

## 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 IS A CRITICAL INCIDENT?

A critical incident is an event that falls outside the norm for the everyday practice 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 a 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 practise 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, it's 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 on 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 assess 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.

## COMMUNICATION

When an incident occurs, the District will make an assessment and then communicate with the community as necessary. In general, the process for communication going out is in the following order:



The fastest way to ‘push out’ information is Twitter, Facebook and, for larger schools, the appropriate App. The Website will be updated next. Finally, direct emails or phone calls may occur after this, but this will not be a universal occurrence.

Following the incident, the Superintendent may communicate with the Board of Education, media, other schools, and parents. In the past, there has even been communication to parents relating to incidents in other school districts. This is typically done via a letter, often located on the district website or sent directly home to a specific school’s parents.

## 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.

## WHAT CAN PARENTS EXPECT FROM THE SCHOOL/ SCHOOL DISTRICT?

Each incident is unique, but overall parents should expect the school and district to react in some predictable ways. Adequate supervision will be maintained as best as the degree of the critical incident will allow. Teachers and staff will not intentionally leave students unattended and/ or unsupervised. In the case of an evacuation, some staff may be permitted to leave by the Principal as students are safely away from the site. Students will not be left unsupervised; if a parent is required to collect a child, there will be someone attending to the child until they are released to the parent.

Communication will correspond to the nature and severity of the incident. Please remember that each school has a large number of students and often principals/ vice-principals are required in assessing and assisting in critical incident responses and individualized communication will not always be possible (ex. a phone call to notify each parent).

Students and staff will have access to a flight team after a critical incident. This will include counselling support. If a parent feels their child needs additional help processing or dealing with an event they can contact the school to ensure this happens.

In the period after the incident, the Superintendent and site Principal will review the situation and the reaction to it. There will generally be an opportunity to provide feedback on the critical incident for parents and staff.

## 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 the transition back to regular academic learning. This may involve a team of counsellors being at the school for several weeks, or simply checking 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 traumatized. Other supports may include food or physical space for staff to decompress.

## WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

**EMERGENCY PLANS** Find out emergency plans for your child's school. Some schools have very different designs, as well as specific evacuation sites.

**COMMUNICATION** Find out how emergencies and critical incidents are communicated to parents and if there is any concern around this, discuss with the school administration - for example, if you don't have a mobile phone.

**RUMOURS AND SPECULATION** Please refrain from sharing unsubstantiated social media posts regarding rumours about the school. This can create undue chaos and panic. Instead, consult with the school administration or police.

**FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS** Critical incidents can be very emotional and as a parent, it may be instinctual to rush to the school, but please stay away from the school if instructed to do so, as it could impede emergency responders and delay response time.

**PREPAREDNESS** Discuss with your child about safety preparedness and emergency situations. This can be a good opportunity to develop your own plan for emergencies such as fire and earthquakes. The goal is understanding and preparedness, not anxiety or fear.

**FEEDBACK** Provide feedback on emergency procedures and this guide.

For further information or feedback to improve this brochure, contact the Superintendent of Schools via the links below. Thank you for working with the School District to help ensure the best possible responses to critical incidents.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION	
MISSION PUBLIC SCHOOLS	<a href="https://www.mpsd.ca">https://www.mpsd.ca</a>
ANGUS WILSON, SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS	<a href="mailto:angus.wilson@mpsd.ca">angus.wilson@mpsd.ca</a> Twitter: <a href="https://twitter.com/AngusSD75">@AngusSD75</a> Facebook: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/MissionPublicSchools">@MissionPublicSchools</a> (604) 826-6286
PROVINCIAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLANS	<a href="https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/emergency-management-bc/provincial-emergency-planning">https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/emergency-management-bc/provincial-emergency-planning</a>
MAINTAINING SCHOOL SAFETY	<a href="https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/erase/documents/maintaining-school-safety-guide.pdf">https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/erase/documents/maintaining-school-safety-guide.pdf</a>
RCMP MISSION	Twitter: <a href="https://twitter.com/MissionRCMP">@MissionRCMP</a> (604) 826-7161 <a href="http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en">http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en</a> <a href="http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/detach/en/d/249#Mission">http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/detach/en/d/249#Mission</a>