

“So, the first thing you do is to take all the plans off the top shelf and throw them out the window and start once more. But if you haven't been planning you can't start to work, intelligently at least.” –Dwight D. Eisenhower

Yes, our school has a Crisis Response Plan. Every classroom (and administrative office) in our school has a red, three-ring binder containing a map of the school with highlighted areas for Severe Weather/Tornado “safe areas” and tabbed pages containing the following information headings: Crisis Team members, Emergency Contacts, Staff Responsibilities, Violent Crimes, Fire/Hazardous Materials, Bomb Threat, Medical Emergencies, Student Welfare, Bus Accidents, Weather Emergencies, Utility Failure, Lock-Down Procedures, Sheltering Procedures, and Evacuation/Relocation Center.

So, again, yes we have a Crisis Response Plan and yes this crisis plan follows the guidelines set forth in our first resource from the US Department of Education. But in the words of the nineteenth century Prussian field marshal, Helmuth Von Moltke, “No operation extends with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the main body of the enemy.” That is to say, no plan survives past the start of a crisis. So then, why do we have a plan? Why do all classrooms have this red, three ringed binder of standard operating procedures in the face of crisis? I cannot answer that question other than to say that it gives the illusion of preparedness and safety. It is something we can point to or pull out upon request and show a concerned parent or school board member that we have a plan. But absent further planning and training that plan is quite useless.

So, do we scrap crisis planning all-together? I think not. Another famous field marshal, and eventually the thirty-fourth president of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower, had this to say about planning for times of crisis, “Plans are worthless, but planning is everything. There is a very great distinction because when you are planning for an emergency you must start with this one thing: the very definition of “emergency” is that it is unexpected, therefore it is not going to happen the way you are planning.”

This is exactly the point I tried to make last year when my principal asked me to be on the school’s Crisis Team. Unless we, as administrators, begin using the word plan in its verb form rather than as a noun all we are planning to do is fail when faced with a real emergency. I found the CampusSafetyMagazine.com article (Armes & Bliesner, 2015) helpful in laying out some of the proactive measures schools can take as they plan for emergencies. And I am a firm believer, having experienced it first hand in combat, that muscle memory in times of crisis trumps all doctrinal plans.

So yes, changes need to be made; namely a paradigm shift from producing a binder full of plans to a series of rehearsed interventions. Barriers to this type of shift like always are time, money, and effort. But I think an honest discussion with all stakeholders (staff, school board, community leaders, emergency response personnel) can go a long way to establishing the common understanding that in any crisis situation student/staff safety is paramount and any decision, with that in mind, is better than no decision.