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CASE STUDY

Detailed Crisis Management Plan Compels Healing and Recovery: Aurora Public Schools (CO)

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Detailed Crisis Management Plan Compels Healing and Recovery: Aurora Public Schools

| Kathleen Choi and Naomi Kooker

John Barry, superintendent of Aurora Public Schools (APS) in Aurora, Colorado, remembers the moment he got the call. It was July 20, 2012, 1:15 in the morning. The call was from the chief operating officer of Aurora Public Schools, Anthony Sturges, telling him a gunman had opened fire in the Aurora Century 16 theater during a midnight screening of the Batman film, *The Dark Knight Rises*. Twelve people had been killed and at least 58 injured, according to a report that appeared later in *The Denver Post*. Among the dead was Alexander J. (“AJ”) Boik, 18, a Gateway High School graduate. It was a nightmare.

Upon receiving the call, Barry immediately deployed Aurora Public Schools’ Crisis Management Plan. Even though the theater was not technically part of the school district, the APS Crisis Management Plan encompassed the Aurora community at large. The district was a partner to the community, just as the community provided support to the district.

Barry, a retired two-star major general in the U.S. Air Force, knew something about crisis and its aftermath; he had been at the Pentagon on 9/11. Since arriving at Aurora Public Schools as superintendent in 2006, Barry and the district had been further developing the crisis management plan that APS had in place. There had been many drills and emergency exercises. But this was real.

FAST FACTS: Aurora Public Schools

59 schools

\$279 million annual budget (2012-13)

40,000 students



54.7% Hispanic

17.9% Black

17.8% White

4.6% Asian

Students come from over 130 countries and speak more than 120 languages. 37% are second-language learners, and of those 86% are Spanish speakers.

71% receive free or reduced lunch

In response to the enormity of the event, Barry and his team have since grown the plan into a five-phase Crisis and Disaster Recovery Plan, which has helped keep the school focused on the healing process.

The district has been widely lauded for its swift and caring response to the shooting. “[Aurora Public Schools] was unusual in how proactive, thoughtful, and comprehensive they were in their response,” said Dr. David Schonfeld, director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, a division of the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, as reported in *The Denver Post* (December 17, 2012). Indeed, APS’s five-phase Crisis and Disaster Recovery Plan has become the gold standard for districts. Not only has the plan helped the district in responding to the July 20th shooting, but it is proving to be very valuable in handling myriad crises that occur on an almost daily basis. Executing the plan has also had other unforeseen benefits: the district has forged stronger relationships with the community, has strengthened its skills, and enhanced its ability to openly tackle difficult issues.

Building a Better Plan

When Barry came to APS, he brought three core values to the district: be proactive, focus on building and strengthening relationships in the community at large, and be willing to have conversations about the hard issues. Barry’s three values drove him to examine how the district could be better prepared in the event of a crisis. He looked at different facets of the existing plan and sought to enhance it. Through the process, he (1) examined the Incident Response Team and added key personnel; (2) built a one-room Command Center with state-of-the-art equipment where the team could congregate, thus improving communication during a crisis; (3) increased the intensity and number of drills and exercises; and (4) established tighter relationships with key community partners, such as the police and fire departments and the Aurora Mental Health Center.

1. Enhancing the Incident Response Team

APS had already established an Incident Response Team (IRT), a group of about a dozen individuals who are mobilized at the onset of a crisis to work



Uniting in the aftermath of the tragedy

“It’s a sad commentary about the world when we have to educate [our staff] with these kinds of training, processes, and procedures,” said Barry. “But it’s needed.”

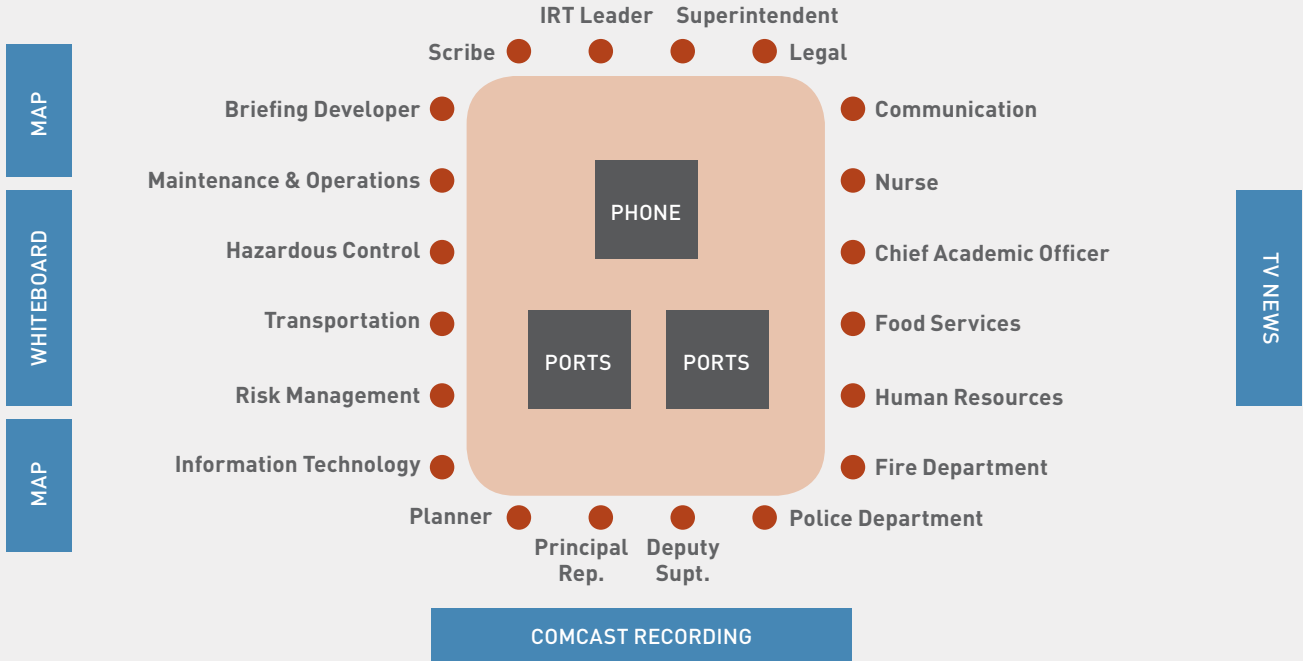
with first responders, such as the city’s police and fire departments.

One of the first things Barry did was to review the composition of the IRT, and to increase it to 20 members. For example, he added a food services representative because food and water might be needed for first responders or for students in the event of a prolonged lockdown. A representative from hazardous control was also included; if there were wounded, bleeding victims in a crisis, there would be a need for safe cleanup and treatment.

Each IRT member has a specific role, and each individual carries a checklist of duties.

Over the many drills and exercises, the roles have been carefully defined and the checklists revised. The IRT meets quarterly. Protocols and procedures are kept in a three-ring binder and online. →

Incident Response Team's Command Center



2. Command Center and State-of-the-Art Technology to Improve Communication

When Barry arrived, the district was embarking on its 10-year master plan for physical restructuring. Because APS did not have a central office—one building that housed all the administrators—when a crisis call came in, the team members were not together in one place. Since immediate and efficient communication is key to responding to a crisis, Barry took advantage of the master plan and created a Command Center, a designated conference room built to provide a meeting place for the IRT.

The Command Center was constructed next to the superintendent's office and is equipped with state-of-the-art technology for efficient communication. A large table—big enough to seat 20—is at the center of the room. On one wall are a whiteboard and maps of the district and surrounding towns; a flat-screen television to broadcast the local news is on another wall; and the third wall has a smart board to broadcast webinar communications with those out in the field. A control box on the

table allows Barry to flip between screens, such as watching an incident unfold and getting a view of the map.

There is a phone on the table to conduct conference calls and landlines to connect phones and laptops to the Internet. “I don’t believe in relying only on wireless during a crisis,” said Barry, who didn’t have cell service while trapped in the Pentagon on 9/11. When the IRT congregates, each member sets up his or her laptop or device to receive constant updates and to communicate during the crisis.

During a crisis, the superintendent's office—which is also equipped with landlines, a television with DVR/DVD player, and a whiteboard recorder—is used as a breakout room. There are also other breakout rooms; these are important to ensure individuals can find a quiet space to concentrate on their assigned tasks, like crafting an email to parents alerting them of the situation. Breakout rooms also serve as a quiet place to talk with family members or those affected by the crisis.

Communication is enhanced outside of the building as well. All school buses are equipped with GPSs and cameras, so they can be tracked and

The Incident Response Team

- **Superintendent**
- **Legal Counsel**
- **Incident Commander** (leader of the IRT)
- **Scribe** (makes a log of the incident as it unfolds)
- **Briefing developer** (keeps track of the process real-time & prepares briefing)
- **Maintenance and Operations representative**
- **Hazardous Control representative**
- **Transportation representative**
- **Risk Management** (operates surveillance cameras)
- **Information Technology representative**
- **Planner** (operates GIS maps)
- **Principal representative**
- **Deputy Superintendent**
- **Police Department representative**
- **Fire Department representative**
- **Human Resources** (information provider)
- **Food Services representative**
- **Chief Academic Officer**
- **Nurse**
- **Communication Officer**

drivers can communicate with the IRT. One person from the IRT goes into the field with two laptops and a printer to gather data updates and report back to the IRT; this person also serves as a resource for the first responders, for instance, by sharing photos of students or staff who may be involved in an incident.

3. Increased Drills and Exercises

Prior to Barry's arrival, APS was already conducting annual drills with the fire and police departments. Some members of the IRT received training from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and shared that training with the team. But it wasn't enough for Barry.

Barry increased the number and intensity of the drills, adding an annual exercise that the district conducts every June. For the drill, a crisis is simulated, real-time, which forces the IRT to gather and go through the motions of responding as though it were an actual emergency. Barry also increased the intensity of what the district refers to as "tabletop exercises," in which individual schools run through the protocols for crisis situations such as a fire alarm, tornado threat, or evacuation of the school.

After every drill and exercise, there is a "hotwash," a debriefing and a rundown of lessons learned. This includes assessing what needs to change on team members' checklists and what could be done better, and giving kudos for what the team and school staff did well.

4. Tighter Relationships with Key Partners

Although the IRT and the school district had forged good relationships with the community before Barry's arrival, there was more to do. In addition to more outreach efforts by the staff to community partners, the IRT reached out to more mental health and social workers; they have been invaluable allies to the students as well as to the staff, who need guidance in dealing with crises and related issues like suicide prevention. And Barry took the relationship with the Aurora Police to another level, befriending the chief of police and creating better communication.

"You have to have those relationships before the crisis," said Barry. Such relationships are fostered through direct personal contact during the annual exercises and drills.

Post 7/20: A Five-Phase Crisis and Disaster Recovery Plan Is Forged

"7/20," as the shooting at the Aurora movie theater is now referred to, changed everything. The enormity of the trauma and its aftermath forced Barry to break down the plan that was already in place into "chunks" and add a Disaster Recovery component. In this way, the school district was not overwhelmed and could "wrap its head around" dealing with the crisis in manageable phases.

The five-phase Crisis and Disaster Recovery Plan that is now in place takes into account an immediate response as well as the need for ongoing support for months if not years after a traumatic event. The five phases for 7/20 are as follows:

Phase 1: Immediate Response

Phase 2: Preparation for School to Start

Phase 3: School Start

Phase 4: Ongoing Support

Phase 5: Commemoration

Phase 1: Immediate Response

Communication is the key element in this phase. Superintendent Barry or Aurora Incident Commander Anthony Sturges receive the first emergency phone calls from community first responders. Depending on the nature of the crisis, the Incident Commander may initiate a robocall to all 20 members of the Incident Response Team, alerting them to gather at the table in the Command Center at a designated time.

After Barry received the initial call from Sturges early on 7/20, he immediately opened Gateway High School to witnesses and families. "People were coming in, wounded and bloody," recalled Barry.

The next action was to organize the IRT. By 7:30 AM, the 20 members were seated around the table at the Command Center. Images of the movie →

theater as well as the schools where witnesses and families were congregating were projected on the webinar screen.

Once at the table, the team started answering basic questions to shape what Barry calls “situation awareness”—shorthand for keeping track of how the incident is unfolding by the minute. Barry devised these questions, leaning on the basic 5 Ws of who, what, where, when, and, eventually, why, to come up with a clear picture.

Barry took a proactive stance with his own school district and reiterated the message that “our schools are safe, students and families are not alone, and our staff members care.”

WHO IS INVOLVED?

Team members consulted their checklists and training notes and began to assess how they could assist with this tragedy. Before the day ended, more schools had been opened to the community and more than 150 APS staff members were dispersed to be on hand for all those affected.

WHAT IS GOING ON?

Team members could watch news reports as well as watch by webinar what was going on with the victims and witnesses at the schools via cameras in place there.

WHERE IS IT TAKING PLACE?

Team members pulled up maps of the schools and surrounding areas that might be affected. When police went to investigate and evacuate the apartment building where the suspect James Holmes lived, Paris Elementary School—located across the street—was also evacuated.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?

While the shooting happened during the midnight showing of the movie, the incident continued to unfold, with witnesses gathering at Gateway High School and police working around the clock at both the theater and the suspect’s apartment.

Each team member tackled his or her checklist. The scribe kept an incident log and sent constant updates via a link to team members, so they could maintain “situation awareness.” This log became an invaluable document once the incident was over. The food service representative was called on to provide food to the first responders working in the field that fateful morning. The communication person went to a breakout room to craft emails and phone messages to families and staff. And the hazardous control representative organized the cleanup at Gateway.

Phase I lasted for approximately 72 hours immediately following the shooting.

Phase 2: Preparation for School to Start

“Preparation” is a broad term. But for APS in relation to 7/20, it covered three monumental tasks: (1) opening schools in support of police and the Red Cross; (2) helping prepare the memorial service for AJ Boik; and (3) preparing the district for the upcoming school year.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

The IRT quickly responded by opening Aurora Central High School as a temporary Red Cross shelter for displaced families. The team also opened two additional high schools as places where community members could access mental health support.

Gateway principal William Hedges took on the role of primary facilitator in helping students and families plan a service for AJ Boik. The memorial service held at Gateway High School within a week of the shooting came together in large part because the students came to the school looking for consolation and a place where they felt safe. It was important for them to feel empowered to do something in the wake of the shooting, which had left them bereaved and feeling powerless. Once the details were in place, the district supported the



Superintendent Barry greets an APS bus driver — the first staff member the students would meet on the first day of school.

plans by providing staff and security to keep the ceremony private.

The Monday after the shooting, Barry sought the help of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (NCSCB), an organization that school districts often wait months to contact after a traumatic incident occurs. Barry was thinking ahead, and wanted to prepare for the return of students and staff. In the wake of 7/20, APS knew it would take special effort to bring some normalcy to the schools and have the necessary supports in place for the start of the school year.

As suggested by the NCSCB, the district reached out to parents and community partners, including faith-based organizations and mental health professionals; in conjunction with its partners, the district assembled and provided a resource list of all mental health and wellness agencies to those in need; and the district established talking points for teachers and staff. Finally, as part of preparation for the opening of school, more psychologists and counselors were hired.

POSITIONING APS FOR THE LONGER-TERM

APS set a precedent by hiring a full-time recovery coordinator to act as the liaison between APS, city officials, the community, and mental health workers and to ensure that appropriate actions

are taken to address the community's needs after the crisis. The district brought in Francis Pombar, a U.S. Air Force veteran and educator, to fill this role. Barry charged Pombar with leading a newly formed Crisis Management Committee, a group that serves as the eyes and ears in the field to support recovery efforts. Composed of teachers, therapists, psychologists, social workers, and key community partners such as Aurora Mental Health, the committee focuses on reassessing safety and wellness practices with an emphasis on mental health issues at APS.

As recovery coordinator, Pombar's responsibilities encompass the following:

- Ensuring that APS students, staff, and families have the resources needed to heal.
- Sustaining and building partnerships with key community partners.
- Acting as the APS focal point and voice of the July 20th City Recovery Committee, composed of victims and their families and volunteers from nonprofit organizations. The committee focuses on coordination efforts to identify, quantify, and meet short-, intermediate-, and long-term needs resulting from the tragedy.
- Developing quarterly comprehensive trauma-training workshops for school counselors, social workers, psychologists, staff, and families. →



Offering comfort and support following the tragedy

- Developing the APS Incident Action Plan in collaboration with APS and community leaders on behalf of the Superintendent to discuss and implement strategies on how to best heal the community.
- Monitoring financial expenditures related to district recovery efforts.

In short, Francis Pombar, as recovery coordinator, is charged with overseeing that all is in place to execute the subsequent phases of the plan and provide support so that the community can recover from the tragedy and students can feel safe to learn and move forward.

Phase 3: School Start

With the students and teachers heading back to school, Barry, Pombar, and the APS team implemented measures to drive home its new main message: “Our schools are safe, students and families are not alone, and our staff members care.”

In this phase, the focus was on providing practical tools to the staff, students, and teachers.

Those tools included:

- Providing talking points for teachers that are grade-specific.
- Making sure the students and families are aware of the many mental health resources available to them.
- Hiring enhanced security around the schools to reinforce the sense of safety.
- Ramping up three prevention programs already in place: Pro-active Substance Abuse Reduction, Suicide Prevention Plan, and Positive Behavior Support Coordinators. In each instance, staff were trained to recognize symptoms or cues that may indicate a student is in need. For example, in suicide prevention, staff were advised to notice even the little things; a student’s being down or a little off should not be viewed as just a “bad day” but instead should result in a teacher’s reaching out to that student. The Positive Behavior Support Coordinators are trained personnel who model appropriate behavior and respond to poor behavior not in a punitive way but in an empowering, engaging way so students can correct themselves.
- Increasing awareness of bullying behavior and reminding parents and staff to make sure students know they can talk to a trusted adult if they do not feel safe for any reason.

Phase 4: Ongoing Support

“We know that symptoms of trauma can emerge over time for students and staff members,” commented Schonfeld at the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. This underscores the importance of having this phase of ongoing support incorporated into a crisis management plan. APS’s response to the 7/20 crisis went beyond handling the immediate problems and needs, and demonstrates the district’s willingness to tackle the hard issues that may arise after a tragic event.

The focus of this phase is on prevention and healing. It is continuous. It involves:

- Looking for symptoms and referring students to mental health workers for help. Post-traumatic symptoms include “anxiety, flashbacks, moodiness, emotional numbness, and difficulty concentrating,” according to the APS Website.

- Assessing students' needs on an ongoing basis by staying close to community partners, such as mental health workers.
- Dealing with trauma and healing in an open, organized way. For example, four Community Resource Workshops were held throughout the school district in December 2012; these workshops showcased a student musical performance and featured pre-holiday fun, but also included social workers, mental health professionals, and organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club who were on hand to speak with the families and offer their support. With 7/20 still fresh in some minds, the school district designed a program that acknowledged both the joy of the season and the emotional loss and stress that families and students might still be experiencing. Hundreds of parents attended. More workshops are scheduled before the school year ends.

When the horrific shooting took place on December 14, 2012, at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, Barry wasted no time showing solidarity with Newtown and reaching out to them with condolences. He also took a proactive stance with his own school district and reiterated the message that “our schools are safe, students and families are not alone, and our staff members care.”

Phase 5: Commemoration

As the anniversary of 7/20 draws closer, the focus is on honoring and preserving the memory of those who are gone, rather than on the details of the tragedy itself. It is imperative to involve the affected families and children in the planning of the commemorative event. Involvement benefits students by giving them a feeling of control and empowerment in the face of memories of a traumatic event over which they had no control. The focus is on the “how” of the planning and not so much on the “what,” though it should be a commemorative event that is relevant to the crisis or tragic event. In this way, the memorial activities help children express and cope with their feelings, an aspect that is helpful in the healing process. Considerations at this phase include recognizing the different needs of adults and children and honoring them both.

Prepared for Any Crisis

“There are two types of school administrators: those who have faced a crisis and those who are about to,” said National School Safety Center Executive Director Ronald D. Stephens as part of his Director’s Message on the NSSC Website.

When Barry arrived at APS in 2006, he had no way of knowing that he and his staff would face the horrors of 7/20. But he knew that the original Crisis Management Plan needed bolstering so that APS would be well prepared to respond to a crisis.

Barry knows that while the plan is a valuable guide, each new crisis will test its players. The hope is that all the training and troubleshooting prepare staff members to think on their feet.

While Barry’s plan is extremely comprehensive, Barry is also realistic. Having decades of crisis management under his belt, he also knows that a plan is just that—a plan. “Nothing is ever the same,” said Barry of being in the midst of a crisis. “Plans are only good for the first five minutes.” He knows that while the plan is a valuable guide, each new crisis will test its players. The hope is that all the training and troubleshooting prepare staff members to think on their feet.

The Myriad Benefits of the Crisis and Disaster Recovery Plan

Although the APS Incident Response Team created the five-phase Crisis and Disaster Recovery Plan specifically in response to 7/20, the school district has benefited from the plan in many →

other ways. It has increased rapport among all schools and community partners, made APS more responsive to community needs, and resulted in valuable training for staff. The plan has also put a spotlight on mental health issues, and created a safe forum to talk about difficult issues that confront the district.

“Before, at the district level, there was an inclination not to talk about difficult issues, such as a death or shooting, because we didn’t want to force students to talk about sad topics. School staff members were left to make decisions about how to handle the topics on their own,” said Georgia Durán, chief communication officer of APS. “Now, we talk and put them on the table. It’s more beneficial for the whole range of stakeholders because we’re not ignoring what is happening in our community.”

“[Aurora Public Schools] was unusual in how proactive, thoughtful, and comprehensive they were in their response.”

—Dr. David Schonfeld, director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

The plan is proving to be a priceless tool in helping the district deal with a broad range of crises and challenges. For example, following the illness and death of a beloved teacher in the district, the Crisis and Disaster Recovery Plan was instrumental in helping the staff respond. It offered guidance

on how the teachers should talk to the students about the death of their much-loved teacher. The commemoration phase, which engaged the students, helped them honor the person they had lost.

“We deal with crises every day,” said Francis Pombar, the APS recovery coordinator. “7/20 just took it to another level. The bigger piece is how do you go about identifying those struggling emotionally and socially and get them the help they need?” Because the plan helps keep a spotlight on student behavior and mental health issues, it’s easier for teachers and staff to recognize important cues in everything from depression to bullying and to have the tools to be proactive in dealing with students in need.

Safe Schools, Better Learning

It is no surprise that safe schools lead to better learning, fewer distractions, and overall better performance. Not only has the plan brought more peace of mind to APS staff and administrators, but it is serving its ultimate purpose: creating and maintaining a safe place so students can learn.

Although Barry, 61, is stepping down as superintendent at the end of the 2012-2013 academic year, he is leaving a legacy of successes. He raised the graduation rate, lowered the dropout rate, and helped to improve achievement rates on an annual basis since his tenure began at APS. He was named Superintendent of the Year in 2011 for Colorado.

And he leaves in place a gold-standard Crisis and Disaster Recovery Plan. “It’s a sad commentary about the world when we have to educate [our staff] with these kinds of training, processes, and procedures,” said Barry. “But it’s needed.” The exemplary plan that John Barry leaves at Aurora Public Schools not only helps APS to be well-positioned to face the future, but also provides valuable lessons for other districts. ♦