

Berks County Crisis Management Flight Team: Districts helping districts when tragedy strikes

When the Unthinkable Happens

Imagine you are a principal at one of the 105 schools within Berks County's 18 school districts. Further, imagine that the peace of your campus is shattered by something beyond your control. Perhaps a student dies suddenly in a car accident over the weekend. Or a student turns violent and harms classmates and staff.

As you, your faculty, administrators, and support staff go into overdrive dealing with the situation as it happens – you're notifying the police and ambulances; you're fielding calls from the media; you're trying to determine exactly what happened, how, and why; you're working to keep your student body calm; and reassuring dozens, perhaps hundreds, of parents that their child is OK – you're also working to keep your own feelings of grief and despair in check.

You sure could use some help from someone who knows exactly what to do, when to do it, and whom to call to get it done.

That "someone" easily could be the Berks County Crisis Management Flight Team.

Help for the Recovery Phase of a Tragedy

More than 60 counselors, teachers, and administrators from 11 of Berks County's school districts and the Caron Foundation have made themselves available to respond to the needs of students and school staff during the recovery portion of a traumatic school event, said Rodney Good, safety and training coordinator, Berks County Intermediate Unit, and coordinator for the Flight Team.

"This is a unique situation in which districts in a sense 'loan' staff to other districts to help the affected district in the recovery process," Good said. "Staff from one school district will work side by side with staff from another district in lending counseling and emotional support."

Flight Team members may support a district in several ways, including:



Flight Team members review agreement forms and update contacts to be prepared for the next call for assistance. Pictured, from left: Beth Burnham, Muhlenberg S.D.; Rodney Good, BCIU; Marilee Cassidy, Boyertown Area S.D.; and Linda Misterkiewicz, Exeter Township S.D.

- Handling announcements to students/moderating classroom discussion
- Fielding parent calls and concerns
- Working with the news media
- Screening and debriefing incoming counselors
- Providing a way for students to express their fear, grief, and compassion
- Contacting affected families
- Returning the affected student's or staff member's belongings to the family
- Meeting the counseling needs of special groups, such as the basketball team or drama club, if members are particularly affected by the incident
- Helping plan a memorial activity
- Assisting with other administrative support

"It's a district-helping-district concept," Good continued, "similar to what happens in your local community when a large fire breaks out and fire companies from far and wide respond to help one another with the blaze."

Compassion Coupled with a Clear Head

Perhaps one of the worst moments in a school administrator's life is the time he or she must make the announcement that a student or staff person has been injured or killed. Or field questions from members of the media. Or plan a memorial service. Emotions understandably can be overwhelming, and showing anything but calm can make the situation worse.

Flight Team members can help at those times, as well.

"Announcements can be made more calmly and professionally when someone from another district gives that information," Good said. "It's also a huge burden lifted from the administrators' shoulders. They have so much going on, so much to do, so many emotions in overdrive. Someone not directly involved in the school or close to the individuals involved often is the best person to handle those situations."



Help is Just One Phone Call Away

Districts participating in the Flight Team make just one call – to one of four coordinators, including Good – when they need crisis recovery services. There's no need to call around to various schools, districts, or other entities during a situation when time is at a premium. The coordinators put the call out to Flight Team members, and then those who are available and willing head out to the affected school to begin the recovery process.

This "one call" service was a huge help, according to one district's administrator, who used the Flight Team's assistance during an at-school incident not too long ago.

This was not the administrator's first time handling an emergency on campus. During other "times of crisis, I [was] faced with making numerous phone calls to coordi-

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nate help and then additional calls to continue assistance," the administrator said. "Time is a very precious commodity in times of crisis. Thanks to the coordinated effort to create a team in Berks County and the willingness of personnel to be trained and participate, we managed this crisis in a manner far superior than other situations in which I've been involved.

"The support we received from the Flight Team was outstanding."

Helping Hundreds of Berks County's Students

The Flight Team began in the 2005-2006 academic year with funds from the Safe Schools Initiative and Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act. Eleven of Berks County's 18 school districts participate in the Flight Team. They are:

Boyerstown Area | Brandywine Heights Area
Conrad Weiser Area | Exeter Township | Governor Mifflin
Muhlenberg | Oley Valley | Reading
Tulpehocken Area | Wilson | Wyomissing Area

Administrators, counselors, and others who volunteered as members of the Flight Team received five days of training, including instruction in how to talk with students after trauma and other grief-invoking events, suicide prevention, and using a team approach in the recovery process. Cheri Lovre, M.S., director of the renowned Crisis Management Institute in Salem, Oregon, provided the training. Good said he is working on bringing Lovre back for another session for new Flight Team members.

Since its inception, the Flight Team has worked with four Berks County schools and helped more than 700 students and staff in situations ranging from on-campus violence to the death of a beloved classmate in an automobile accident.

For more information on the Berks County Crisis Management Flight Team, contact Rodney Good at rodgoo@berksiu.org or at 610-987-8615.

"As I watched the Flight Team work with our children," another school administrator said, "I realized something else – how lucky we are to have trained professionals who will put their own work aside to respond to children in another district who now need their help. We are truly blessed!"