

Providing Psychological First Aid: Principals and Administrators

During and following an emergency, you will be responsible for the health and safety of your students and staff. They will look to you for guidance on how best to proceed. You may need to coordinate assistance from city, state, county, and/or federal agencies. You may be overwhelmed by the need to make myriad immediate decisions, predict unknown variables, and be accountable to the district and the community at large. Below are suggestions for how to implement PFA-S.

PFA-S Core Action 1: Contact and Engagement

Provide Leadership: To be most effective, be visible to the school community, delegate extensively, and provide steady, reassuring, and accessible leadership. Call on your school's district and community partners for their help and resources. Avoid closing off the school to agencies that can help in recovery. When you delegate specific and appropriate roles to your staff, they will feel more empowered and better able to stabilize students, parents, and others.

Reach out to Those Affected: Make contact with groups most affected by the incident, including family members of deceased students/staff, injured and hospitalized individuals, and staff members who have been directly affected. If you are unable to make contact, assign an administrative designee. In addition, assign a staff member to act as the Liaison Officer with community services (e.g., police, fire, mental health) and other response organizations.

Consider Consultation: If your safety plan does not apply to the incident at hand, contact the school district's emergency office, other local and state resources, or other administrators familiar with similar events to help you with the series of decisions you will have to make. You might also contact disaster mental health experts who have developed school-based recovery programs. Your state education agency, the US Department of Education, or local professional organizations can help identify such experts.

PFA-S Core Action 2: Safety and Comfort

Provide Regular Updates: Communicate regularly about the situation and services offered at the school or in the community. Set up mechanisms, such as staff meetings, to get updates from teachers and other staff members about ongoing safety concerns.

Address Identified Safety Concerns: Use a multidisciplinary team (including police, legal advisor, and school counselor) to assess and address the safety concerns of students, staff, and/or families. Consider developing a Threat Assessment Team, if your school does not already have one, so that students, staff, and parents have a reporting system through which they can anonymously share critical, sensitive information or report rumors.

Limit Media Access: Work with the district or your Public Information Officer on which messages will be released about the event, when, and how. Maintain a good working relationship with local media and provide regular updates in a pre-designated location during and after the emergency. Enforce policies to limit the amount of media exposure on school grounds. Monitor media stories to see how they may influence the safety concerns of the school community.

Help Manage Grief: Give special attention to those affected directly by the incident. Form a group of representative administrators, teachers, student leaders, community leaders, and parents to decide about memorial events, displays, or other ways to honor those who died, when temporary displays should be removed, and what information to include in the yearbook or how to honor the deceased at graduations.

PFA-S Core Action 3: Stabilization

Stabilize the School Environment: You can be a calming influence in the days and weeks after an incident. Stay visible. Try to greet students and staff as they enter school, visit classrooms, attend student gatherings or activities and/or community meetings.

Identify Possible Reminders: Meet with staff as soon as possible to discuss possible reminders of the incident within the school setting. Sounds, sights, or specific areas of the school may cause significant distress to others. Take steps, to the extent possible, to eliminate potential reminders. Remember: what serves as a memorial for some may serve as a trauma/loss reminder for others.

Identify Students at Risk: Make sure there are mechanisms in place to monitor those who need additional mental health support and other services. Encourage trainings be offered to all staff highlighting the common courses of recovery, signs of risk, and how to promote recovery.

PFA-S Core Action 4: Information Gathering

Become Fully Informed about the Incident: Take the time to understand fully what happened. When “mapping” the event, identify which groups may have been more affected than others. Obtain information from interviews, attendance records, nursing and/or teacher reports, police reports, and crisis team debriefing meetings. In a multi-agency response to an emergency, make sure a member of your administration is part of the Incident Command System.

Actively Reach out to Students: Work actively with your staff to identify how students are coping. Establish clear lines of communication and referral between staff and school counselors. You may want to encourage your health-related staff to conduct brief screenings to proactively identify students who are in need of additional support.

PFA-S Core Action 5: Practical Assistance

Coordinate Donations and Volunteers: Other schools and community agencies may offer their assistance, and donations may arrive from various sources. Assign a staff member to monitor and coordinate these efforts; otherwise, you may be overwhelmed trying to manage such donations.

PFA-S Core Action 6: Connection with Social Supports

Integrate New Students: Students who have been through an emergency may transfer to your school temporarily or permanently. Encourage staff to integrate these students into the school culture and orient them to the school procedures as quickly as possible. Avoid singling out these students in a way that alienates them from the rest of the student body.

Establish Peer-to-Peer Programs: Help students reach out to each other. Peer-to-peer programs facilitate a sense of belonging among students and help connect incoming students to peers.

Maintain School Community Connections: If your school is unable to reopen immediately, establish ways students can get in contact with each other (e.g., website, social media, an event).

PFA-S Core Action 7: Information on Coping

Provide Psychoeducation and Information: Hold staff and parent meetings as soon as possible. Clarify what happened, describe available resources, and explain next steps. Be prepared for intense conversations and questions that you do not have answers to yet. Have a team, that includes police (when relevant) and mental health professionals, with you to address these questions.

Promote Your School as an Environment for Recovery: Stress that there are different courses of recovery and that you are doing your best to put in place policies and procedures that will support recovery and promote learning and academic functioning. Let individuals know if the school will continue to provide services for those having difficulties in the future or will provide additional support (staff, respite, resources) for staff dealing with their own recovery.

Maintain School/Academic Routines: Students do better when they can return to their regular routine. Reopen school as quickly as possible, help reestablish school routines, and make modifications as needed. For example, advise teachers if they should consider adjusting their teaching plan and to be prepared to postpone some events if safety concerns remain.

PFA-S Core Action 8: Link with Collaborative Services

Activate Mutual Aid Agreements: Contact agencies with whom your school has preexisting mutual aid agreements and identify others needed to assist in your school's recovery.

Seek and Apply for Funding: Financial resources may be available to provide services to those affected by the crisis (e.g., Victims of Crime, American Red Cross) or to your school (e.g., Dept. of Ed Project SERV grants; SAMHSA SERG grants). Research the agency's sites regarding eligibility requirements and assign staff to work on the applications.

In the days and weeks following an emergency, the school becomes a recovery milieu. Due to your leadership role, you will be under extraordinary stress at this time. Secondary traumatic stress is common for those in these positions. As you create an environment to promote recovery in those around you, be sure to practice self-care. In doing so, you will model self-care for your staff and students, and you will be able to meet your responsibilities most effectively.