please be aware that no guide can cover every possibility or the nuances that may occur between different scenarios.

**What’s a Critical Incident?**

A critical incident is an event that falls outside the norm for the everyday practise of school, and may have unexpected or unwelcome outcomes. For example, upsetting natural events like a storm or fire, tragic occurrences such as a suicide or sudden death of an individual connected to a school, or the criminal entry of an intruder all classify as critical incidents. Severity ranges, of course – a small 3.1 earthquake is not the same as a 7.8, and brick buildings react differently from wooden ones. There is an effort to have an ‘All Hazards’ approach to incidents – this means a relatively small series of plans to a wide range of events, allowing for more efficient response.

**What is Emergency Management?**

School systems have in place a plan to react to a crisis or disaster should it occur. School Principals practice drills for different eventualities (eg earthquakes, fires, or intruders); efforts are made to have supplies on site in case students and staff are required to remain in place for extended periods; Health & Safety teams review site specific issues and concerns on a monthly basis. The Superintendent is in charge of the overall operation, handling issues like media communications, supplies, consultation with RCMP or other First Responders as necessary. The Principal is considered the Site Commander, responsible for ensuring the operations, planning, and logistics flow smoothly. A key part of this is preventative – in addition to drills, its also ensuring that the facility has clear hallways, functioning locks, good evacuation routes, and staff are updated to any changes in procedures.

**Assessment**

When a critical incident occurs, an assessment occurs. In the case of physical damage or potential damage the assessment involves determining the severity of the impact to the school. The Principal and/or Facilities may determine that the school needs to be closed, or a staircase closed off, or perhaps buses cannot enter the usual bus loop, as just a few examples. In the case of a threat of violence, a Violent Threat Risk Assessment is conducted. Depending on the nature and timing of the threat, different reactions may occur. For example, a vague message in a student’s assignment may result in a visit to a counsellor, whereas an angry intruder leads to immediate contact with the police. Principals, vice principals, and district administration have been trained to asses a variety of threats to determine their potential. They also rely on provincial assets to assist in, for example, social media monitoring. It is important to emphasize that every case is unique, and multiple factors determine if the school contacts the RCMP, medical professionals, or other levels of response.

**Critical Incident Terminology**

When an event occurs, there are a variety of responses to the situation. The terminology used by first responders and schools includes:

* **Shelter in Place** – Students and staff remain on site. This may be due to a flood, powerlines down, a hazardous spill near the school, and so on. Essentially, evacuating is more dangerous than remaining in place.
* **Evacuate** – Students and staff evacuate the building, generally to a specific nearby location (a field, park, or similar). This is typically due to events like a fire, threat, or accident in or near the school.
* **Hold and Secure** – Also referred to as a lockout, in this case students remain in the building, but external doors are locked. Sometimes students are asked to remain in classrooms while the situation is resolved. Typically used for a police incident near a building. This may also occur due to a violent threat.
* **Lockdown** – A lockdown isolates students and staff from a threat outside or within the building. This is generally considered the most significant level of response and controls the movement of people both within and near the building. Internal and external doors are locked.

**Recovery**

Not all critical incidents involve lockdowns or evacuations. The event could be a non-substantive bomb threat or the tragic death of a school community member. Regardless of the type of critical incident, or whether or not the school experienced a lockdown, the School District will assess the situation in part for physical recovery (are parts of the building damaged or non-functional?), and more significantly for emotional recovery. As such, the district will engage its Flight Team, a group of trained counsellors and support workers, who assist the school in transition back to regular academic learning. This may involve a team of counsellors being at the school for several weeks, or simply a check in for a day or two, depending on the severity of the incident. Not all students and staff recover at the same rate. Some may have had little to no impact, others may be significantly traumatised.

**What can parents do?**

Ask for information on emergency plans for your child’s school. Where do they evacuate to? If the school is closed, how are parents informed? Do you have communication connections to the school district? Is the school and district meeting regularly with law enforcement and other agencies to keep clear lines of communication? Are you familiar with the terminology noted in this document?

As difficult as it can be, in emergency situations our natural reactions may not be best. For example, a situation may require the public to remain away from a school. As parents, we want to rush in to assist, but whether it is a toxic spill or a violent incident, the First Responders need to be able to do their work. This again means having access to communication from the school and district is important. Be sure you have ready access to websites, push notifications from appropriate apps, and don’t rely on rumour.

If you encounter an upsetting post on social media, DO NOT share it on social media. Contact the police or school administrators. The message can cause panic or create chaos when no actual threat exists.

Finally, discuss with your child what kinds of events may occur. This shouldn’t be about instilling fear, but rather preparedness for upsetting or unexpected events. It also opens a useful conversation about safety at home too – do you have supplies for a natural disaster? What is the plan for evacuating the house in event of a fire? Children become confident when they know that the adults around them have plans to prevent, mitigate, and react to events.

**For Further Information**

Mission Public Schools <https://www.mpsd.ca>

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Provincial Emergency Response Plans <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/emergency-management-bc/provincial-emergency-planning>

Maintaining School Safety <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/erase/documents/maintaining-school-safety-guide.pdf>