

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: A PORTRAIT OF SCHOOL DISTRICT CRISIS  
MANAGEMENT: LEADERSHIP CHOICES  
IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY DURING THE  
SNIPER SHOOTINGS OF OCTOBER 2002

Brian Joseph Porter, Ph.D., 2010

Directed By: Professor Hanne B. Mawhinney  
Department of Education Leadership, Higher  
Education and International Education

The actions of two assailants who shot and killed 10 people and wounded three others, including a student, in the region around Washington, D.C., in October 2002, provides the backdrop for a qualitative study of the emergency response by school district leaders in Montgomery County, Maryland. The study explores and describes the experiences of the district's superintendent and a group of leadership staff, including the author as a participant researcher, and two elected officials and a union president who contributed to the decisions and actions. A non-evaluative study, based on portraiture in the form of case study, the narrative report provides often minute-to-minute detail of the events of the case and a unique perspective of crisis management and decision making at the school district level. The study revealed aspects of the case regarding implementation of an emergency response plan, involvement of principals, management style, political extremes, and phases of the crisis. The study also illuminated targeted objectives for decision and actions, including a central focus on mental health and communications. The

study reflects a subject area that is largely overlooked in the research of education leadership. Implications from the study are that school district leaders need specific training and experience necessary to manage a crisis, make decisions under crisis circumstances, and improve their performance through practice. The study identifies licensure for school district leaders as a way to attain a standardized level of competency in crisis management and decision making skills. The study also provides an entry point for further research in educational crisis management and decision making. In particular, the study explores a unique blend of research encompassing critical tasks in public leadership during a crisis, complex transformational processes among the components of a school district's social system, and expectations of high reliability in organizational environments that support mindfulness and expertise.

A PORTRAIT OF SCHOOL DISTRICT CRISIS MANAGEMENT:  
LEADERSHIP CHOICES IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY DURING  
THE SNIPER SHOOTINGS OF OCTOBER 2002

By

Brian Joseph Porter

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Advisory Committee:

Dr. Hanne B. Mawhinney, Chair  
Dr. George L. Marx  
Dr. Carol S. Parham  
Dr. Patricia M. Richardson  
Dr. Thomas D. Weible

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## Dedication

This study, which spanned nearly five years and many personal and professional crises and triumphs, is dedicated to my wife, Gail Joann Lupton Porter.

I owe her everything.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my friends and former colleagues within the Montgomery County Public Schools for their support and encouragement in the completion of this study and to those who accepted my invitation to participate by offering their recollections about a unique chapter in the history of the school district.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction of the Portrait

### Overview

In October 2002, just outside Washington, D.C., in the suburban community of Montgomery County, Maryland, a series of random shootings with marksman accuracy sparked one of the largest criminal manhunts in the nation's history. By the time the assailants were arrested more than three weeks later, there were 10 people dead and three wounded in two states and the District of Columbia. In the midst of these events, school districts leaders across the region instituted a variety of safety and security measures, especially after one of the wounded victims was a middle school student. The actions taken by the district leaders in Montgomery County, often chronicled in minute-to-minute detail, form the case on which this portrait of crisis management and decision making is based. The portrait begins with the context of the study.

### Context of the Study

The experiences in crisis management and decision making by school district leaders in the Montgomery County Public Schools during the sniper incident comprise a story with little precedent in the research about educational administration. Within a few hours of the first shootings on the morning of October 3, 2002, the school district implemented one of the most stringent security measures possible, in response to a police warning about student safety. The decision triggered a wave of similar actions, as other

school districts also reacted to an unseen threat. Thus began the crisis management response of the Montgomery County Public Schools, the focus of this study, in which a group of school district leaders dealt with the cumulative effects of events that shocked and threatened the region for more than three weeks. The event was characterized as the longest crisis of its kind to ever face a public school district in the nation (Bowler, 2002)—after just the first 10 days. A chronology of major events in the case provides an overview of the scope and sequence of the crisis (Table 1.1).

The Maryland Court of Special Appeals, in a decision denying a request to overturn a lower court conviction of one of the two assailants, compared the effects of the attacks to those of “Jack the Ripper” and described the public reaction in Montgomery County, in particular, as “gripped by a paroxysm of fear, a fear as paralyzing as that which froze the London district of Whitechapel in 1888” (“John Muhammad v. Maryland,” 2007, p. 1). The impact was felt well beyond the county, during what was described in the media as “a three-week siege in which a seemingly faceless gunman terrified the region by killing indiscriminately...forcing schoolchildren behind locked doors and turning mundane outdoor ventures into a test of nerves” (Morello, Davenport, & Harris, 2002).<sup>1</sup> The crisis reportedly affected 30 school districts, enrolling more than a million students and employing more than 65,000 teachers (“Sniper shootings,” 2002, p. 17). Tightened security was reported in school districts encompassing an area from the Maryland border with Pennsylvania to south of Richmond, Virginia (Figure 1.1).

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<sup>1</sup> On October 12, 2002, little more than a week after the shootings began, *Newsweek* released a national poll saying 19% of American adults were “very worried” and 28% “somewhat worried” that they or a family member might be a victim of “this kind of violence” (2002). The results suggested nearly one in two American adults thought such an attack was possible anywhere.

Table 1.1 Chronology of Shootings and School District Actions

Date	Shootings	Code Blue Ordered	Outside Activities Prohibited
Wednesday, October 4	■ evening		
Thursday, October 3	■■■■ morning ■ evening	■ morning	■ morning
Friday, October 4	■ afternoon		■ morning only
Saturday, October 5			
Sunday, October 6			
Monday, October 7	■ morning	■ morning	■ morning
Tuesday, October 8		■	■
Wednesday, October 9	■ evening	No school	■
Thursday, October 10			■
Friday, October 11	■ morning	■ morning	■
Saturday, October 12			■
Sunday, October 13			■
Monday, October 14	■ evening	■	■
Tuesday, October 15			■
Wednesday, October 16			■
Thursday, October 17			■
Friday, October 18		No school	■
Saturday, October 19	■ evening		■
Sunday, October 20			■
Monday, October 21			■
Tuesday, October 22	■ morning	■ morning	■
Wednesday, October 23		■	■
Thursday, October 24		■	■
Friday, October 25			
Totals	Dead: 10 Wounded: 3	Code Blue days: 8	Days with outdoor restrictions: 20

■ = shooting or decision to restrict outside activities all day (unless otherwise indicated)

Shooting data from *John Allen Muhammad v. State of Maryland* (2007). Court of Special Appeals of Maryland. Retrieved November 11, 2007, from <http://mdcourts.gov/opinions/cosa/2007>.

School data from *Sniper crisis: Superintendent's crisis management communications* (2002). Weeks 1-3, Additional Materials. [Notebooks]. Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools.



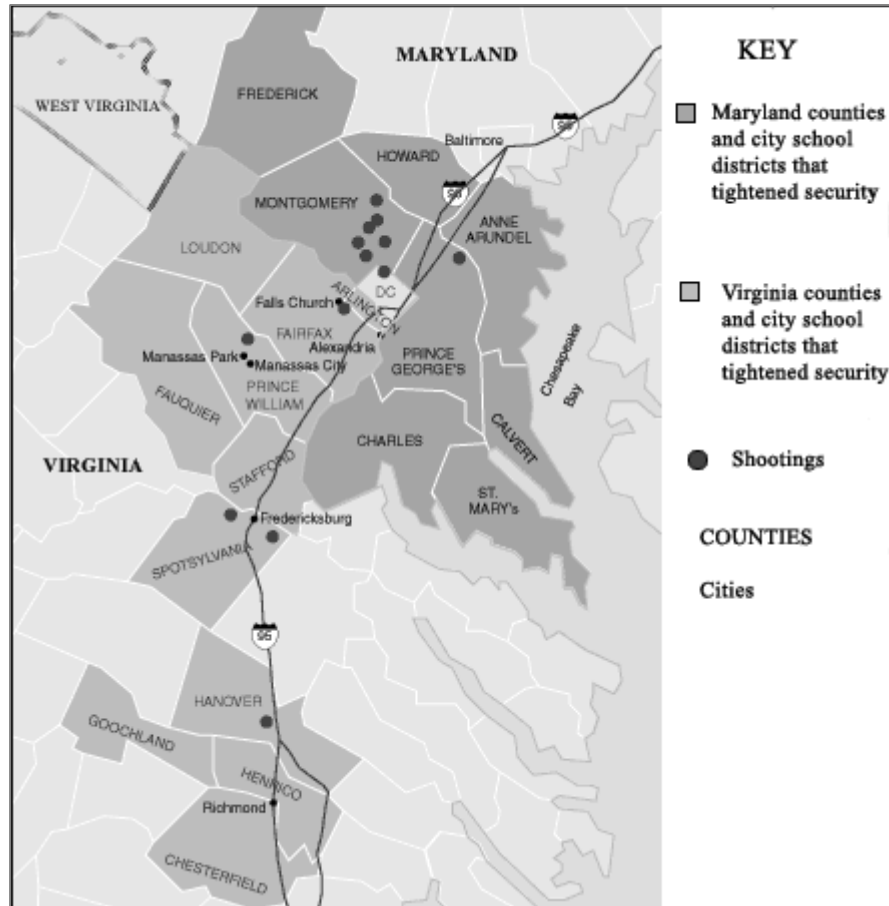


Figure 1.1 Area of Heightened School Security

From "Sniper Shootings" (2002, October 30). *Education Week*, p. 17. Copyright 2002-2009, Editorial Projects in Education, Bethesda, Maryland. Reprinted with permission.

### Problem

There is little in the way of research about crisis management and decision making among leaders of public school districts or schools. As described in Chapter 2, the literature is largely based on anecdotal references to individual experiences without a foundation in research analysis. On the other hand, there is extensive research outside the field of education regarding the management of crisis conditions and similar situations across a number of occupations and fields of expertise. This includes, for example, research in the management of organizational crises (Allison & Zalikow, 1999; Weick,

2001a), the making of crisis decisions (Eisenhardt, 1989; Klein, 1993a), and the effects of crises on human behavior (Gladwell, 2000; K. Sacco, Galletto, & Blanzieri, 2003), among others.

The absence of such research in education suggests there is little need or interest within the field of educational leadership to know about research-based crisis management and decision making skills, the improvement of such skills through training, and the attainment of expertise based on standards of performance not simply experience. The absence creates a void in which this study is situated, requiring the development of a conceptual framework for the research based largely outside of education literature.

The problem is related to the absence of training in general on in-depth management and decision-making skills for school district leaders, let alone crisis management and crisis decision making. For example, Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) noted in a study of school principals that little training in critical problem solving skills was available. The problem was thought to be particularly serious for novice principals who had subject area knowledge but lacked skills in resolving authentic, ill-structured problems.

The literature on school leadership focuses primarily on decision making associated with policies and procedures, administration, instructional reforms, and organizational change. All of these areas are important and worthy of considerably more attention. But the absence of substantive inclusion of crisis management and decision making is noticeable even in the most comprehensive literature. For example, the recent edition of one of the widely used texts in principal training, *Educational Administration: Theory, Research, and Practice, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Hoy & Miskel, 2008), has an extensive

section on several models of decision making and problem solving, including conflict resolution, but does not provide a link to the applicability of these models to decision making in a crisis. Similarly, a text published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, *The New Principal's Fieldbook: Strategies for Success* (Robbins & Alvy, 2004), cites the need for “balancing teaming with decisiveness” (p. 221) in responding to a crisis situation but does not mention let alone explain the unique characteristics of what decisiveness means in making a crisis decision.

Various guide books on crises in schools, including *Best Practices in School Crisis Prevention and Intervention* (Brock, Lazarus, & Jimerson, 2002) and *Coping with Crisis: A Resource for Schools, Parents, and Communities* (Poland & McCormick, 1999), have extensive descriptions of the tasks involved in responding to a crisis largely from the perspective of after-the-fact counseling, not the complex management of a broad-based emergency at a school or a crisis on the scale of a school district, nor the elements and demands of crisis decision making.

Yet, as the review of the literature revealed, school district leaders are expected to know how to handle a crisis, be effective crisis managers, and attain expertise in threat assessment and crisis containment (R. A. Fein, et al., 2002).

#### Framework

The conceptual framework for the study was developed from a review of literature on crisis leadership, management of complex events, and decision making under extreme conditions, among related subjects. The review, as described in Chapter 2, led to the development of a unique blend of three areas of research encompassing the context of critical tasks in public leadership during a crisis (Boin, 'T Hart, Stern, &

Sundelius, 2005), the complex transformational processes among various components of social systems of schools (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; 2008), and expectations of high reliability in the implementation of crisis management activities in environments that support mindfulness and expertise (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, 2007).

The framework was influenced by research suggesting that effective decision makers in a crisis use their experience and training in the form of intuition to take action, make sense of their environment, and address the personal and situational impact of the crisis and the challenges that follow. Such research comes from, among others, the study of fast-paced work environments (Eisenhardt, 1989), the military (Klein, 1997), firefighters (Weick, 2001b), emergency management personnel (Flin, 2001), and patient-treatment decisions by critical care nurses (Currey & Botti, 2003).

Important in the conceptualizing the analytical basis for the study was the concept of decision making as sensemaking, in which people act (make a decision) in order to understand a change in their environment (Weick, 2001a). The context of a crisis causes a considerable disruption of the sensemaking capabilities of people, escalating problem conditions as the crisis unfolds and new challenges arise (Rosenthal et al., 2001). At such moments, sensemaking occurs within the decision-making process itself, as decision makers rely on their own intellectual abilities to make sense of their surroundings and take actions that reflect what they instinctively feel and recognize, based on their training and expertise (Klein, 2003). In the process, though, their action (or decision) changes the environment, and Weick called this “enacted sensemaking” (2001a, p. 224) and applied it to crisis situations, saying in essence that the act of managing a crisis changes the crisis.

## Methodology

Portraiture as a form of case study was chosen as the methodology for the study, based on the work of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) and Bloom (2003), among others. The selection of portraiture was influenced, in part, by the work of Heck and Hallinger (1999), who suggest that narrative forms of research are useful in describing the “decision-making or problem-solving practices of school leaders” (p. 155). It also reflects the tradition of descriptive studies of decision making that explore situations from the point of view of the participants (Simon, 1978b, p. 8). Pearson and Clair (1998, p. 62), for example, note that research of crisis events often lacks the perspective of people who experienced the crisis, and Rosenthal et al. (2001) suggest that such studies of management responses to a crisis should include exploration of the personal experiences and effects of shock, upheaval, and stress that occur from “very concrete and frightening events” for all participants, including managers (p. 22).

In particular, the study was conducted as an open-ended inquiry intended to explore and describe a lived experience shared by the participants in the case. Thus, the narrative report provides, as described by Creswell (1998), a form of qualitative “rhetoric” about “a certain state of social being” (p. 79). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe this as a form of emergent phenomenological inquiry, in which data gathered from a variety of sources are interpreted in the form of a narrative report reflecting a panoramic view of the participants and their actions. In this study, the research involved a deep analysis of the events of the case based on archival records and the recollections of participants. This incorporated a process in the study, as described by Shank (2002, p. 160),

in which an analytical deconstruction of events was undertaken in order to reveal not only what occurred but also why.

As a retrospective view of past actions, the portrait approached the crisis management and decision making events from the perspective of a case study, collecting data from multiple sources for the analysis and documentation of the case, as described by Yin (2003). In some respects, portraiture is an extension of case study, with common data collection and analysis techniques. I was influenced by the perspective of Shank (2002), who describes portraiture as going “beyond the simple notion of documenting a case toward the richer and more complex notion of...creating an illuminating case that is as much an artistic task as it is a piece of scientific reporting” (p. 54).

Standard applications of qualitative research procedures were used, consistent with those outlined by Marshall and Rossman (1999), Creswell (1998, 2003), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Yin (2003), among others.

The portrait is a strictly non-evaluative study, based on the a presumption of “goodness” in the actions of people, as described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), and throughout the study I resisted what they call “the more typical social science preoccupation with documenting pathology and suggesting remedies” (p. 141). This meant the study approached the events of the case from the perspective of presumed strengths, rather than expected deficiencies (Hackmann, 2002, p. 54). This was consistent with the view of Pearson and Clair (1998, p. 73) who suggest that studies involving crises, which often focus on failure and loss, should be open to the possibility of success.

My purpose in approaching portraiture as a form of case study reflects my personal interests as a researcher that are rooted in educational leadership and policy,

journalism, and political science. In addition, as a participant researcher in the events of the case, I also followed a methodology that facilitated the reality of this involvement as a benefit, rather than an impediment. My involvement as a participant, as the director of communications for the school district, required certain research practices regarding personal responsibilities, verification, quality, and ethics, which are described in Chapter 3. In addition, the public identification of the participants was undertaken consistent with the requirements of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Maryland, College Park, and the Montgomery County Public Schools regulations on employee participation in research.

#### Purpose

The study was undertaken with the intention of understanding school district crisis management in the context of a single case, as an illustration of issues facing district leaders in crisis situations. The study provided a unique opportunity to explore and describe rarely analyzed aspects of organizational management and decision making, let alone such actions in a public school district. The subject reflects an area of research that is largely overlooked and ignored; and, in the process, the study sought to provide a basis for further research and an illumination of such practices in the administration of public schools.

The responsibilities for school crisis management touch nearly every community. It is not an overstatement to suggest that schools are ubiquitous. They are one of the most identifiable representations of government services available in local communities. People, particularly parents of public school students, recognize and know their local principals and teachers, who are partners in the societal processes of raising and educating children.

The United States had an estimated 98,916 public elementary and secondary schools in operation in the fall of 2007, based on the most recent available federal data. It was largest number of public schools in operation since the mid-1960s. They were governed by an estimated 13,924 school districts, representing a broad mixture of urban, suburban, and rural communities and regions. In the fall of 2009, the public school enrollment nationally was an estimated 49.8 million students (Snyder & Dillow, 2010, Tables 34-93).

Most school districts are moderately sized, much smaller than the large districts associated with the events of this study. In the fall of 2007, the most recent year for which data are available, school districts with less than 46,900 students enrolled an estimated 78% of the nation's students. The rest were concentrated in less than 1% of school districts—the nation's 100 largest, led by New York City with 1.3 million students. Montgomery County's district was identified as the 16<sup>th</sup> largest nationally, with Fairfax County, Virginia, ranked 13<sup>th</sup> and the largest in the region (Snyder & Dillow, 2010, Table 92).

#### Question

The study addressed the question: *What can be learned from the decision making experiences of the leaders of the Montgomery County Public Schools in protecting students from the sniper in October 2002?*

The question brought the study into focus for the collection of information and data from the participants and the documentary record, consistent with portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) and case study (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2003). It was



a contextual question designed, as Maxwell (1996) explained, “to understand how events, actions, and meanings are shaped by the unique circumstances in which these occur” (p. 59).

There were nine sub-questions that further deepened the study’s approach in exploring and describing a lived experience:

1. What were the characteristics of the decisions?
2. Who were the main participants?
3. What are the background characteristics of this case?
4. What commonly held views, themes, and metaphors emerge?
5. What was unique about this case?
6. What retrospective insights can be learned?
7. What strategies and processes of decision making can be described?
8. What does the analysis of the portrait reveal?
9. How can this portrait be situated in the literature about crisis decision making and school district leadership?

As open-ended questions, the inquiry was also consistent with “the logic of crisis analysis,” as described by Rosenthal, et al. (2001), in terms of avoiding a reliance on the linear focus in the chronology of events and, instead, being mindful of the “circular movements” in how a crisis unfolds (p. 21).

### *Context of the School District*

Montgomery County was literally at the epicenter of the event, both because the killings began and ultimately ended there and because the law enforcement response was headquartered in Rockville, the county seat, not far from the central offices of the public school district.

At the time of the case, in the fall of 2002, the district enrolled nearly 139,000 students in 191 schools. The district was the largest in the state, with more than 16% of all students statewide (*Maryland's report card*, 2003). One of the largest districts in the country, the district boasted at one point: “More children attend school here than are enrolled in the schools in four individual states” (*Annual report*, 2002, p. 7). More than half of the students were African American, Asian American, or Hispanic, creating one of the state’s most diverse districts, with a large percentage of students eligible for federal meal assistance, English language assistance, and other services.

Montgomery County occupies 497 square miles of urban, suburban, and rural communities, with the Potomac River as the border with Virginia to the south and southwest. The nation’s capital city, Washington, D.C., is its famous neighbor.<sup>2</sup> Four Maryland counties—Prince George’s, Howard, Carroll, and Frederick—form the remaining jurisdictional contour, from east to west.

Overall, the county reported little crime at the time just prior to the events of the case. Among Maryland’s five largest jurisdictions in 2001, it had the lowest rate of violent crime (the number of murders, rapes, robberies, and aggravated assaults per 100,000 people). The rate was half as much as the next lowest jurisdiction, Anne Arundel County, home to the state’s capital city, Annapolis. Murders also were relatively uncommon, with 19 occurring in the county compared to 463 across Maryland in 2001 (*Maryland state police*, 2005, pp. 12-13).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The county was created in 1776 and named for General Richard Montgomery, a fallen hero from the failed invasion of Canada during the American Revolutionary War (*Montgomery County*, 1999, pp. 3, 29).

<sup>3</sup> For an extended description of the school district and community, see “Appendix A: Montgomery County.”

Nonetheless, the region at the time of the shootings was already on edge because of the terrorist attacks the year before. In May 2002, for example, a poll found a higher level of fear and helplessness among residents in Washington, D.C., than among residents of other large cities in the nation (Hsu & Morin, 2002). On August 2002, the federal director of homeland security urged local government leaders in the Washington region to coordinate their respective agencies for a possible terrorist attack on the nation's capital (Hsu, 2002). The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) engaged school district superintendents and their security staff in efforts to improve "planning, communication, information sharing, and coordination before, during and after a regional emergency" (Rogers, 2002). The organization's first meeting was on September 12, 2002, about three weeks before the sniper attacks began.

#### Public Events

The school district's crisis decisions were public events, reported in the regional, national, and international news media and announced by the school system through almost daily letters to parents and regular announcements on its Web site in multiple languages. The public aspect of the events is important in situating this study as a research project involving a publicly identified case and participants. There were daily news stories, nightly broadcasts, and frequent news bulletins that included news about school operations and the decisions being made throughout the crisis (*Sniper crisis*, Week 1, 2002). The spotlight intensified after the shooting of the middle school student, and a *Washington Post* editorial summed up the environmental context with a headline "A New Level of Fear" (2002, p. A34).

In the aftermath of the crisis, the school district was recognized publicly and nationally as a result of its efforts in crisis management. In March 2003, the district's emergency plan was identified as an example of "promising practices in school emergency response" by the U.S. Department of Education ("Emergency planning," 2003). On April 23, 2003, a segment on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) program "Newshour" highlighted the school system's "sophisticated response" to crises ("Safety lesson," 2003). In October 2004, the school system's role in managing a public event was featured in a report on multi-agency law enforcement cooperation (G. R. Murphy & Wexler, 2004). That same year, on September 3, 2004, NBC *Dateline* reported that a national study by a domestic security organization, America Prepared, praised the school district's crisis readiness (Hansen & Thompson, 2004). The study was described in *The Washington Post* as characterizing the school district as one of the "best prepared among the nation's largest school districts to keep children safe during a parent's nightmare: terrorism at school" (Dana, 2004, p. C6).

#### Participants

The participants in the study included 15 individuals who were engaged in the leadership decisions and actions of the Montgomery County Public Schools during the sniper crisis of October 2002. All but three were identified from the preliminary research, with the others identified as the study progressed (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2 Identified Internal and External Participants

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<i>Alvez, Aggie</i>	Director of Special Projects, Office of the Superintendent (director of communications and family outreach).
<i>Bowers, Larry A.</i>	Chief Operating Officer.
<i>Clarke, Edward A.</i>	Director of School Safety and Security (consultant, private practice, Olney, Maryland)
<i>Duncan, Douglas M.</i>	County Executive, Montgomery County (consultant, private practice, Rockville, Maryland)
<i>Hellmuth, Robert B.</i>	Assistant director, School Safety and Security (director of school safety and security)
<i>Ikheloa, Roland</i>	Staff Assistant to the Board of Education (chief of staff, Board of Education)
<i>Kamins, Matthew J.</i>	Supervisor of Psychological Services (psychologist, Psychological Services)
<i>Kress, Donald H.</i>	Chief School Performance Officer (consultant, private practice, Germantown, Maryland)
<i>Lacey, Frieda K.</i>	Chief of Staff to the Superintendent of Schools (deputy superintendent of schools)
<i>Madden, Judy</i>	Supervisor of Guidance Services (director of educator learning, College Summit, Washington, D.C.)
<i>Shirley, Edward W.</i>	President, Montgomery County Association of Administrative and Supervisory Personnel (superintendent, Caroline County Public Schools, Denton, Maryland)
<i>Subin, Michael L.</i>	Chair, Education Committee, Montgomery County Council (attorney, private practice, Rockville, Maryland)
<i>Tronzano, Matthew A.</i>	Executive Assistant to the Chief Operating Officer (executive director, The Jones Center for Families, Springdale, Arkansas)
<i>Weast, Jerry D.</i>	Superintendent of Schools
<i>Williams, James A.</i>	Deputy Superintendent of Schools (superintendent, Buffalo City Public Schools, New York)

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Listed alphabetically by last name, with position or association with the Montgomery County Public Schools during the case and current professional status if different in parentheses.

### Significance

The study has significance for practice, in that school district leaders and leaders of schools should have the knowledge and understanding necessary to manage a crisis, make decisions under crisis circumstances, and improve their performance through

practice sessions, similar to learning any other skill (such as teaching). The study also has significance for policy, in that licensure in the preparation of school district leaders and leaders of schools should include requirements for attaining a standardized level of competency in crisis management and crisis decision making skills. And, the study has significance for research, in that it provides an entry point for adding research in educational crisis management and decision making.

#### Limitations

As a qualitative study involving a single case there can be no generalization beyond the case. It can be illustrative, but it is not predictive. The study is also limited by the conceptual and methodological frameworks that established the analytical perspective and guided the conduct of the study.

The study is further limited in its design as a retrospective study, relying on available records and the recollections of participants, whose selection and public identification create additional limitations. These limitations apply, as well, to the researcher, who was also a participant, in addition to potential threats to such research because of bias and reflexivity. These limitations are addressed in Chapter 3.

#### Definition of Terms

Ambiguity—the lack of sensemaking as a result of “an ongoing stream” of information “that supports several different interpretations at the same time” (Weick, 1995, p. 91).

Bounded Rationality—the “inescapable limitations of knowledge and computational ability” of a person in any given situation (Allison & Zalikow, 1999, p. 20).

Case Study—the “exploration of a bounded system or a case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection from multiple sources, rich in context” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61).

Code Blue—a security response strategy requiring all students to be accounted for and under supervision, with additional security measures implemented depending on the situation (Montgomery County Public Schools: retrieved June 26, 2005 from <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/info/emergency/procedures/codeblue.cfm>).

Crisis—“A period of upheaval and collective stress” that disrupts the known reality in “unexpected, often inconceivable ways” (Rosenthal et al., 2001, p. 6).

Participant Researcher—a special mode of qualitative methodology in which the researcher participated in some way in the events being studied, including that of a staff member or decision maker in an organization (Yin, 2003, pp. 93-94).

Portraiture—an emergent, open-ended form of phenomenological research that gathers and interprets multiple sources of data to explore and describe lived experiences in a narrative report, the portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Phenomenology—the exploration of “the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals about a specific concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51).

Sensemaking—understanding reality through a process “that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs” (Weick, 1995, p. 15).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review for the Portrait

### Overview

The portrait of crisis management and decision making during the sniper incident of October 2002 by school district leaders in Montgomery County, Maryland, was undertaken against a backdrop of limited research on this topic in educational organizations. The literature is largely defined by other fields or narrowly viewed within the context of school-based counseling. Little is available to illuminate the subject at the districtwide level. At the same time, the evolution of crisis management for schools can be seen in the reports of steps taken (or not) by the federal government, states, and school districts. Together, these sources contributed to the development of the conceptual framework for this study, the exploration and description of the case, and the subsequent discussion, conclusions, and implications. The review begins by situating the study within the context of crisis management in school districts.

### Context of Crisis Management

The literature on crisis management and decision making in school districts generally describes personal lessons learned by individuals involved in traumatic incidents. Such reports provide a varied assortment of anecdotal insights, usually first-person accounts, reflecting the actions of principals and superintendents under crisis conditions. One such experience involved the shooting of an assistant principal at a high school in Wisconsin in December 1993. George Goens was the district superintendent,



and he later described in a magazine article what he saw and experienced at the school. The scene, as he recalled, involved a crisis well under way, with different groups of people at varied stages of response, both professional and personal. He concluded later that among the things he needed most that day was a simple “conceptual emergency plan” to guide staff “through the immediate tidal wave of the crisis” (Goens, 1996, p. 50). Fourteen years later, he wrote again about the experience, this time explaining vividly why he thought preparing for a crisis was necessary:

Throughout that day, ambiguity and uncertainty stalked me like a dark, bleak shadow. The kids and staff were in lockdown. The perpetrator was unknown. The police were investigating. Getting everyone out of the building safely was a priority. I was dazed and stunned, but paradoxically my behavior was controlled, linear and logical. Each decision that day carried immense magnitude because of the consequences for people’s lives. Time literally stood still or sped by in a vapor. It seemed surreal (Goens, 2007).

Goens’ description captured one of the salient concepts from the research on crisis management and decision making. Researchers describe typical crises in largely similar terms. As one noted, a crisis creates a time and place where “we are not ourselves and the world around us is completely changed” (Gullatt & Long, 1996, p. 26). The psychological experiences may reflect feelings of isolation, frustration, worry, and vulnerability, and the physiological factors may include adrenaline reactions, startled reflexes, and dysfunctions such as sleep deprivation (Klein, 1993b). The reactions worsen as a crisis escalates. People under extreme changes in the social order are capable of mass behavior that can tip from panic to epidemic quickly and unexpectedly (Gladwell, 2000).

#### Advance Preparation

The goal of crisis management is to avoid falling victim to the distortion of senses that cause people to react haphazardly. Such reactions can be primal. Weick (1995), in

his work about organizational sensemaking, described the crisis response as rooted in basic human conditions that tacitly rely on everyday routines and the expected “dispositions of [other] individuals” (p. 86). Abraham Maslow’s “theory of human need” in 1970 (as cited in Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 137) identified personal safety and security as the second most basic necessity in a hierarchy of human motivations. Intense feelings associated with protecting basic conditions of life occur when a threat redefines “who we are, what we want, and what we think, reducing our ability to reflect and putting us back into an action mode in which meeting these [basic] needs entirely absorbs consciousness” (Greenspan, 1997, p. 117).

Approaches to crisis management recognize that crises are not necessarily unique events, and researchers identify several common features and characteristics of crises that serve as linchpins in developing management strategies and decision schemes, in advance. Unpredictability is a primary common attribute. Crises are random and, as noted by Campbell (1999), they “can come at any time, usually out of nowhere” (p. 9). Other attributes are ambiguity and uncertainty. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, ironically creating vagueness about correct interpretations of the “distinct phenomena” (Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997, p. 150). Researchers suggest the words should be viewed as inherently different within the context of preparing for an emergency or responding to one. Weick (1995), for example, described ambiguity as a byproduct of confusion, and uncertainty as a function of ignorance. Confusion arises when people are caught by surprise and feel momentarily startled or, at worst, physically threatened (Sniezek, Wilkins, Wadlington, & Bauman, 2002). Lipshitz and Strauss (1997)

suggested uncertainty is akin to a “sense of doubt,” manifesting itself as hesitancy, indecisiveness, and procrastination (p. 150).

Ambiguity, of course, is not unique to crises. There is a “lengthy tradition of research and theorizing” suggesting that the conditions associated with ambiguity are “endemic to organizational life” (Wallace, 2003, p. 10). March (1988), in his work about decisions in an organizational environment, makes the point that dealing with ambiguity guides the development of personal and social structures within an organization and affects efforts in building experience, identifying relevance, coping with the past, communicating with others, and contributing to the creation of myths, rituals, and cultural symbols that offset inherent organizational ambiguities. The level of ambiguity of a given situation determines the amount of effort required “to define the nature of the problem than if cues clearly specify what is wrong,” especially when there are vague cues, conflicting cues, and uninterpretable cues (Orasanu & Fischer, 2001, p. 353). In a crisis, ambiguities are intensified by the speed of events. Ambiguity becomes a “major obstacle to effective decision making” in high-stakes and tense situations where the risk are substantially escalated (Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997, p. 149).

#### ‘Social Systems’

In normal, non-crisis environments, people conduct themselves according to various environmental and structural limits. They adapt themselves to institutional structures and create symbols, sub-structures, and environmental processes for addressing goals, mediating conflicts, and working together (Cibulka, 1997). For example, there are formal and informal communication processes that guide typical interactions in organizations (Senge, et al., 1999). In terms of a school environment, Wayne K. Hoy and

Cecil G. Miskel introduced a theoretical model to illustrate the dynamics of human behavior based on the concept of an open social system (Figure 2.1). Their eighth and most recent edition of a standard reference text on school administration continued to present the model as a blend of two very different views of organizational theory: the “rational” and “scientific management” perspectives based on structure and rules, and the “human relations” and “natural system” perspectives based on human interaction (Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 17).

The social systems model provided a useful reference point from which to examine the literature on crisis management and decision making and applying such research in the context of schools districts. As discussed later in this chapter, the model influenced *part* of the conceptual framework developed for the analysis undertaken in this study. This was in addition to other analytical components, also presented later, which helped to form the conceptual framework on which this portrait of crisis management and decision making is based.

Hoy and Miskel suggest that the 10 major components of the model (Table 2.1) play a role in the behavior of people within a school organization and, thus, contribute to the behavior of the organization itself. “As a social system,” they argue, “the school is characterized by an interdependence of parts, a clearly defined population, differentiation from its environment, a complex network of social relationships, and its own unique culture” (Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 22). From that perspective, the model demonstrated a way of looking at the immensely varied interactions involved among participants in this case by examining what the authors called the “planned and unplanned aspects of organizational life” (2008, p. 23).

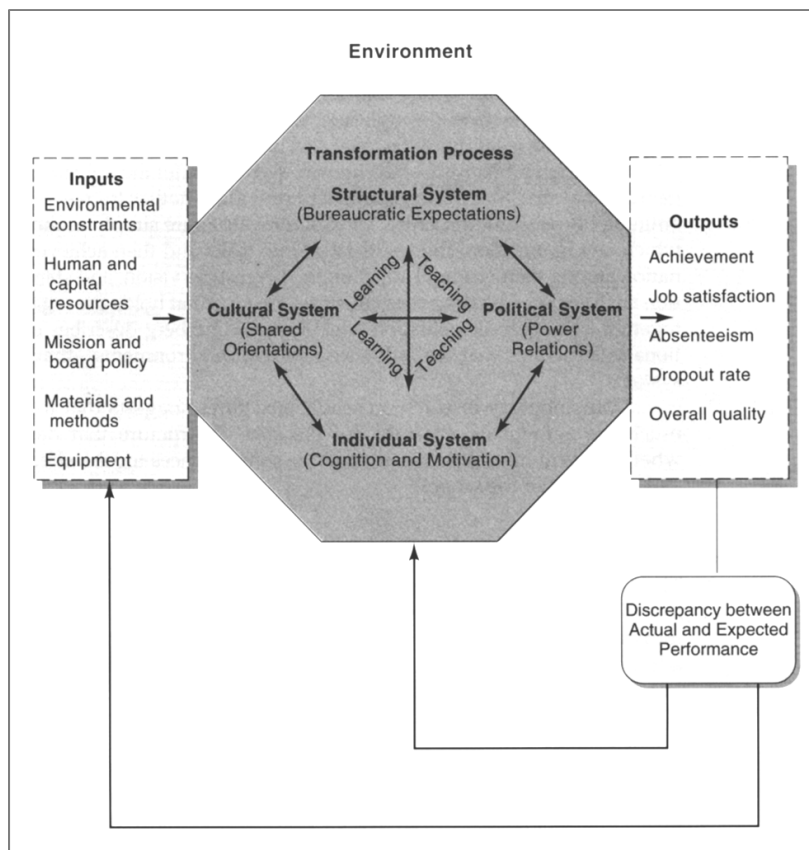


Figure 2.1 “Social System Model for Schools”

From Hoy, W. K., & Miskel, C. G. (2005). *Educational administration: Theory, research, and practice* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Figure 12.1, p. 411. Boston: McGraw Hill. Copyright 2005, The McGraw Hill Companies. Reprinted with permission.

Among the areas that interest researchers of crisis management and decision making are the training, experiences, and mental conditioning necessary to pass through the turbulence of a crisis and regain mental clarity, if not normalcy. Indeed, Weick (1996a) challenged school district leaders to act on the implications of sense making research in order to prepare for situations that threaten the life and safety of students and staff. He made the argument three years before the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999. That incident, as discussed later in this chapter, became

Table 2.1 Component Definitions for “Social System Model”

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<i>Environment</i>	External factors and influences, affecting the actions of people within the organization.
<i>Inputs</i>	Elements from outside the system that interact with the elements and processes within the organization.
<i>Structural System</i>	Formal rules and expectations that govern the function of the organization and the people within.
<i>Individual System</i>	Personal needs and beliefs of people within the organization and their understanding of their duties and responsibilities.
<i>Cultural System</i>	Shared values, norms, beliefs, and perspectives among people within an organization, both formal and informal.
<i>Political System</i>	Informal power relationships within an organization, often illegitimate, tending to personal or group interests.
<i>Technical Core: Teaching and Learning</i>	Primary purpose of a school organization; all other organizational functions are secondary.
<i>Transformational Process</i>	Conversion of inputs into outputs, on the basis of interaction with elements and processes of the organization.
<i>Outputs</i>	Products or services, influences or values, created by the transformational process.
<i>Discrepancy between Actual and Expected Performance</i>	Analysis of internal and external feedback about outputs and the processes and people who created them.

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Adapted from Hoy, W. K., & Miskel, C. G. (2008). *Educational administration: Theory, research, and practice* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.), pp. 23-33. Boston: McGraw Hill.

the defining point for school crisis management in terms of events before Columbine and those after. Nearly a decade later, the national magazine for the American Association of School Administrators featured an article on “what works” in crisis management by an individual who based his eight recommendations on “my 20-plus years experience as a

superintendent” (Joel, 2007). No references were made to formal training in crisis management or relevant research-based guidelines were made, or if training might be useful.

#### Legacy of Fire Drills

In the evolution of school crisis management, the fire drill is considered the embryonic starting point. It was “one of the first precautions” to arise from a planned response to a potential emergency in the history of organized schooling (Heath, Ryan, Dean, & Bingham, 2007, p. 208). The typical drill is designed to ensure that children and adults know how to exit a building without injury during a fire, and the procedure has been adapted for other emergencies. The drill represents the minimum level of planning and activity in terms of school safety procedures. Yet, to ensure that school leaders conduct such drills on a regular basis requires unusual procedural enforcements. In Maryland, for example, each district is required “to hold a fire drill in each public school at least 10 times each school year” and, in order to prevent principals from bunching them together (during times of good weather, for example), a drill must be held “at least once every 60 days,” with each event documented and reported to the district superintendent (“Title 7-408,” 2006, p. 291).

The absence of competent skills in school evacuation was blamed, in part, for horrific deaths among school children as far back as 1850. In that year, 40 students died and many more were injured as they panicked attempting to rush out of a New York City school as the result of a *false* alarm (Heath, et al., 2007, p. 208). Other lessons from early school fires prompted changes in building design, including designated mass exits and outside stairways. Nonetheless, such structural measures were not uniformly applied across the country less than a century ago. In 1915, the federal government found that

only 14 of the nation's 49 states required schools to have "fire escapes" of some kind ("Digest of State laws," 1916, pp. 369-371). Massive casualties from school fires continued well past the Korean War, as both private and public schools were slow to upgrade buildings and train staff on proper procedures. The last major fire (defined as causing the deaths of 10 or more people) occurred in Chicago in 1958. In that incident, known as the "Our Lady of the Angels School Fire," 92 children and three adults died (Cote, 2003, p. 25). A study of the incident by the National Fire Protection Association found that the building's structural condition, cleanliness, and life safety equipment were insufficient to prevent and contain the fire, which injured more than 100 other people. However, the study also concluded that evidence from the fire "clearly indicate that adequate steps had not been taken at this school to assure proper emergency action by the teachers in case of fire..." (Babcock & Wilson, 1959, p. 174).

In the years since the Chicago fire, changes in building design, materials, and equipment, along with adherence to typical fire drill procedures, are credited with preventing another such fire and major loss of life (Cote, 2003, p. 25). But the lessons were slow to learn. Three years after the incident, for example, fire drills were still considered somewhat of a novelty in New York City. City schools received news media coverage in 1961 for "practicing fire drills and developing routines for exiting buildings" (Heath, et al., 2007, p. 210). In the years since, architectural engineering advances were made to design buildings that facilitate a speedy exit. Complex "evacuation computer models" were used to measure the effects of "points of constriction" (such as doorways) and calculate the time necessary for people "to flow past these points and to the outside" during an emergency (Kuligowski & Peacock, 2005, p. 1). In school districts, choices



based on budgets and resources have affected the most basic public safety measures. A recent study of districts across different geographic regions found a lack of safety equipment in schools, most notably fire extinguishers (Shelton, Owens, & Song, 2009).

#### Responsibility for Care

Fire safety measures are but the tip of the legal iceberg in terms of educators' responsibilities for the welfare of students and staff. Laws governing the operation of schools in Maryland, for example, touch nearly every aspect of the typical school day, from the nutritional content of the free and reduced-priced breakfast to the educational content of the instructional program to the particle content of the indoor air (Bounds, Woolums, Bresler, Eisenberg, & O'Meally, 2006, pp. 410-411). School leaders cannot guarantee the absolute safety of students and staff at all times and under all circumstances. However, they have a "general duty of care," particularly for students, and this is "the same degree of care and supervision that a reasonably prudent parent would employ under the circumstances" (Jimerson & Furlong, 2006, p. 43). This duty is based, in large measure, on the responsibilities educators accept when they agree to teach the children of others. Their relationship with students is characterized by the concept of *in loco parentis*, a Latin phrase for "in the place of a parent," which arose from English common law and, under modern interpretations, is used to establish the basis (and often the limits) of teacher authority over their students (Alexander & Alexander, 2005, p. 433).

The duty to care arises from an educator's responsibility to protect students from foreseeable risks of harm. The duty extends in Maryland, for example, to breaking up fights among students "or other individuals," and school district staff may use "the degree of force...as reasonably necessary to prevent violence, restore order and to protect the

safety of the combatants and surrounding individuals” (“Education article,” 2006, p. 287). Under general tort, liability, and insurance issues, for example, educators are thought to be negligent when that duty is “breached by the failure to exercise the appropriate standard of care” and that failure is causally related to a student’s injury “in which there are provable damages” (Bounds, et al., 2006, p. 223).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, schools were seen as potential havens amid community tragedies and teachers were urged to protect children from the grim details of local crimes and catastrophes. An education journal at the time strongly criticized teachers who “frightened school children and caused sleep disorder” by sharing information about the massive flood that killed more than 2,200 people in the valley town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania (“Disasters,” 1889). Sixty-two years later, the modern notion of shelter in place emerged as schools in American cities initiated programs to protect “the emotional and physical safety” of students against foreign invasion, and as teachers in Washington, D.C., for example, planned “lessons on what to do in cases of atomic attacks” (“Many school systems,” 1951).

School safety and security measures have increased dramatically in the ensuing half-century. School principals now make decisions over “which security measures to implement, including hiring law enforcement officers, using metal detectors or security cameras, locking entrances and exits during the school day, and using staff supervision in hallways” (Bauer, Guerino, K.L., & Tang, 2008, p. 10). They have been told to be experts in threat assessment and the potential physical and emotional harm (R. A. Fein, et al., 2002). They must be cognizant of the threat of biological attacks, car bombings, suicide attacks, and military-equipped intruders (Brickman, Jones, & Groom, 2004).

Their schools are no longer theoretical targets of terrorism. In 2004, a school in Russia was stormed and taken over by terrorists (Chivers, 2004).

Closer to home, yearly reports detail the extent of violence in schools (Planty, et al., 2008), crimes in schools (Noonan & Vavra, 2007), and violent deaths in school-associated settings (Dinkes, Kemp, Baum, & Snyder, 2009). In 2005, for example, approximately 80% of schools nationally experienced one violent incident.

#### Post-Columbine Era

The pivotal change in the concept of protecting students occurred after the shootings at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. The incident resulted in the deaths of 12 students and a teacher, the wounding of many others, and the suicides of the two student attackers. Jane Hammond, then the superintendent of the Jefferson County school district that included the high school, reflected on the event 10 years later:

The Columbine tragedy galvanized the country around safety with a new focus on prevention and intervention in addition to response. We learned the importance of developing a systemic safety plan thoughtfully with parent, staff and community input. When effectively implemented, the safety plan shifts focus from perfunctory responsibilities to processes where students and staff members know their roles and how they contribute to the safety of the school (Hammond, 2009, p. 16).

The findings of a Colorado state review panel two years after the incident concluded that “it is fair to observe that neither law enforcement command personnel nor school administrators were well prepared to counter the violence that erupted” (*The Report*, 2001, p. 112). The report noted that the incident sparked changes in school crisis management preparations elsewhere in the nation and urged schools and school districts in Colorado to make improvements in inter-agency planning and training at the local and districtwide levels in school crisis management, including school security,

communications, incident prevention, student counseling and intervention, and police response tactics.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, for example, school security changes prompted by Columbine occurred within a few months of the incident, with an external review in the summer of 1999 and the initiation of planning with police on new assault strategies to protect and rescue students threatened by an intruder in schools. The changes included the introduction of new Code Red and Code Blue security procedures that sought to impose highly restrictive measures to protect and shelter students and staff within schools. Elsewhere in Maryland, school districts were encouraged almost immediately after Columbine to develop districtwide crisis management plans.<sup>4</sup>

On April 23, 1999, three days after the attacks, the state superintendent of schools, Nancy Grasmick, sent local superintendents a memorandum conveying a draft guide on developing a crisis management plan for schools (Grasmick, 1999). The crisis management components recommended by the state included the identification of “key members of any crisis management team,” assignment of “designated backups” for team members, designation of “a chain of command,” development of a “flip-book versions of their crisis plans” as a quick reference source, development of “an emergency kit” for readily accessible equipment, information, and supplies, and practicing “a Code Red alert

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<sup>4</sup> Other Maryland state actions to address underlying causes of the Columbine incident, such as bullying and harassment, were also initiated. This included the Interagency Steering Committee for Safe Schools, which made recommendations in August 2000 that were designed “to ensure that every school in Maryland had a crisis management plan in place,” recalled Chuck Buckler of the Maryland State Department of Education (Personal communications, January 20, 2009).

to react to a crisis” (*Developing*, 1999, pp. 5-13).<sup>5</sup> Those same procedures were identified as components of crisis management plans implemented in Montgomery County over the following three years

#### Incident Command

One of the central changes in school security that emerged from the Columbine incident was the concept of incident command systems for the inter-agency management of school crises. This was the type of system adopted by the Jefferson County school district in Colorado, which supervised Columbine High School. A review panel reporting to the Colorado governor later urged the inclusion of all schools and school districts statewide in inter-agency training with law enforcement and rescue personnel on incident command procedures for emergencies. It specifically urged that “each school’s emergency plan must be clear about which school personnel will carry out which functions in the course of a crisis” (*The Report*, 2001, p. 114). The command system was based on models more commonly used among fire and law enforcement.

A typical incident command system reflects a highly structured management organization, resembling a military-style hierarchy, in which personnel work under a unified leadership arrangement with specific roles and responsibilities in response to an emergency. There is an incident commander, a command team, and others who serve in support functions. The concept arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s after studies of a series of disastrous fires in California identified problems in coordination and

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<sup>5</sup> In the draft guide were two exhibits from Montgomery County as “sample formats” of security measures, including a “bomb threat checklist card” and the regulation on “weapons on MCPS property” (*Developing*, 1999, p. 14). There were no references to districtwide plans from any other district.

collaboration “when a multitude of agencies responded to the same incident” (Molino, 2006, p. 5).

In 2000, a report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recommended the inclusion of law enforcement specialists to assist school districts in crisis planning nationwide. The report also urged the training of school staff “in the fundamentals of the threat assessment,” as well as improved training and staffing devoted to adolescent development, violence, and related mental health issues (M. E. O’Toole, 2000, p. 32).<sup>6</sup> The recommendations urged school leaders to be diligent and proactive in responding to the inherent exposure of schools to violence.

In the fall of 2001, the Montgomery County Public Schools adopted the incident command concept as the central basis of a new emergency response plan for schools and the district. The new system, which the district implemented about eight months before the sniper incident in October 2002, was patterned after the models developed by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA).

Also in the months prior to the sniper incident of October 2002, the Maryland State Department of Education actively encouraged the development of plans by school districts and involved local school district staff in the preparation of model plans, including staff from Montgomery County. By the following year, in October 2003, the department published a 173-page guide on emergency planning that included a suggested configuration of an incident command system (*Emergency planning guidelines*, 2003, p. 11). In the state’s guide, the configuration reflected the operations of an educational

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<sup>6</sup> Similar recommendations were made in May 2002 in a report by the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education, which urged specific training for both police and school officials (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Moszeleski, 2002, p. 41).

organization and incorporated school-level representation on the districtwide command team (Figure 2.2). The guide noted, for example:

Lessons learned from September 11 in New York revealed that principals must be empowered to make decisions without consulting with central office. The arrival of first responders may result in the incident command being transitioned to a unified command. Unified command means that designated individuals from one or more response agencies will work jointly with the LSS or school commander to carry out the response (*Emergency planning guidelines*, 2003, p. 11).

In December 2004, the Maryland State Board of Education adopted a regulation, titled Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) 13A.02.02, Emergency Plans, which required school districts to maintain written emergency plans developed in collaboration with police and other safety organizations, engage in an annual series of drills, and provide annual assurances to the state superintendent of schools that certifies compliance with the regulation. According to a department representative, the original 2003 emergency planning document remained the agency's main source of written guidance for schools and the COMAR reference remains the state's existing legal requirement (Personal communications," 2009). In 2006, a legislative-appointed Task Force on School Safety recommended that school districts receive professional assistance from local emergency management agencies and law enforcement personnel in "crisis response team development," "crisis management planning," and "emergency operations planning," among other areas ("Report from the task force," 2007, p. 2).

#### Federal Guidance

In May 2003, the U.S. Department of Education introduced an incident command system as a central component of crisis planning for schools and communities, noting the importance of emergency preparations because "school districts in this country may be touched either directly or indirectly by a crisis of some kind at any time" (*Practical*

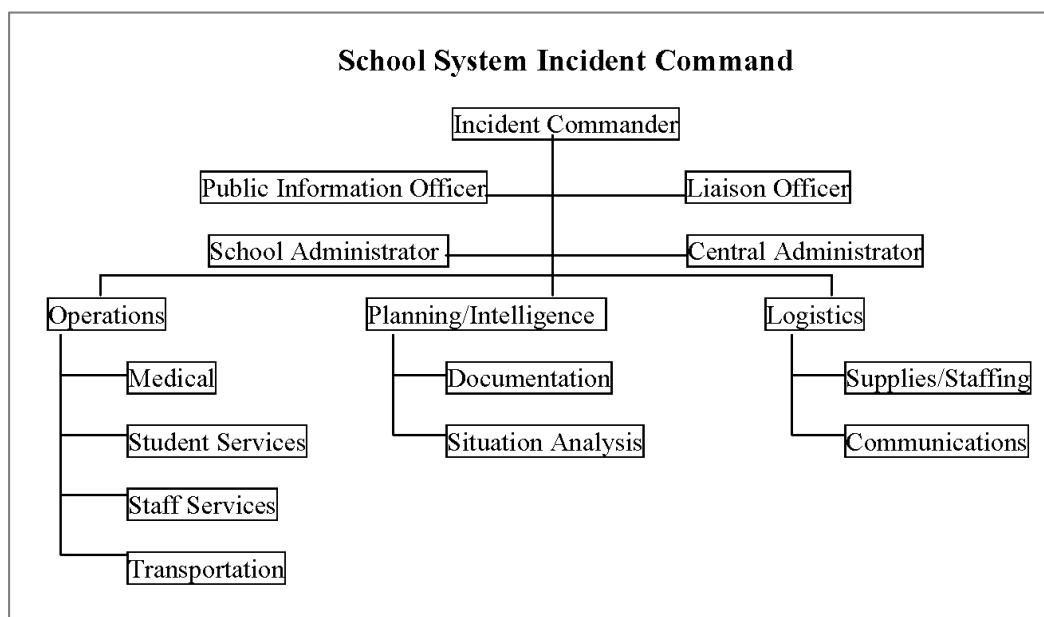


Figure 2.2 Maryland Recommended Crisis Management Model

Illustration from *Emergency planning guidelines for local school systems and schools (2003)*. Maryland State Department of Education. Retrieved March 9, 2009, at <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org>.

information, 2003, p. 1.2). The 146-page guide, which was marginally revised in 2007, provided the first national crisis planning resource for schools, with detailed information on the management of crises, their mitigation and prevention, preparedness of staff, procedures for responding, and steps for recovery. The guide also provided sources of additional information at the federal, state, and local levels.<sup>7</sup>

The incident command system recommended in the federal guide was based on the FEMA model. It described emergency situations in which police and rescue personnel, such as first responders, take command of all response activities. The incident commander was the individual who “manages the entire incident and will very often be

<sup>7</sup> Montgomery County Public Schools was identified in the planning guide as a source of further information on emergency preparedness (*Practical information*, 2003, p. A.3).



an emergency responder rather than a school administrator” (*Practical information*, 2003, p. 6.19). For other incident command functions, the guide underscored less the leadership of school personnel and more the deference to, and outright replacement by, others:

Although emergency responders may be managing the incident, there is still much for school staff to do, including managing the care of students and the supplies and staffing needs of the situation. While the [incident command system] calls for school staff to serve in all of the critical functions, be prepared for the incident commander to designate outside personnel to manage these responsibilities (*Practical information*, 2003, p. 6.19).

The same emphasis on external agencies was reflected in the descriptions of the other functions of the incident command team (public information, safety, liaison, operations, planning and intelligence, and logistics). None of the descriptions referenced broader responsibilities associated with school crisis management and decision making.

A change in emphasis, however, was evident in the on-line training offered to schools. For example, the “primary audience” of the introductory course included “kindergarten through high school personnel” and the course provided role playing exercises specific to school-based situations (*Introduction to the incident command system*, 2008).

#### Funding Requirement

In 2006, the department began requiring applicants for federal emergency preparedness grants to implement the components of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) as a condition of funding. This represented a fundamental shift in the federal role in school crisis management. Earlier requirements under the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act of 1994 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 obligated school districts receiving such funds to provide assurances that a crisis

management plan was in place. Under NIMS, the components for school crisis management plans are much more prescriptive and the requirements extensive.

The NIMS components were established in 2004 under the Department of Homeland Security as part of the federal government's "uniform system for managing domestic incidents" (*NIMS*, 2006, p. 1). The components include the requirement that each participating school and school district establish an incident command system and engage in training on the development and implementation of the system as a form of crisis management (Figure 2.3). The required training is provided through online courses presented by FEMA's Emergency Management Institute.

Under the federal funding requirement, the incident command system was identified for use by all participating schools and higher education institutions receiving funding "for managing all emergency incidents and pre-planned school and campus events" (*NIMS implementation*, 2008). All federal departments and agencies are required to implement the NIMS components, as are any state and local government units and community and non-profit organizations that receive federal funding for emergency assistance planning and programs. The Department of Homeland Security has encouraged the components as a standard for all schools, regardless of funding source. The goal is to create a nationwide network of similarly prepared agencies and organizations as part of an emergency response matrix that "unites all response teams across all of the participating jurisdictions" at any time and place an emergency may occur (*NIMS implementation*, 2008).

There has been no study published on the effectiveness of the incident command system for schools. The Department of Education described the NIMS components as

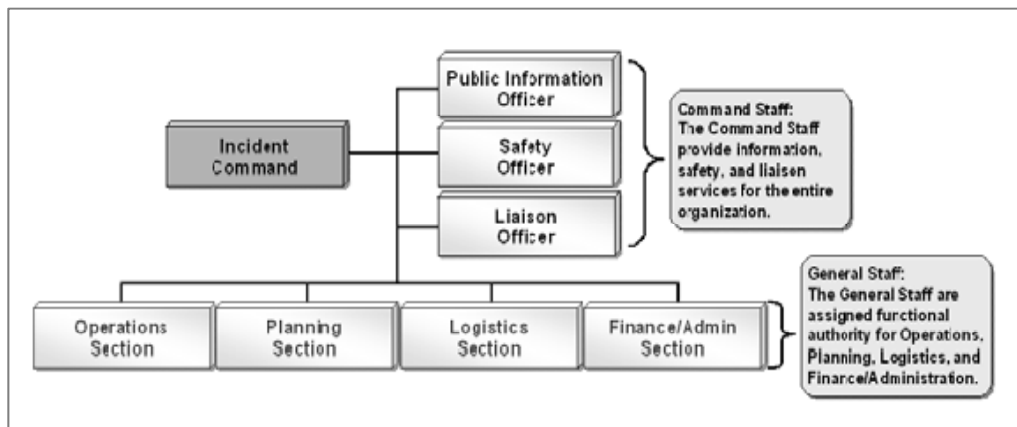


Figure 2.3 Federal Incident Command Organization for Schools

From *Unit 4: Incident Commander and Command Staff Functions* (2009). In *Introduction to the Incident Command System, I-100, for Schools*. Federal Emergency Management Administration. Retrieved March 8, 2009, from <http://training.fema.gov>.

“reflecting proven practices” of the participating federal agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, FEMA, and the U.S. Fire Administration, among others (NIMS, 2006). However, the standardized use of an incident command system has drawn criticism. Researchers who conducted a meta-study of literature about the federal use of the incident command system raised questions about whether the imposition of the model was appropriate on a national basis, given the diversity of community characteristics and emergency situations. The analysis cited the federal response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans as well as the recovery operations after the terrorist attacks in New York City as examples in which one size does not fit all. “The command and control mode does not currently, and given the social complexity, likely never will work for all phases of disaster operations,” the researchers concluded (Buck, Trainor, & Aquirre, 2006, p. 2001).

## Mental Health Concerns

Mental health professionals were not typically involved in the leadership decisions associated with crisis management. The lack of involvement goes back to at least the early 1990s as school districts began planning more formalized crisis response and intervention activities in schools (Poland, 1994). School staff involved in the mental health services, including school psychologists, school counselors, pupil personnel workers, and other professionals, participated in the responses to a crisis but not in positions that expressly included them in other aspects of school crisis management.

The lack of such a defined leadership role for mental health professionals was evident in the recommended incident command team configurations offered by the U.S. Department of Education through March 2009. A review of the department's website conducted for this study revealed no provisions in the department's documents for a formal leadership role for mental health professionals. The review also included the NIMS components and training, plus earlier department documents on school crisis management.

In the education department's descriptions of crisis management functions, mental health services and professionals were identified as important components of a school crisis response, but not as part of the command functions. This was made particularly clear in the distinction among training components under the required NIMS protocols, in which "critical personnel" with command responsibilities were to receive twice as much training (in terms of required courses) as "general personnel," which covered various school-based and support staff, including such positions as "counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists" (*NIMS implementation*, 2008, p. 21). The instructor's guide for the

introductory course on the incident command system contained one reference to “mental health,” which appeared in the description of the “potential responsibilities” for the crisis intervention team (*Instructors guide*, 2007, p. 5.19).

There were no other references to well-being, traumatic stress, counseling and other terms and phrases typically associated with mental health problems and issues in response to emergency situations, based on an electronic word search.

Providers of mental health services have a pervasive role in school crisis interventions and responses. The 2006 School Health Policies and Programs Study, a questionnaire administered every six years to a nationally representative sample of school districts by the Centers for Disease Control, found that 94% of school districts had provided “counseling after a natural disaster or other emergency or crisis situation” in the previous year (Brener, Weist, Adelman, Taylor, & Vernon-Smiley, 2007, p. 495). Post-crisis counseling was identified as the second most prevalent provision of mental health services in schools, behind crisis intervention for personal problems.

There is extensive literature on the provision of crisis intervention support in schools, including proposed structures that contribute to the management of crises. For example, Knox and Roberts (2005) described a model of crisis intervention that builds from school-level crisis teams to district-level teams and other supports to regional level assistance involving community-based mental health providers, with all three levels of response involved in primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of crisis intervention. Jimerson, Brock, and Pletcher (2005) recommended an integrated model of school crisis preparation and crisis intervention as a way of improving the response and collaboration

of mental health providers during an emergency, especially events involving many staff with different levels and types of expertise, training, and experiences.

Nickerson, Brock, and Reeves (2006) proposed placing a mental health professional, such as a school psychologist, on an incident command team as a “mental health officer” (p. 66). They recommended the position as a direct advisor to the incident commander, along with the typical alignment of other command staff, such as the positions for public information, safety, and liaison with external agencies. Other researchers have noted that, despite the lack of formal leadership positions, mental health providers occupy unique positions with influential, if not positional, authority during the onset of a crisis and response. One article noted, for example, that “school counselors can expect to take on leadership roles in times of crises due to their expertise” and “effective school counselors have found subtle ways to support and counsel formal leaders” (A. H. Fein, Carlisle, & Isaacson, 2008). In 2008, the National Association of School Principals released a training program on school crisis prevention and intervention that placed a mental health professional among the key members of a crisis management team (Reeves, Brock, & Cowan, 2008).

#### Welfare of Children

Schools by their very nature remain especially vulnerable to the parental and community anxiety that terrorism and community violence create about the safety of children (Greene, Barrios, Blair, & Kolbe, 2004; Lindle, 2008; Vossekuil, et al., 2002), as well as levels of traumatic fear (Wendell, 2002) and posttraumatic stress disorders (Brock & Cowan, 2004). Schools, already well recognized as incubators for the common cold,

are also identified as seedbeds for pandemics of catastrophic proportions (McGiboney & Fretwell, 2007).

In 2004, the National Advisory Committee on Children and Terrorism recommended more deliberate steps in the preparation of schools for large-scale traumatic emergencies. The committee reported that “no region of the country is safe from the impact of terror,” citing the sniper shootings in October 2002 in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., as an example of domestic terrorism (Greene, et al., 2004, p. 39). The report noted the central role of schools in the well being of entire communities, not only as a gathering place for children and a source of teaching and learning but also due the responsibilities assumed by school staff on behalf of parents, keeping their children safe and providing shelter, health care, and nutrition. Schools were described as serving as a community resource for adults and families, including recovery services after a traumatic event. The report urged special attention to schools in the national, regional, and local planning for emergencies, identifying schools as key delivery points for physical as well as mental health intervention and support. “No place else in the community has access to such a high percentage of children and adolescents, and, through them, adult family members,” the report said (Greene, et al., 2004, p. 41).

The report referenced not just the physical impact of emergencies but also the threat to the mental well being of children who experienced a traumatic event. Research on the effects of traumatic events on children and adults is extensive, but there is little in the way of literature on the traumatic effects of emergencies in school districts. Studies regarding the effects of the terrorist attacks on September 2001 on students and school staff in New York City suggested that the crisis impacted the ability of some teachers and

parents to care for children and may have inhibited the delivery of services (Brown & Bobrow, 2004). Serious mental health trauma may have impacted as many as one of every four students in the school district, especially girls (Hoven, et al., 2005).

There were no published studies regarding the traumatic effects of the sniper incident in October 2002 on public school students and staff in the immediately affected areas of Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. However, there were studies that reported high levels of traumatic stress among students at four private schools (Westerman, Augustyn, & Westerman, 2003), among staff at a military hospital (Grieger, Fullerton, Ursano, & Reeves, 2003), and among women living within five miles of shooting sites (Scheldren, et al., 2006), as well as other behavioral changes among women living near the shooting sites (Zivotofsky & Koslowsky, 2005). Another study reported higher stress among patients of area mental health providers (Cabello, 2003; Grados & Alvord, 2003; Peele, 2004).

#### Lack of Preparation

Studies point to a lack of preparation and readiness to address violence when it occurs among schools and colleges in the United States. A non-government study seven years after Columbine and five years after the terrorist attacks in 2001 reported the lack of school readiness for a mass-casualty incident (Graham, Shirm, Liggin, Aitken, & Dick, 2006). Other studies subsequently described problems and inconsistent preparation for school safety and management among school districts in specific states and jurisdictions, including Los Angeles County, California (Kano, Ramirez, Ybarra, Frias, & Bourque, 2007), as well as Massachusetts (Goldman, 2008), and Idaho (*Safe and secure schools*, 2008).



In April 2007, a Virginia state review panel faulted the campus administration and police force at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) for alleged crisis management mistakes in connection with an incident in which a student shot and killed 32 students and faculty and wounded 13 others before killing himself (*Report of the review panel, 2007*). The report criticized the university administration on several aspects of its crisis management efforts, including communications and mental health services.

After the Virginia Tech incident, a federal report by three members of the President's cabinet—the secretaries of Health and Human Services, Education, and Justice—said that “many” of the nation's schools were prepared for security threats (Leavitt, Spellings, & Gonzales, 2007). At the same time, a study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported widespread lack of training, equipment, and readiness in crisis management among schools nationally (Ashby, 2007). Congressional reaction to the GAO report included criticism of federal emergency management efforts by the chairperson of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security (Thompson, 2007).

### *Context of Crisis Decision Making*

The literature on crisis management and decision making describes the process of making a decision under emergency conditions as best done with prior training—not only in the topic of the crisis decision but in the processes of making the decision. Researchers place a crisis decision at the extreme end-point of a decision-making continuum. At the other end are simple, discretionary decisions. From there, the

continuum escalates to high-stakes, rapid decisions because a “severe situation demands immediate action” (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976, p. 251).

In between those two points are the processes of the human mind, which Herbert A. Simon argued are both “capable of dealing with only one or a few things at a time” and being able to address complex issues quickly by “recognizing familiar features of the problem situation” (1978a, pp. 503-504).

Simon’s theories of problem solving and decision making are well documented in the literature on organizational administration, dating to his “seminal” publication in 1945 of *Administrative Behavior* (as cited in Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995, p. 38). In that work, Simon introduced the concept of “bounded rationality” to describe the practical limitations within which administrative decisions and policy are made (as cited in Dunn, 2004, p. 51). Simon later expanded on the concept and suggested that people act within the bounds of their own personal knowledge and the limits of their surroundings. “In complex situations,” wrote Simon (1978b, p. 8) “there is likely to be a considerable gap between the real environment of a decision (the world as God or some other omniscient observer see it) and the environment as the actors perceive it” (p. 8). The concept that human behavior reflects personal perception is fundamental in the research of decisions arising amid complex and challenging circumstances, such as crisis situations involving international politics and the threat of war (Allison & Zalikow, 1999).

The introduction of bounded rationality by Simon also accompanied his concept of the phases in rational decision making, including the use of intelligence, design, and choice to identify problems and issues that would guide the selection of actions (Nutt, 1992, p. 520). The rational decision maker concept underscores the classical views of

executive decision making, in which decisions are viewed as an “essentially orderly and rational” process with defined and isolated problems, gathered information, and presented alternatives, with an established implementation and ending point (Burns, 1978, p. 379). This characterization is linked to the “prevailing mythology” of organizational managers as rational people “who plan, organize, coordinate, and control activities of subordinates” (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 265).

Within the concept of rationality, however, Simon suggested that there are acceptable limits to information gathering and that, eventually, a person has to make a decision based on the best information in hand. Simon called this “satisficing,” in reference to the acceptance of a *satisfactory* decision and the recognition that that such a decision will *suffice* for the given set of limits (as cited in Dunn, 2004, p. 51). Another idea about incremental decision making, called “muddling through,” recognized that sometimes complex problems are resolved incrementally based on lessons learned from past decisions and “intimate knowledge” that only the decision maker may know, if not anyone else (Lindblom, 1959, p. 88).

#### Not the Ideal

What accounts for decision making, however, is far from perfect. Weick (1995) cites research showing that decision making is “often inconsistent, unstable, and externally driven,” with the “past notoriously unreliable as a guide to the present or future” in which “political and symbolic considerations play a central, perhaps overriding, role in decision making” (p. 106). This is sometimes also described in the literature with the metaphor of a garbage can. Individuals trying to make sense of the

ambiguities between actual and expected events gather everything into a jumble and mix it together—the preverbal garbage in a can (March, 1988, p. 13).

The garbage can model recognizes that rarely in real life are decisions reached in a truly rational and straightforward fashion. Indeed, Hoy & Miskel (2008) suggest that the basic feature of the model, which they do *not* recommend as a process to emulate, is just the opposite of orderly decision making and, instead, benefits institutions and individuals who need “ways of doing things for which there are no good reasons” even occasionally needing to “act before they think” (p. 343). Or, as suggested elsewhere, the idea of unruly decision making “fits well with other theories that emphasize the disorderly nature of school administration” (Slater & Boyd, 1999, p. 327).

In his analysis of decision making, Weick (2001a) described the garbage can model as the reaction of decision makers to the unwieldy “streams of people, choices, solutions, and problems that intermittently converge, more for reasons of timing, than logic” (p. 14). The concept also is called the “primordial soup” of decision making, in which problems and solutions are mixed together “in continuous flux” (Dunn, 2004, p. 44). The metaphor of “mud wrestling” is used by Mawhinney (1994) to describe a similar approach to untangling the mix of ambiguity and complexity in the dynamics of policy decision making (p. 2-3).

#### Rational Decisions

There are a variety of models of rational decision making. For example, Hoy and Miskel (2005) describe four basic models: “classical,” which has a heavy reliance on theory to drive decision making; “administrative,” which relies on both theory and experience, with realistic assessments offsetting the “naïve” aspects of theory;

“incremental,” which uses successive comparisons of options and past actions to reduce or eliminate the need for theory altogether; and “mixed scanning,” which combines theory, experience, and successive comparisons (pp. 300-315).

Ultimately, however, Hoy and Miskel (2005) suggest that a “contingency approach” in decision making—in which decision makers pick the right strategy for the situation and make decisions based on expectations of making the best of a situation (“adaptive satisficing” in reference to Simon’s earlier work)—is the most appropriate for complex tasks, including conflicts (p. 315-317). In this approach, Hoy and Miskel (2008) suggest three basic questions for selecting the best decision making model (p. 342):

- Is there sufficient information to define a satisfactory outcome?
- Is there time to engage in a comprehensive search?
- How important is the decision?

Both “satisficing” and “muddling through” are important concepts in contrast to the ideal that perfect decisions can be made if people maximize their abilities, wait for the right moment, and act with indisputable precision. This notion of “maximization” is based on concepts of comprehensive rationality, in which the decision maker is “assumed to have a utility function that consistently ranks all the alternatives the actor faces and to choose the alternative that achieves the highest utility” (Allison & Zalikow, 1999, p. 20).

The reality is quite different. Most crisis decisions aim for satisfactory rather than optimal results under challenging conditions that create ambiguity and uncertainty. All decision makers are affected by the “inescapable limitations of knowledge and computational ability” regarding human conceptions of a given situation, problem, or issue (Allison & Zalikow, 1999, p. 20). As Burns (1978) noted, even the day-to-day decision making of organizational executives does “not take place in a vacuum...but in

the context of political and psychological forces, rational and irrational, operating through it” (p. 379). In fact, the concept of bounded rationality includes the possibility of seemingly irrational behavior. Allison and Zelikow (1999) suggest that irrational decision making based on misperceptions may, in actuality, be entirely rational because the decisions are based on the “values, beliefs, and stereotypes of the decision maker, irrespective of the accuracy of his views” (p. 20).

#### Sensemaking

Studies of organizational decision making suggest the relationship between action and decision often defines the very culture of the organization. For example, the book *Ambiguity and Choice in Organizations* (1976) by James March and Johan Olsen (as cited in Allison and Zelikow, 1999) described the culture of the Pentagon as interwoven with an emphasis on heroic action and decision, with each action representing a decision and the decisions providing “powerful tokens of identity and rules for future action” (p. 154).

Action and decisions, therefore, are part of the sensemaking in organizations and the reaction to inherent ambiguity. Weick (1995) notes that “the basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs” (p. 106). The sensemaking involving decision making occurs on two levels. First, there is sensemaking as a *result* of making decisions and restoring order (Weick, 2001a). Second, there is sensemaking *within* decision making, in which a decision maker relies on the recognition of familiar patterns to make a choice. This concept refers back to the work of Simon (1978), whose insights have been cited by Klein (2003) to explain “how people can make effective decisions without conducting a deliberate analysis” because they can recognize patterns

and cues, anticipate goals and expectations, and implement routines and actions based on their “sense of a situation” (pp. 22-23).

Crisis decision making is highly subjective and deeply personal. For example, the central decisions by American political leaders during the Cuban Missile Crisis emerged not necessarily from a planned, objective strategy but from a very subjective process of argument and reflection among a variety participants whose opinions were continually “influenced by and validated against the course of events” (Grattan, 2004, p. 65).

Nonetheless, the subjectivity in decision making is not necessarily irrational. On the contrary, subjectivity can be rational and built into the planned process of addressing strategic expectations. This is essentially the concept of “subjectively expected utility,” a mathematics and economics model of rational decision making that assumes that “decisions should be reached by summing over the set of alternatives, the utility of each alternative weighted by the subjective probability of its occurrence” (Crozier & Ranyard, 1997, p. 5). The primary variation of this model, “Prospect Theory,” suggests that personal decisions are more than just subjective—they are “reference dependent” to the probable outcome of decisions in a given situation (Kahneman, 2003, p. 704). This is what Weick (1995) argued in suggesting that “perceptions matter” among people as they react to their specific environment, events, and dispositions (p. 86). An individual’s own strategies for making choices are “highly contingent” upon situational factors, especially perceptions of time and problem complexity, according to the conclusions of Kerstholt and Raaijmakers (1997, p. 205) in their review of two decades of studies on decision processes.

Subjectivity in decision making is all about personal insights. People bring their own beliefs, interpretations, and reactions to events and make decisions accordingly. High profile and tragic events can trigger fearful reactions, for example. In one study, for example, researchers found that personal fear of terrorism and conservative views about safety increased among a sample of college students in Italy immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States, despite no such apparent threat in Italy itself (K. Sacco, et al., 2003, p. 1125).

The highly negative news affects subjectivity more so than similar news that has occurred long ago. This is called the “recency effect” that Hertwig, Barron, Weber and Erev (2004) identified in studies of risky choices. They found that the recency of negative events, not the “objective probability” of the event ever occurring again, is an important factor in making personal decisions involving elements of risk (p. 535).

Sometimes, it may be just a matter of how a crisis problem is presented before the decisions are even made. For example, Kuhberger (1995) concluded in a study using a mock disease scenario that people will reverse their decisions based on different interpretations or framing of options and presentations of the same problem (p. 230). In his later work, Kuhberger (1998) reviewed 15 years of research on problem and decision framing and found that people are influenced primarily by “semantic manipulations” in the way a problem situation is described, as well as contextual and individual factors that may influence their perspective (p. 453). *Beyond Ambiguity*

Crises create a range of contextual factors that reflect complexity of the incident, a mass of new information, loss of control, pressure on routine decision making, new responsibilities, and psychological challenges from stress and irrationality (Rosenthal, et



al., 2001, pp. 18-19). The success of a decision maker in this situation is dependent on how they make sense of what is happening, often relying on their own “mental models” of previously successful challenges and training “not some bag of tools or techniques, that determine their ability to deal with the unknowable” (Stacey, 1992, p. 19).

A crisis, therefore, requires that decisions are made about what people can handle, absorb, and understand within the circumstances of the events. These are both sense making and communication actions. Addressing these needs requires an understanding how people think, what they assume, and the generalizations they make about what they are seeing, hearing, and feeling (Senge, 1990, p. 18). It also includes what Senge (1990) referred to as “learningful conversations” that balance listening and talking, acquiring feedback and providing responses, in situations where “people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others” (p. 18). Effective crisis decision making recognizes that this profoundly human side of crisis events involves “improvising and interacting with key stakeholders so that individual and collective sense making, shared meaning, and roles are reconstructed” (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 66).

#### Limited Time

Crisis decision making is often characterized as extremely time sensitive. Morris (1977) found the “chief effect of time pressures is to force one into making decisions with something less the amount of information which would otherwise be desired” (p. 213). When time pressure is extreme, the decision makers are thrust out of normal conditions and “must accede to situational dominance and instinctive or routinized responses” (Rosenthal, et al., 2001, p. 7). Klein (1997) argues that time pressure forces people to make decisions based on whatever experience they have (p. 340) and that such

experiences can contribute to a level of expertise in specific problem-solving skills that people can learn and practice (p. 341).

Based on a review of effort and accuracy studies, Maule and Edland (1997) suggest that the pressure of time can be mitigated by a constant “appraisal process,” especially in decisions affected by deadlines (pp. 201-202). Similarly, in her studies of fast-paced decision making in microcomputer companies, Eisenhardt (1990) found that people can be trained to adapt to speedy decision making by learning skills for “accelerating information processing, building up the confidence to decide, and yet maintaining the cohesiveness of the group” (p. 53). This process was later refined as strategic decision making that emerges when participants “develop collective intuition, accelerate constructive conflict, maintain decision pacing, and avoid politics” (Eisenhardt, 1999, p. 65).

Time-sensitive decision skills are valued in private industries where “extraordinary management” situations require decision makers to use innovative strategies that result from “an exploratory, experimental process based on intuition and reasoning by analogy” within the given context of a specific and challenging problem (Stacey, 1992, p. 14). For example, in hospital clinics, doctors are attempting to use strategies of “evidenced-based medicine” to assist clinicians, educators, and administrators in analyzing what they actually see, not what they expect to see (Falzer, 2004, p. 87).

In complex situations involving high variability and ambiguity, it may be necessary to make a decision quickly, ready or not, and take action in order to stabilize the situation. Weick (2001a, p. 50) argues that in these circumstances the inherent delay

in rational decision making can dissipate the energy necessary to carry out the eventual decision and can make a challenging situation worse.

Taking action of some kind is the inherent goal of decision making, and understanding the pressure to act is important in the analysis of decision making. Nutt (1992, p. 519) suggests that, during the formulation of a decision, the decision maker receives a flow of information, both from the formal means of a decision support system and from informal means such as colleagues, all directed at taking action. In making policy decisions, for example, the role of action is ever present, with the decisions seen as a choice of alternatives weighed through a hierarchal process of possible causes for action, plausible causes, and ultimately, actionable causes (Dunn, 2004, pp. 103-104).

Inherent in this and other forms of rational decision making models is the ideal that deliberate choices are being made based on some type of weighing of options in a predictable manner. Rational action is not only based on the “assumption that action constitutes more than a simple, purposive choice of a unitary agent” but also that decision makers will be influenced by the need for “consistency” in terms of goals, objectives, action, and principles (Allison & Zalikow, 1999, p. 17).

However, it is the prevalence of such models and other forms of “conventional definitions of decision making” that unnecessarily narrow the options of school administrators (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995, p. 39). Instead, decision making should be seen multi-dimensionally. Bolman and Deal (1997), for example, categorize decision making through contextual frames that recognize multiple realities in an organization—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic—and influence a decision maker’s orientation towards rationality, inclusiveness, power, and rituals (pp. 266-267).

Research has analyzed the intellectual and physical processes at play and the actions taken in response, particularly among organizational leaders. Rosenthal, Boin, and Comfort (2001), in their early work about crisis management, noted that crises offer both challenges and opportunities for leaders precisely because they must use all of their skills in “a period of upheaval and collective stress” that disrupts the known reality in “unexpected, often inconceivable ways” (p. 6).<sup>8</sup>

#### Problem Solving

Literature about decisions that occur in solving large-scale policy problems can inform the study of the decision making, including crisis decision making. For example, a policy decision reflects not one act but “a series of interdependent activities arrayed through time” to address an issue or a problem, and these activities begin with a process for agenda setting, policy formation, and policy adoption (Dunn, 2004, p. 44). The political aspect of policy decisions is helpful in understanding how decision makers are subjected to political and theoretical perspectives that influence what happens and to whom at each stage of the policy process, particularly at the problem definition stage (Kingdon, 1995, p. 110). For some researchers, the problem definition stage, along with how the decision agenda is set and the policy itself is formulated, are seen as the most important elements of the policy process (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004, p. 64).

Policy decisions rely heavily on procedural processes that are consistent with rational decision making and reflect a positivistic view that policy making should follow

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<sup>8</sup> *Note:* The work of school superintendents is described as already stressful. In a 2006 survey on the status of school superintendents, 44% of respondents reported experiencing “considerable stress” and 15% reported “very great stress” in their jobs (Glass & Franceschini, 2007, p. 48). Inexperience also was a factor, with nearly a third reported as being a superintendent for four years or less.

a deliberate and predictable operational pathway, notwithstanding any political bumps along the way. The rationality of the process is defined, in part, by the expectation that certain procedural elements will occur. In fact, Dye (2002) uses the “process model” as a helpful tool in describing the various activities involved in policy making (pp. 15-16).

Context also matters. The research in policy making helps illustrate this point, especially since crisis decision making in an organization, such as a school district, is tantamount to fast-speed policy making. For example, in the work by McDonnell & Elmore (1991, p. 173), highly complex and contentious decisions in policy making were found to be framed not just by “how a policy problem is defined” (the political context) but also the “resources and constraints policy makers face” (the institutional context, plus governmental capacity, fiscal resources, political support or opposition, information, and past policy choices).

But policy making, like decision making, may ultimately be judged as successful not in how decisions are made but in how they are put into practice. For example, McLaughlin (1991) suggests that the success of a policy rests in the implementation stage where “the consequences of even the best planned, best supported, and most promising policy initiatives depend finally on what happens as individuals throughout the policy system interpret and act on their own” (p. 186). Here, decision making results from the interplay of people making their own choices, multiplied by number of people and interpretations involved. In describing the complexity of “street level” implementation, for example, Lipsky (1980) noted that what appeared to be “simple and straightforward is really complex and convoluted” in terms of the “number of separate decisions that are part of what we think of as a single one” (p. 93).

## Opportunities

Researchers see crises as often giving leaders a rare and potentially valuable “opportunity to innovate” (Mintzberg, et al., 1976, p. 251). There are two concepts that are important here—leadership to make sense and restore order and leadership to move an agenda. In the latter instance, crises can trigger changes in employee attitudes, managerial strategies, and business structures and foster conditions that “stimulate the entrepreneur to think and plan strategically” (McCarthy, 2003, p. 329). A case study of a business crisis related to a damaged product found that company managers created a “novel” alternative that would otherwise not have been identified under normal conditions (Papadakis, Kaloghirou, & Iatrelli, 1999, p. 34).

Leaders may use a crisis as a “focusing event” to bring attention to a policy problem or act as a “powerful symbol” for a problem’s resolution (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 94-95). For example, a crisis in the form of “frontal assaults” on an organizational bureaucracy are sometimes purposefully instigated as a tactical strategy designed by reformers and change agents to encourage an “awakening” among recalcitrant employees to the need for important but difficult systemic changes (Brock, et al., 2002). A study of how nine companies handled particular crises suggested that the critical events themselves became a “defining moment” in which leaders ushered in successful strategies (McCarthy, 2003, p. 334). Just the specter of a crisis can be the impetus for change. The images of children as potential victims dying horribly from a nuclear war, for example, were significant in constraining political leaders and resolving the Cuban missile crisis (Burns, 1978, p. 413).

A leader's ability to handle the opportunities of a conflict reflects a fundamental skill in fostering the "social trust" necessary to lead others in less critical times (Smylie & Hart, 1999, p. 432). Such trust is one form of the "currency of leadership" that leaders expend in their efforts to command individuals (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995, p. 39). For example, being able to depend on employees to provide information and intelligence is a critical element of successful leadership, because leaders are subjected to daily situations that are "marked by great uncertainty, confusion, and distortion" (J. T. Murphy, 2000, p. 118)—not unlike the conditions of a crisis.

#### 'Critical Tasks'

Crises that affect the public realm have the added dimension of government decision making—for example, responding to a bridge collapse, an apartment building fire, a hostage situation, or a terrorist incident. Government, by definition, is a group, not an individual. The literature on group dynamics suggests a special kind of leadership is necessary for effective decision making, one that focuses on helping individuals "develop a shared sense of direction and commitment" through communication and team work and not by trying "to dominate and get their own ideas accepted" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, pp. 157-158). It is this aspect of group leadership that is emphasized in the political aspect of crisis leadership: being available, communicative, and trustworthy, and developing support through connections and associations (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007, pp. 50-53).

Other research suggests this does not go far enough in the modern era of emergencies that threaten neighborhoods, communities, towns, cities, states, and nations. In these situations, "public leaders have a special responsibility to help safeguard society from the adverse consequences of crises...and [they] have to concern themselves with all

crisis phases: the incubation stage, the onset, and the aftermath” (Boin, et al., 2005, p. 10). In other words, they have to manage the crisis, not talk about it.

Boin, et al. (2005), in their work about government decision making during a crisis, embrace the political aspects of public leadership, but they see it as secondary and more of a tool rather than a means to end. Instead, they identified five “critical tasks” of political leaders during a crisis that underscore a personally involved approach (Table 2.2). They caution, however, that this does not necessarily mean deep involvement in the technical and operational arenas, although that might occur to some degree. Instead, their suggested leadership tasks focus on “the overall direction of crisis responses and the political process surrounding these responses” (Boin, et al., 2005, p. 10).

In terms of school organizations, the five “critical tasks” by Boin, et al., offer an additional way of examining the literature on crisis management and decision making and, as with Hoy and Miskel’s “Social System Model of Schools (2008), applying such research in the context of schools. The leadership component is important, regardless of the context of the crisis response. Research suggests that, in the rush of critical events, leaders have to learn not to be “paralyzed by confused complexity” caused by the changes unfolding quickly around them and rely, instead, on their training and experience to guide them (Weick, 2001a, p. 30). Crises accelerate the dynamics of decision making, applying great pressures on leaders in situations that can have significant implications. Leaders must be able to take command and make decisions quickly in an authoritative manner when confronted with genuine emergencies and crises, mustering the emotional strength necessary to control their environment and the actions of others (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002, p. 78).



Table 2.2 Component Definitions for “Critical Tasks”

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<i>Making sense of the crisis</i>	Recognize the reality behind the immediate crisis turbulence and determine what is happening and why.
<i>Making crisis decisions and taking action</i>	Provide leadership not only through executive functions but also by using authority to facilitate coordinated implementation.
<i>Meaning making for others</i>	Resolve ambiguity and reduce uncertainty by helping others understand the crisis issues and the plan for addressing them.
<i>Terminating the crisis</i>	Work toward not just the end point and a return to normalcy, but also the accountability for whatever started the crisis.
<i>Learning from the crisis</i>	Draw lessons from the crisis and the organizational response, as an opportunity to make necessary improvements.

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Adapted from “critical tasks” by Boin, A., T Hart, P., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2005). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure*, pp. 10-15. New York: Cambridge University Press.

The leadership skills necessary in a crisis are described succinctly in an instructional manual produced by FEMA:

The ability to make sound, timely decisions during a crisis is critical, and poor crisis decision making—or the absence of decisions—potentially can result in injury or death to responders and/or victims. There is a need, therefore, to provide training to those in decision-making capacities that will assist them in solving problems and making decisions during a crisis (“Crisis decision making,” 1999, pp. I-4).

In terms of school crisis management and decision making, the five “critical tasks” by Boin, et al. (2005) also presented another lens through which to analyze the events of the case in this study. The case involved the decision making experiences of school district leaders in their management of a crisis involving their school district—the social system, as described by Hoy and Miskel (2008). The “critical tasks” by Boin, et al.

(2005) provided a way to identify and categorize the district leaders decision making experiences (adapted as “critical leadership tasks”) and apply them as the “input” component of an emerging conceptual framework (Figure 2.4). As discussed later in this chapter, there are other parts of the emerging framework.

### *Context of Expertise and Reliability*

Substantial literature exists on the development and implementation of crisis management plans, including the steps involved in prevention, intervention, recovery, communications, safety and security, and reputation protection. In an oft-sited model by Pearson and Clair (1998, p. 66), the process of crisis management is divided into two segments—what happens before a triggering event and what happens after.

The post-event phases include the work of a “reaction apparatus” that mobilizes in a crisis and takes charge, consisting of individuals who are flexible in their responsibilities, knowledgeable about the areas affected by the crisis, empowered to make decisions, and available on short notice (Andersen, 2003, p. 130). This apparatus is known as incident command. The incident command system, as referenced earlier in this chapter, is a management model designed to achieve uniform modes of authority and responsibilities across government agencies, based on the work of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the National Fire Academy (Cole, 2000, p. 203).

Training in crisis management includes seminars, table-top exercises, and mock events to increase familiarity and experience in management tasks, including tactical decision games used by the military (Crichton, Flin, & Rattray, 2000, pp. 209-210). FEMA, for example, emphasizes the use of a basic problem solving model (size up the situation, identify contingencies, determine objectives, identify needed resources, build a

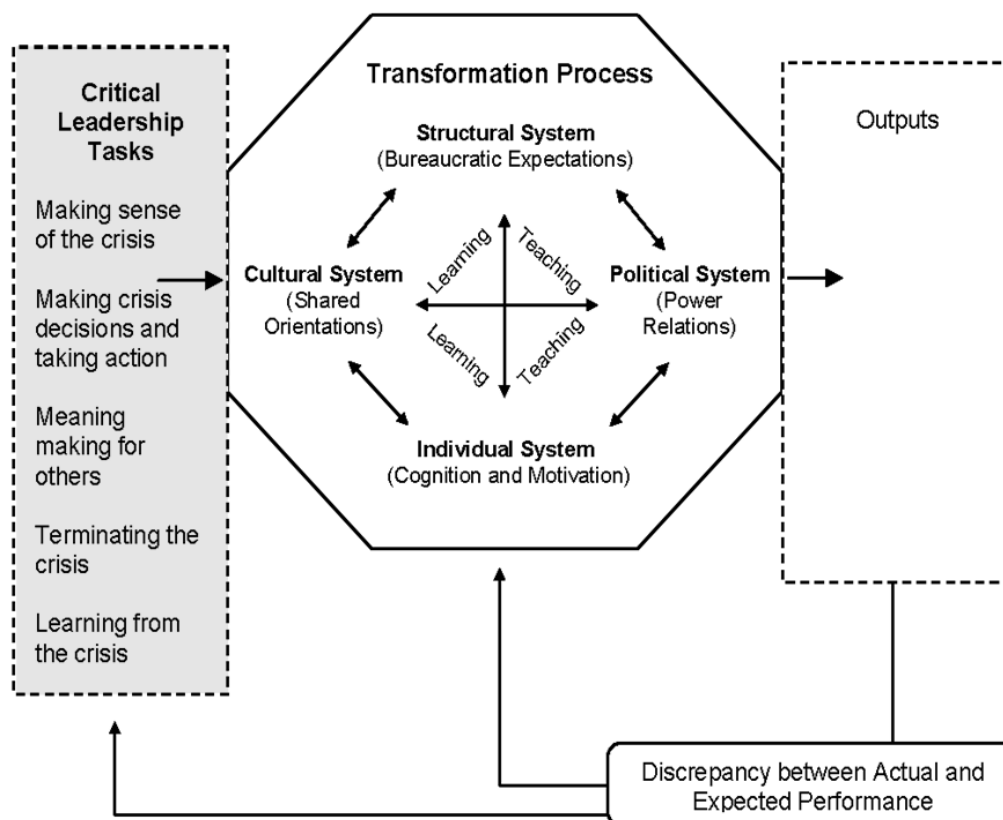


Figure 2.4 Addition of “Input” Elements in Conceptual Framework

Adapted from “social system model” by Hoy & Miskel (2005), p. 411; and “critical tasks” by Boin, et al. (2005), pp. 10-15.

plan, and take action and evaluate results) in teaching students the essence of managing a crisis (“Crisis decision making,” 1999).

Technology simulations of a crisis provide safe environments in which individuals and teams can experiment with procedures, protocols, and strategies, while testing themselves and their experiences (Boin, Kofman-Bos, & Overdijk, 2004, p. 390). The simulation methodology now “widely used in various crisis management contexts” originated in the “world of warfare” (Kleiboer, 1997, p. 198).

### Reliance on Intuition

The influence of experience-based intuition also is seen as critical in crisis decision making. Organizational research suggests that decision makers employ different methods for processing strategic issues based on their own personal perceptions of immediacy, importance, and available contingencies (Dutton, 1986, p. 511). A crisis accelerates the decision making processes. Leaders then rely on their training and experiences to help guide them quickly, especially when doubt and emotions are in play. This is a reflection of intuition—the “essential leadership ability to apply not just technical expertise but also life wisdom” (Goleman, et al., 2002, p. 42).

In the psychology of decision making, people are affected by their present and past experiences, along with inductive inferences. They figure out “what regularly goes wrong, what tends to go wrong, and what hypothetically can go wrong” in a given situation and then they intellectually decipher the steps necessary to “prevent a negative sequence from unfolding” (Teigen & Brun, 1997, p. 119). The intellectual process is fast and unseen, as individuals respond to contextual clues and act on their “gut feelings” that evolve into an emotional acceptance of a solution to a problem because it “felt right” (Goleman, et al., 2002, p. 43).

Klein (2003) likens this mental processing, in part, to the “hunch” that develops as people seek to comprehend unfolding events (p. 21). Other descriptions include “improvisation” by Weick (1998, p. 544), “smart guess” by Goleman et al. (2002, p. 42), and “snap decisions” by Gladwell (2004, p. 48) who also noted that the abilities of individuals to make fast judgments often rely on their perceptions and the “thinnest slice of experience” (p. 52). Specific training and exercises provide instruction on how to rely

on “intuitive decision making, based on pattern matching and recognition of familiar and typical cases” (Crichton, et al., 2000, p. 209).

In contrast, normative models of decision making are described as inherently different. The distinction is based on different mental processes, with *reasoning* described as a “slower, serial, effortful, more likely to be closely monitored and deliberately controlled,” and *intuition* described as “fast, automatic, effortless, associative, implicit, often emotionally charged” (Kahneman, 2003, p. 698).

The latter is not without its critics. A review of the book, “How Doctors Think” by Jerome E. Groopman (2007, Houghton Mifflin), noted the author’s argument against relying too heavily on intuitive judgment instead of “the old fashioned virtues of deliberation, caution and systematic thinking” (Adler, 2007).

Not trusting one’s intuitive understanding and instincts about a crisis situation can be dangerous. For example, in a study about fighting fires, Weick (1996b) examined the repercussions of a wildfire in Montana in 1949 where 13 firefighters died because they balked at the initial interpretation of the conditions they were experiencing and the options available to them to escape. Weick (1996) concluded that, in the face of such swift and surprising circumstances, leaders need to restructure their “intuitive understandings of phenomenon on the spot” and remain creative enough under pressure “to bring order out of chaos” (p. 5). In a subsequent review that used the Montana event to underscore how unforeseen problems are ignored in educational administration, Weick (1996a) urged school leaders to prepare themselves in the way that firefighters need to learn to be alert to the changing contexts of situations in avoiding failure, injury, and death (p. 568).

### Multiplying Challenges

Crisis management research describes very intense and ambiguous situations for a decision maker. A crisis heightens nearly everything exponentially, compounding the decision elements and escalating problematic conditions as the crisis unfolds and new challenges arise (Rosenthal et al., 2001). At the moment of truth, when they act, decision makers in such an event ultimately rely on their past experiences, training, expertise, and intuition to guide them (Klein, 2003). Research suggests that decision making under such conditions resemble the experiences of leaders in fast-paced computer industries (Eisenhardt, 1989), military commanders in war situations (Klein, 1997), and firefighters confronting complex blazes (Weick, 2001b).

Crises are seen as a “process” in which “the very identity of a crisis changes over time” (Rosenthal, 2003, p. 132). This includes the “crisis after the crisis” that creates a stream of subsequent challenges that are “no less formidable than the challenges of the acute crisis stage” (T Hart & Boin, 2001, p. 28). In other words, “crises are dynamic and multi-faceted, requiring cycles of decision making” (Flin, 2001, p. 110). Often, crises are not confined to single events, but can be flashpoints to long, simmering problems (Netzley, 2001). In studies of corporate crises, researchers have found that the first 48 hours of the crisis are most important, followed by the next one to eight days (Lewis, 2004, p. 65).

### ‘Normal Accidents’

Having contingencies to deal with the effects of any number of potential, even remotely possible, crisis events gave rise to a theory of “normal accidents,” in which accidents are expected so that “people get their bearings” quickly when the real thing

happens unexpectedly (Weick, 2004, p. 27). Researchers recognize different levels of crises in a workplace, beginning with those that might cause bereavement and grief, then trauma, then a disaster, and finally a catastrophe (Lewis, 2004, p. 64). Crises are seen as different from the concept of a catastrophe, in terms of measuring the scope of the event and its “origin, consequences, underlying course, and level of risk” (Lalonde, 2004, p. 76). For example, a fire in a basement of a house is a crisis requiring immediate action to save the structure. A house that is burned completely to the ground may also create a crisis of homelessness, but the destroyed house itself is beyond crisis; it is a catastrophe.

In the corporate world, normal accidents are also seen as “risk management,” knowing that crises are inevitable in product development and distribution and efforts should reduce the potential of future losses as a result of such crises (Day, McKay, Ishman, & Chung, 2004, p. 832). Being able to create advance solutions and responses to unforeseen events requires significant expertise and “knowledge of events that have already taken place, a lot of imagination, and the ability to describe and present the conceivable scenarios” (Andersen, 2003, p. 129).

#### ‘High Reliability’

In 1999, in the article “Organizing for High Reliability: Processes of Collective Mindfulness” (republished in 2008), an argument was made that a highly reliable organization is one in which routinized and complex activities are closely attended by “continuous mindful awareness” of the potential for mistakes, not necessarily to prevent them but to recognize and resolve them when they invariably happen (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2008, p. 36). The authors defined the concept of “mindfulness” as dependant more on “the quality of attention” than constantly being at attention, suggesting value of

being attentive was linked more with “what people do with what they notice as it is about the activity of noticing itself” (Weick, et al., 2008, p. 37).

Reliability, they noted, was not based on an engineering model of repeatability. Instead, it was based on the concept that reliability increases when highly skilled personnel pay attention to the likelihood of variance-induced problems and errors inherent in human performance, and they strive to prevent an organizational culture in which “unexpected events are normalized” through mindless and inattentive routines (Weick, et al., 2008, p. 36). The core concept was that highly reliable organizations share common features, which can be emulated. In a subsequent book, the common features were grouped as the five “principals of high reliability” (Table 2.3). Initially, they were identified as five “processes of mindful organizing,” as outlined in the original article published in 1999 (Weick, et al., 2008, pp. 38-39). Two years later, in 2001, the processes were reintroduced in a book, “Managing the Unexpected,” and described as the five “hallmarks of reliability” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Six years later, in the book’s second edition, the processes were rephrased again, this time not as objectives to obtain but as normative values to embrace. In that version, they became the principals “underlying the performance of highly reliable organizations” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 9).

The five principles provide another lens through which to examine the literature on crisis management and decision making and, as with Hoy and Miskel’s “Social System of Schools” (2008) and the “critical tasks” identified by Boin, et al. (2005), apply the analysis in the context of schools. In fact, Hoy and Miskel opened the door to such analysis in the latest edition of their text on educational administration, in which they note that “just as individuals can be mindful or mindless, so too can schools—for



Table 2.3 Component Definitions for “High Reliability” Principles

<i>Preoccupation with Failure</i>	Acknowledge errors, anticipate mistakes, and be wary of success-driven complacency.
<i>Reluctance to Simplify</i>	Generate comprehensive, holistic fact-gathering, including divergent views, and nuanced interpretations.
<i>Sensitivity with Operations</i>	Focus resources on front-line personal and situational awareness, at the expense of broad strategic actions
<i>Commitment to Resilience</i>	Maintain a deep pool of highly-trained and knowledgeable personnel with authority to improvise.
<i>Deference to Expertise</i>	Delegate problem solving and decision making to the experts closest to the problem.

Adapted from principles “underlying performance of highly reliable organizations” in Weick, K. E., & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2007). *Managing the unexpected* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), pp. 9-17. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

example, the mindless adherence to rules is just one example of a collective mindlessness that imbues school life” (2008, p. 111).

For this study, the five principles were viewed as a way of conceptualizing another facet of the social system of school organization. Hoy and Miskel (2008) viewed the “mindfulness” aspect of reliability as an “enabling” structural component, in which the entire school organization fosters a reciprocal “learning” environment as a core goal (p. 112). With this concept in mind, the five “principals of high reliability” were added as the third component of the conceptual framework for this study and arranged as a structural envelope surrounding the central component of the social system model (Figure 2.5). Inherent in this framework is an understanding that the five reliability principles are not isolated from the other components. Instead, they reflect an integrated component, another *system* of interactions, with implications for each of the others.

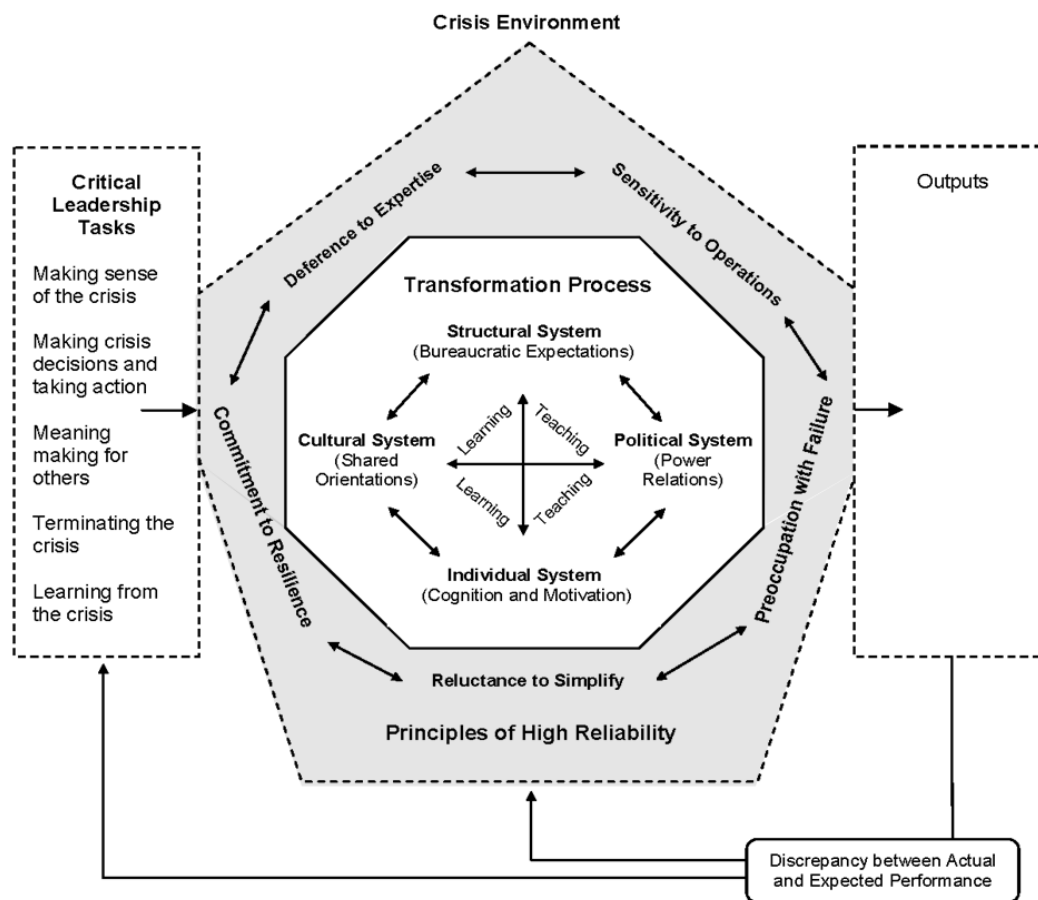


Figure 2.5 Addition of “High Reliability” Elements in Conceptual Framework

Adapted from “social system model” in Hoy & Miskel (2005), p. 411; “critical tasks” in Boin, et al. (2005), pp. 10-15; and “high reliability” principles in Weick & Sutcliffe (2007), pp. 9-17.

### Conceptual Framework for Analysis

The final major element of the conceptual framework for the analysis was the identification of “crisis management targets” for the decisions and actions taken during the crisis (Table 2.4). The identification of the targets relied substantially on a preliminary review of the case, pending a deeper understanding of events as the analysis continued. This final element comprised the “outputs” portion of the “social system model of schools” (Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 459). In this instance, however, the concept of outputs, as measurable units, was beyond the scope of the study, as was the related

Table 2.4 Component Definitions for “Crisis Management Targets”

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<i>Students and staff are safe</i>	Uphold duty to care and ensure against unreasonable risks of physical and mental harm for everyone in schools and offices.
<i>Schools open for teaching and learning</i>	Protect key mission of school district, along with community support functions of schools for children and families.
<i>Students attend school and staff report to work</i>	Use low attendance data as an indication of potential problems and strive for normal attendance by both students and staff.
<i>Mental health support provided</i>	Enlist expert guidance from mental health professionals, with the aim of addressing the immediate and long-term effects.
<i>Staff implements district decisions</i>	Ensure that measures taken to address the crisis are not impeded by blockers and other bureaucratic barriers.
<i>Parents and public support district decisions</i>	Enlist active or passive agreement steps taken to alleviate or remedy effects of the crisis on schools and communities.
<i>Agencies support district decisions</i>	Secure endorsements and collaboration with elected and appointed leaders of government emergency efforts.
<i>District operations continue</i>	Maintain normal functions of core business and instructional services, unaffected by the crisis (such as payroll).

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Developed from case analysis and identified as targets, in terms of purpose of critical leadership tasks.

component of measuring the differences expected and actual performance. Instead, and in keeping with the relationship of inputs-to-outputs, the component was reconceived as “crisis management targets” (Figure 2.6).

This, then, became the conceptual framework to guide the analysis of the study, not as a model of crisis management but as a framework for understanding its components. A model of crisis management was beyond the scope of this study. The

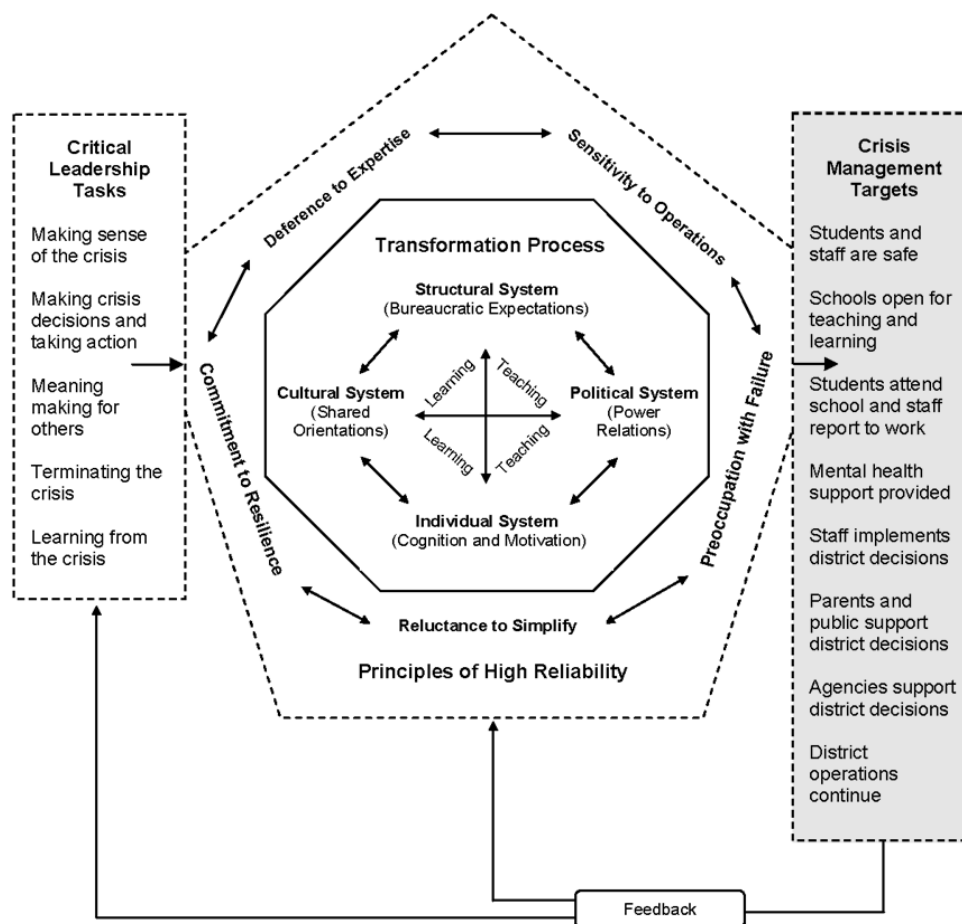


Figure 2.6 Addition of “Targets” to form Conceptual Framework for Analysis

Adapted from “social system model” in Hoy & Miskel (2005), p. 411; “critical tasks” in Boin, et al. (2005), pp. 10-15; and “high reliability” principles in Weick & Sutcliffe (2007), pp. 9-17.

conceptual framework suggests that to “critical leadership tasks” are affected by the transformational process within the social systems of the school district and, in turn, the ideal of success in achieving crisis management targets are affected by the elements necessary high reliability.

## Chapter 3: Methodology of the Portrait

### Overview

The portrait addressed the issue: *What can be learned from the crisis decision making experiences of school district leaders?* The question provided entry into an important area of inquiry. The literature on crisis decision making, within the larger scope of crisis management, hinted at possible insights, but a review of the research revealed the topic as largely removed from field of educational leadership. The focus was elsewhere, primarily on corporate, industrial, governmental, and related organizations, for which crises were often associated with large-scale events. Little was known about crisis decision making by school and school district leaders. This chapter provides an overview of the methodology and research design, including the collection and analysis of data, verification tasks for quality, and the creation of a compelling narrative, based on the emergent themes of the research.

### Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework for the analysis of the case was developed based on a review of literature encompassing the context of critical leadership tasks, social systems of schools, and expectations of high reliability in the implementation of crisis management activities (Figure 2.6). Within the framework were theoretical components arrayed in a model of possible relationships in the achievement of identified conceptual targets (such as *students and staff are safe*). Outside of the model, these components

provide the basis for identifying the actions of the school district's leadership in terms of a category for each component (Table 3.1).

The elements of the framework also provided a way to analyze their relationship to one another and to explore each of the areas on their own, in terms of clues and themes that might emerge through careful analysis. At the outset, the model of the framework and the individual component categories merely set the stage for the inquiry. They were the "tools used to generate questions and to search for patterns," as noted by Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 53), and served as the basis for an open-ended inquiry.

### Research Method

The methodology of portraiture was used to describe and explore the complex circumstances and emergent themes of the case, based on a conceptual framework that integrated research about schools as social systems, leaders engaged in critical tasks of managing crisis events, and values of organizations that emphasize mindfulness in pursuing high reliability among their workforce. Research methods consistent with case study and the analysis of critical decisions were used to collect data from multiple sources and construct the narrative portrait.

The author, as researcher, was also a participant in the case, a special form of inquiry that provided certain benefits from an insider's perspective and certain limitations associated with that same insider's limited view. The study reflected my interest in developing a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of executive leadership of school districts and the application of expertise and training at decisive moments.

The study explored a specific case, with identified participants: the crisis decision making experiences of a set of public school district leaders in Montgomery County,

Table 3.1 Analytical Categories from Conceptual Framework

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<i>Critical leadership tasks</i>	Making sense of the crisis Making crisis decisions and taking action Meaning making for others Terminating the crisis Learning from the crisis
<i>Principals of high reliability</i>	Deference to expertise Sensitivity to operations Preoccupation with failure Reluctance to Simplify Commitment to Resilience
<i>Transformation process</i>	Structural system Political system Individual system Cultural system Crisis environment Feedback
<i>Crisis management targets</i>	Students and staff are safe Schools open for teaching and learning Students attend school and staff report to work Mental health support provided Staff implements district decisions Agencies support district decisions District operations continue

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Adapted from “critical tasks” by Boin, et al. (2005); “social system of schools” by Hoy and Miskel (2008), and “high reliability” principles by Weick and Sutcliffe (2007). See also Figure 2.6.

Maryland, during the 23 days of the sniper incident in October 2002. The participants included leadership staff and other associated personnel who were publicly identified. Their identification was consistent with the research requirements of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Maryland, College Park, and the Montgomery County Public Schools, as described later in this chapter.

The case provided an opportunity to build on existing knowledge about decision making in a crisis and inform the practice of crisis decision making by school leaders. More specifically, the portrait addressed research questions, which guided the development of the conceptual framework, the analytical methodology, and processes used to identify, understand, and describe the findings of this specific case:

- What can be learned from the decision making experiences of the leaders of the Montgomery County Public Schools in protecting students from the sniper in October 2002?
- What were the characteristics of the decisions?
- Who were the main participants?
- What are the background characteristics of this case?
- What commonly held views, themes, and metaphors emerge?
- What was unique about this case?
- What retrospective insights can be learned?
- What strategies and processes of decision making can be described?
- What does the analysis of the portrait reveal?
- How can this portrait be situated in the literature about crisis decision making and school district leadership?

#### Portraiture

The methodology employed for this research was based on portraiture as a form of case study. Portraiture provided a means of engaging in a form of emergent, open-ended inquiry, consistent with the phenomenological processes described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), in which the data was gathered and interpreted from a variety of sources in order to explore lived experiences. The roots of the methodology, they said, are



grounded in “the traditions and values of the phenomenological paradigm, sharing many of the techniques, standards, and goals of ethnography” (p. 13).

I embraced this concept in both research and analysis, creating a portrait of the case as a narrative outcome of portraiture, but not merely to tell a story. I endeavored to create “a reality,” as suggested by Bloom (2003, p. 875), in which the reader was invited into the subject through reflections on the past, the interpretations of the present, and insights about the future. This was accomplished consistent with the type of exploratory and descriptive research studies described by Marshall and Rossman (1999) that “build rich descriptions of complex circumstances” (p. 33). The approach also was consistent with the design of studies of crisis events, which Rosenthal (2001, p. 21) describes as emphasizing an open-ended and flexible analysis of complex, unpredictable events that unfold and change. The focus on the experiences of participants also responds to important suggestions in crisis research. Pearson and Clair (1998, p. 62) note that research of crisis events often lacks the perspective of people who experienced the crisis. Rosenthal et al. (2001) suggest that such studies should explore the personal experiences of shock, upheaval, and stress of “very concrete and frightening events” in a crisis (p. 22). Heck and Hallinger (1999) suggest that narrative forms of research can be useful in describing the “decision-making or problem-solving practices of school leaders” (p. 155).

#### Qualitative Research

Careful attention was taken to maintain the alignment of the methodology with the qualitative research procedures that explore events, situations, and actions of people, as described by Maxwell (1996, pp. 17-21). This included detailing the context in which

participants in the case acted and understood their actions, the processes by which those actions occurred, and the identification of any unanticipated phenomena and relationships.

I approached the study knowing that, as a form of qualitative research that deeply involves the researcher in the telling of events, portraiture required a personal “level of understanding and empathy,” as described by Hackmann (2002), which would be exceedingly difficult to achieve if one were writing as “a dispassionate, detached observer” (p. 53). As such, I also understood what Hackmann (2002) argued were portraiture’s similarities to social anthropology and, not entirely favorably, his characterization of portraiture as “descriptive case study” or “impressionistic tales” because it often reflected the influence of the researcher’s experiences in the field (p. 52).

The perspective of case study was appropriate for use in this study, given that the events being portrayed took place well in the past, required retrospective interviews and archival documentation to reconstruct, and involved bounded sets of events, participants, place and time. There were ample suggestions in the literature to support this approach. Creswell (1998, p. 37), for example, described portraiture as closely related to case study in the alignment of qualitative research methods. Marshall and Rossman (1999) found that portraiture embodies the narrative design of case study by taking “the reader into the setting with a vividness and detail not typically present in more analytic formats” (p. 159).

#### Complex Descriptions

The study explored the complex challenges faced by the school leaders in the case. The techniques undertaken to accomplish this involved a methodology that Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) described as “an iterative process of data collection, interpretation, and analysis” (pp. 213-214) and was based on the establishment of personal

perspective, guiding questions, an informed literature review, and an overall conceptual framework.

The data collection involved multiple sources of information, including direct observations, review of documents, and interviews with participants. This was consistent with case study criteria, as proffered by Creswell (1998, pp. 62-63), for describing the actions of people and then developing a theory about what happened within the events of the case. The data collection also involved explorations of the relationship of contextual conditions and processes, which Yin (2003) recommended for situating “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 13). That approach was particularly important in the research of this case. As noted by Yin (2003), the research techniques of case study are appropriate for “distinctive situations,” in which there are multiple variables, multiple evidence sources, and theoretical propositions developed in advance (pp. 13-14).

An interview technique from the field of task analysis, known as the critical decision method, was also consulted in the development of the interview strategies with participants. The method was helpful, as suggested by Graesser, Baggett, & Williams (1996, p. 19), in understanding how people remember and make sense of what happened during critical decisions. Researchers use the technique in the study of decision making under naturalistic conditions, not unlike the events of this case. The methodology influenced my approach to not only explore an entire complex task or event, but also to focus on decision details, as suggested by Lipshitz (2001, p. 343), among others, and keep the decision making experiences as the central focus of the study. My use of the technique relied on probe questions consistent with the observations by Klein, et al., (1989) in their retrospective research of complex decisions “characterized by high time

pressure, high information content, and changing conditions” (p. 462). The use of probe questions in this study helped participants who were far removed from the events in 2002 and needed assistance, as suggested by Gordon (1997, p. 137), to remember a past incident, identify key decisions within that incident, and describe the trigger conditions that prompted each incident. Gordon identified Klein, et al., as having reinvented the process. It was originally developed by Flanagan (1954) in the study of “case-based reasoning in problem solving” (as described by Hoffman, 1998, p. 256), in which experts recall how they encountered and resolved problems.

#### Personal Involvement

At the time of the events involved in this case, I was employed by the Montgomery County Public Schools as the director of communications and served as the district’s spokesperson. I participated in the events of the case, as a member of the superintendent’s senior staff and held one of the four primary positions on the incident command team, as the information officer. Since that time, I continued to work with many of the participants in the case. I served as the superintendent’s chief of staff, beginning in August 2004, and retired from the school district in October 2007. Subsequent to that retirement, I performed contract work on behalf of the school district. That work ended in December 2008, and I have not had more than incidental contact with any of the case participants since then, outside of the research activities of this study.

My involvement in the events of the case meant I participated in or observed the majority of the crisis management activities and decisions described in this study. I am a primary or secondary author of many of the documents in the archival record of the case, and my actions and commentary were included in news media and literary accounts of

the incident.<sup>9</sup> As such, I conducted the study as a participant researcher. These dual positions provided me with a unique opportunity to explore and describe lived experiences of the participants within the case, including myself, and examine information that I was unaware of at the time. I also contributed information of my own, including personal observations and insights that were revealed during the research process. I, therefore, contributed to the study not only as a researcher but also as an insider, providing my perspective to the reconstruction and analysis of the case and adding my own identified recollections, knowledge, and expertise.

My inclusion as participant and researcher in the action and analysis of the portrait reflected one of the distinctive characteristics of portraiture. Active involvement of the researcher is one of the primary features of the methodology that distinguishes it from other forms of qualitative inquiry (Hackmann, 2002, p. 52). I approached this perspective from the point of view of a portraitist, in much the same way a painter or photographer interprets scenes through a personal brush or lens. My point of view was ever present. While I sought balance and truth about past events, as best as can be reconstructed years afterward (and as described later in this chapter, under verification and quality), my efforts were never entirely objective and devoid of my own thoughts and recollections. Indeed, this was never a goal. In portraiture, as described by Hackmann (2002), the “investigator’s voice is purposefully woven into the written document” as a

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<sup>9</sup> The most recent was Censer, J. R. (2010). *On the trail of the D.C. sniper: Fear and the media*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. A section of the book, “Schools and the Sniper,” described several aspects of events of the case and participants, including me from an interview in 2004. The book also was cited as a source document for this study.

result of “the researcher’s interaction with the actors in the research setting” (p. 52). This was true regardless of my participant status.

#### Special Mode of Inquiry

My role as a participant researcher reflected a special mode of inquiry, based on established practices in qualitative research. Yin (2003), for example, described participant research as a form of “illustrative studies,” in which the investigator is “not merely a passive observer” but also assumes roles within the case situation and “may actually participate in the events being studied” (pp. 93-94). In examples that reflected the specific nature of this study, Yin (2003) cited “a staff member in an organizational setting” or “a key decision maker in an organizational setting” as a type of participant researcher (p. 94). In my situation, experience in the case provided access and opportunities that might not otherwise be available. Maxwell (1996, pp. 17-22) underscored the value of such access, consistent with the qualitative research expectations for faithfully reconstructing the events of the case. He referenced the prospect of a participant researcher enriching the development of an evidentiary record and the context of the case, as providing potentially unique perspectives in exploring and describing in detail the circumstances of how events occurred in a way that can advance the public understanding and the significance of the case. I endeavored to do just that.

At the same time, efforts were taken to ensure that my subjectivity and voice did not dominate the study (as noted later in this chapter, including reference to critical friends who read drafts of the study with this thought in mind). Researchers in portraiture are expected to assume a secondary role, not primary, in the conduct and report of the study. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) note that portraiture is not a form of

editorial and caution that a researcher's voice "should never overwhelm the voices or actions" of the others and turn the study into a "self-portrait" (p. 105). On this point, there has been some criticism of the involvement of researchers as the primary interpreters in portraiture (Mello, 2002, p. 232). Critics have suggested that it has been difficult to verify whether the portraitist has told the "truth" (English, 2000, p. 21) or whether the researcher engaged in merely a "personal essay" that reflected the researcher's own "idiosyncratic interpretation of a situation" (Donmoyer, 1999, p. 630). Ellis and Bochner (1999), while generally endorsing the style of personal narrative, caution about the overindulgence of writers who become not witnesses but characters in the narrative (p. 235). Weick (2002) warns against "self-as-theorist" and the problems associated with reflexivity when the author overpowers the voices of others in the case (pp. 893-984). These cautions were taken to heart by me in the ongoing conduct of the study, in all of its phases.

#### Personal Experience

My personal and professional experience with the topic of crisis decision making among school district leaders spans more than three decades. Prior to my 17-year career with the Montgomery County Public Schools, I was a reporter for the *Journal* newspaper in Prince George's County, Maryland, covering the Board of Education, superintendent, and schools. I later served as the special assistant to the president for communications at the then Bowie State College in Maryland, prior to appointment as the public affairs and communications director for the Prince George's County Public Schools. I hold a Bachelor of Arts degree (journalism) and a Master of Education degree (policy, planning, and administration), both from the University of Maryland, College Park.

During my career, I have participated in crisis management and decisions involving many types of emergencies affecting the health and safety of students and staff. These include deaths and acts of violence, traffic accidents, weather emergencies, bomb threats, arrests, and the impact of regional, national, and international events on the operation of schools. I have lectured and written on the topic, including the events of this case.

I approached this study with the intent of telling the truth and presenting the case with credibility. I knew that my work was influenced by personal values, including the strong belief in the goodness of people. This belief, in the conduct of this study, relied on a personal understanding of the actions and motivations of people as intrinsically good, unless shown otherwise. No effort was made to minimize or hide unflattering information that was important to addressing the research questions or understanding the events and context of the case, including information about my actions, nor was any effort made to highlight information that was otherwise unnecessary or gratuitous.

The case involved people I know personally and professionally. Their actions and experiences during the sniper crisis were (and remain) highly valued by me as a shared experience and as a source of insightful understanding about crisis decision making by school district leaders. My relationship with them required attention to the kind of strategic, ethical, and personal issues of a participant researcher, as described by Marshall (1999, p. 79), and as presented later in this chapter.

### Research Design

The research design was based on the context and setting of the portrait, in which a specific case was bounded by time and place, with a bounded set of decision events, participants, and available data. Certain limitations in the data sampling were overcome



through a multi-stage process that included an emergent basis for data collection. The design also was based on participants being publicly identified as a result of the public nature of the case and the media exposure it received.

Data collection for the portrait included all types of documentation, artifacts, and other materials about the case and the roles of participants. This included documents and artifacts created by me (whole or in part) as a participant during the case itself. It also included documentation of data from interviews, retrospective observations, and an ongoing form of memoing. Various forms and processes were created to assist in the data collection, including consent forms, timeline charts, contact forms, and other ways of managing the data, as described later in the chapter under data collection.

The research design followed a logical sequence of steps consistent with the concept of “illumination” in portraiture, which refers to the phenomenological process of exploring (not examining or evaluating) the essential elements of a lived experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The design encompasses the essential focus of the portrait itself—the crisis decision making experiences of an identified set of school district leaders during the sniper crisis in October 2002.

The research design adhered to the four main components of the process of illumination in portraiture, as outlined by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997): the context and setting of the portrait was established, the voice and perspective of the participants were identified, the relationship of the portraitist to participants was confirmed, and emergent themes were developed. These four components were analogous to the research methods described by Maxwell (1996, p. 108) for sampling, data collection, research relationship, and data analysis in case study and other qualitative

research. I used the research processes of portraiture and case study interchangeably in the creation of this portrait. The combination was seamless, providing the basis for the final process of illumination—determination of the story, the composition of the narrative, and the completion of the portrait.

#### Context and Setting

The first step in the study established the context of the portrait itself. The process of framing was used to explore and describe the physical setting of the case, the contextual setting of the portrait, the personal setting of the portraitist, the background of the events in the case, and details of the portrait itself. The framing process followed the guidance of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 41) and involved data collection procedures of direct observation, analysis of documents and other archival or historical records, and interviews with participants, other contacts, or informants. This was essentially the qualitative processes of sampling, as described by Maxwell (1996), which included identifying the sources of data related to the sites, persons, places, and times of the case.

#### Time and Place

The physical setting of the portrait was bounded by both time and place, consistent with case study methodology outlined by Creswell (2003, p. 37). The establishment of a finite boundary was necessary to focus the portrait specifically on the experiences of school district leaders in making crisis decisions during the 23 days of the sniper incident. The boundary of time, therefore, coincides with the school district's involvement with the sniper crisis, beginning Thursday morning, October 3, through Friday, afternoon, October 25, 2002. (Although the boundary of time for the case was

limited to the time period in October 2002, there were contextual factors that occurred prior to then, as explored and described in Chapter 4.)

The boundary of place is the physical locations of the school district and the participants in the study. For the most part, the events of the case were made within the confines of school district's central administrative headquarters in Rockville, Maryland. On occasion, however, the research revealed other circumstances and conditions that enlarged the physical boundary of the case and included the homes of case participants.

#### Initial Sampling

The sources of data for this portrait were influenced by the research question and the conceptual framework of the portrait. This was consistent with the sampling process suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 27). The research question focused on the crisis decision making experiences of school district leaders during the identified case. The conceptual framework suggested a perspective through which to view those decision making experiences and apply an analytical process for exploring and describing in a narrative report of this study.

The framework suggested that critical leadership tasks in school crisis management are part of an open social system, in which decisions are transformed through various human interactions affected by structural, political, individual, and cultural systems, an external crisis environment, and feedback on efforts to achieve crisis management targets. The framework also included recognition of factors related to expectations of high reliability in the implementation of crisis leadership tasks and activities.

Therefore, the study focused on describing and exploring specific crisis decisions, the experiences of participants in making those decisions, and the available documentary records about those events, and interviews with participants about their experiences. This required sampling that was bounded by a set of decision events, a set of school district leaders, and a set of data sources.

#### Decision Set

There were decision events that provided an initial bounded sample, and these were related to the high-profile events of the sniper incident. They served as an immediate focus area and entry point for data collection. Consistent with the emergent nature of the investigative processes of the study, however, the sampling grew over time as the research information revealed additional decision events and other activities.

#### Participant Set

The school leaders to be included as participants in this study constituted a bounded set. They were identified primarily through the review of data in preparation for the study and from my own recollections of the case. Others were included in the data collection processes as informants and critical friends. The participant set included 15 people, in addition to me, as identified in Chapter 1 and reintroduced here (Table 3.2). They included 12 employees of the school district, four of whom have since left or retired; and three others who not employed by the district but who were personally involved in the decisions in the case. These individuals were part of an “elite” interviewing group, as described by Marshall (1999, p. 113), and were narrowly selected on the basis of their involvement as participants in the case.

Table 3.2 Identified Internal and External Participants

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<i>Alvez, Aggie</i>	Director of Special Projects, Office of the Superintendent (director of communications and family outreach).
<i>Bowers, Larry A.</i>	Chief Operating Officer.
<i>Clarke, Edward A.</i>	Director of School Safety and Security (consultant, private practice, Olney, Maryland)
<i>Duncan, Douglas M.</i>	County Executive, Montgomery County (consultant, private practice, Rockville, Maryland)
<i>Hellmuth, Robert B.</i>	Assistant director, School Safety and Security (director of school safety and security)
<i>Ikheloa, Roland</i>	Staff Assistant to the Board of Education (chief of staff, Board of Education)
<i>Kamins, Matthew J.</i>	Supervisor of Psychological Services (psychologist, Psychological Services)
<i>Kress, Donald H.</i>	Chief School Performance Officer (consultant, private practice, Germantown, Maryland)
<i>Lacey, Frieda K.</i>	Chief of Staff to the Superintendent of Schools (deputy superintendent of schools)
<i>Madden, Judy</i>	Supervisor of Guidance Services (director of educator learning, College Summit, Washington, D.C.)
<i>Shirley, Edward W.</i>	President, Montgomery County Association of Administrative and Supervisory Personnel (superintendent, Caroline County Public Schools, Denton, Maryland)
<i>Subin, Michael L.</i>	Chair, Education Committee, Montgomery County Council (attorney, private practice, Rockville, Maryland)
<i>Tronzano, Matthew A.</i>	Executive Assistant to the Chief Operating Officer (executive director, The Jones Center for Families, Springdale, Arkansas)
<i>Weast, Jerry D.</i>	Superintendent of Schools
<i>Williams, James A.</i>	Deputy Superintendent of Schools (superintendent, Buffalo City Public Schools, New York)

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Listed alphabetically by last name, with position or association with the Montgomery County Public Schools during the case and current professional status if different in parentheses.

It was necessary to publicly identify the participants due to the unique characteristics of the case, and the substantial public exposure already received by many of the participants. As a non-evaluative study, it was not seen as appropriate or necessary

to shield participants through anonymity, nor was the prospect of public identification seen as impediment to their participation. Each of the participants reviewed and signed a detailed consent form describing the extent of the public identification and its limitations, and they had the opportunity to decline to engage in any aspect of the study or withdraw at any time. Public disclosure was authorized under procedures approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Maryland, College Park, as well as a corresponding reviewing authority for the school district.

As part of the procedural safeguards, each participant was given an opportunity to review, reject, change through deletion or expansion, and/or approve all or any portions of the verbatim typed transcript of their digitally-recorded interviews. In addition, participants were given a similar opportunity regarding segments of their approved interview transcripts preliminarily identified for potential use in the narrative report of the study.

There were no known risks associated with participating in the study. Personal information, not otherwise specified in the consent form as related to the study, was kept confidential and stored in a secured cabinet or computer files available only to the researcher through coded access. Participants were promised that all copies of their recorded interviews were to be given to them or destroyed at the conclusion of the study, per the typical protocol for recorded interviews.

#### Information Set

Data used in the course of the study included information obtained in five categories: (a) paper documents and online copies of materials and other files, contemporary newspaper articles and transcripts of television and radio programs, and

retrospective articles, books, and conference presentations related to the events of the case; (b) digitally-recorded and transcribed interviews with the identified participants in the case, in addition to follow-up notes from telephone or e-mail inquiries; (c) notes from inquiries with informants regarding technical and background questions regarding events of the case; (d) written commentary by critical friends who reviewed preliminary drafts of the narrative report of the study, and notes from oral commentary by students and faculty within the College of Education who received early presentations of preliminary findings; and (e) retrospective memos by me regarding the events of the case, analysis of data, and observations about the ongoing illumination of personal insights and findings. From these sources, and as described later in this chapter, data was collected from more than 700 separate records and nearly as many analytical memos.

A major source of data was a four-volume set of large document binders, titled *Superintendent's Crisis Management Communications*, made available by the Office of the Superintendent of Schools for Montgomery County. The binders included one for each of the approximate three weeks of the incident and each contained copies of contemporaneous documents, notes, and other materials produced during that week. The materials were retained for inclusion in an after-event report of decisions and actions of the district's leadership. A fourth binder contained other documents and materials largely related to associated events during and after the incident. The binders were prepared by secretarial staff for the Chief Operating Officer in December 2002, about six weeks after the conclusion of the incident. Other offices and departments in the school district also provided access to contemporaneous documents and data about the district, the context of emergency management events prior to the case, and the events of the case.

I found no reason to doubt that the school district's archival file contained a comprehensive and inclusive inventory of the materials produced during the identified time and place asserted by the collection. Indeed, the materials include raw notes of contemporaneous discussions and debate, letters and messages of complaint and criticism, and previously confidential materials. However, I was aware that such documentation, produced in this manner, can include inaccurate and misleading information through inadvertent mistakes and omission. In an effort to verify the completeness and accuracy of the records, I also searched for and obtained data from other sources.

#### Sample Limitations

Two important limitations regarding the initial sampling were identified prior to the onset of the study, and each was addressed as the study progressed. The limitations involved (a) retrospective identification of the participant set and (b) retrospective identification of the crisis decision set. To overcome these limitations, a process of constant comparative analysis was used to identify emerging possibilities for additional participants and decision events. Although Creswell (1998, p. 106) and others primarily have associated this strategy with grounded theory, I found it useful as an additional process of checking facts, ideas, and preliminary conclusions arising from a retrospective investigation of a complicated case. This resulted in the identification of numerous previously unknown or unrecognized aspects of events in the case, including three participants who were overlooked initially and identified only during the course of the study. (There was also one individual who ultimately declined to participate in the interview process but provided access to a personal artifact from the case.)



### Data Collection

Data were collected in an organized fashion involving rigorous attention to maintaining chronological order, subject identification, and categorizing by associated groups, topics, participants, and other defining features of the form of documentation, such as letters, e-mails, transcripts, reports, etc. The various forms of data came from multiple sources, including interviews with elite participants, personal observations, informal contacts with other informants, and records and artifacts from within the school district and from external sources. The external records included articles and photographs from newspapers, transcripts of radio and television programs, subsequent books and conference presentations, and publicly available material obtained from the Internet and other sources, including court records. Such data sources, as noted by Marshall and Rossman (1999, pp. 134-135), had their own strengths and weaknesses. My purpose was to collect as much information as possible to search for clues, reduce ambiguity and clarify points of contention or disagreement, and provide informed prompting in questions for interviews and subsequent follow-ups inquiries.

Of the more than 700 records collected in this study, 696 were imported to a software program for subsequent qualitative data analysis, as explained later in this chapter. These files included 246 school district records; 241 items from news media sources, transcripts, and books; and 15 approved interview transcript, 24 court documents; and 185 records from various other sources. In addition, there were 629 analytical memos (of various lengths) written by me over the course of study, and these also were used as sources of data about factual observations and commentary.

### Case Documentation

Efforts were made to identify and describe the events of the case, in the broadest and the most specific terms. This included obtaining relevant documents, artifacts, and other materials related in any way to the overall scope of the study. Such documents and the process for collecting them were important procedural elements in establishing the internal context for the environment of the portrait, setting the stage for obtaining additional information from people being interviewed, and generally facilitating the illumination of the case, and all of which reflected the research steps recommended by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 63). This also was consistent with qualitative methodologies for establishing the “history and context” of a specific activity or event, as noted by Marshall (1999, p. 116). Efforts were also made to follow the guidance outlined by Yin (2003, pp. 85-89) concerning the types of documents to be searched for, collected, and analyzed.

Marshall and Rossman (1999), in recommendations for data collection, noted that documents of any kind can be useful in obtaining information for “portraying the values and beliefs of the participants in the setting” (p. 116). In portraiture, this includes “alternative information,” as described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 64), and the purpose is to broaden the context for the portrait and enliven the description with novel or unique insights and observations. One court record found in the course of the case investigation, for example, was a digital recording of the testimony of Lee Boyd Malvo on May 23, 2006. He was the younger of the two assailants convicted in the shootings, and he was testifying that day in Montgomery County at a trial of his accomplice (“State of Maryland v. Muhammad,” 2006). Part of his testimony concerned events four years

earlier, on October 3, 2002. On the recording, a woman can be heard in the background beginning to cry, first in muffled sobs and then in piercing and repeated wails, as a voice can be heard comforting her, and Malvo continued to describe in detail the shooting of someone the woman obviously knew and cared for and probably loved. The sounds brought me back to the morning the crisis began.

#### Record Organization

Processes were created to manage the record collection and ensure that a primary focus remained on the research question, as data were gathered about events in the case, the identified participants, and their experiences in crisis decision making during the case. The events of the case were associated largely with a date chronology and, therefore, all records were categorized by the date and source of their origination and the topic they referenced. From this categorization, the events were identified over a 23-day period in October 2002. Three types of events: (a) the sniper shootings, (b) the school district's decisions to implement the Code Blue procedure and (c) the often separate decisions to restrict outdoor activities—served to broadly define the chronology of the case (Table 3.2).

The internal and external participants in the case were identifiable by name or position from the archival records of the case and confirmed by later participant interviews. Initially, the participant set included 12 individuals, other than me, and they were identified as having been part of one or more meetings of the Incident Command Team, as convened by the superintendent of schools on the first day of the crisis. Later in the analysis, it became apparent that three other individuals also participated, in some fashion, and they were added to the list, as described earlier in Table 3.1. All relevant

Table 3.3 Chronology of Sniper Shootings and School District Security Decisions

Date	Shootings	Code Blue Ordered	Outside Activities Prohibited
Wednesday, October 4	■ evening		
Thursday, October 3	■■■■ morning ■ evening	■ morning	■ morning
Friday, October 4	■ afternoon		■ morning only
Saturday, October 5			
Sunday, October 6			
Monday, October 7	■ morning	■ morning	■ morning
Tuesday, October 8		■	■
Wednesday, October 9	■ evening	No school	■
Thursday, October 10			■
Friday, October 11	■ morning	■ morning	■
Saturday, October 12			■
Sunday, October 13			■
Monday, October 14	■ evening	■	■
Tuesday, October 15			■
Wednesday, October 16			■
Thursday, October 17			■
Friday, October 18		No school	■
Saturday, October 19	■ evening		■
Sunday, October 20			■
Monday, October 21			■
Tuesday, October 22	■ morning	■ morning	■
Wednesday, October 23		■	■
Thursday, October 24		■	■
Friday, October 25			
Totals	Dead: 10 Wounded: 3	Code Blue days: 8	Days with outdoor restrictions: 20

■ = shooting or school district security decision (implemented all day unless otherwise indicated).

Shooting data compiled from *John Allen Muhammad v. State of Maryland* (2007). Court of Special Appeals of Maryland. Retrieved November 11, 2007, from <http://mdcourts.gov>.

School data compiled from *Sniper crisis: Superintendent's crisis management communications* (2002). Weeks 1-3 and Additional Materials. [Notebooks]. Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools.

records also were categorized by association with specific participants, either as the individual who created the record or as someone referenced in the record.

#### Content Organization

In addition to the chronology of the major events and the identification of participants, records also were organized in reference to the theoretical elements of the conceptual framework for the case, as described in Chapter 2. This was consistent with research guidelines identified by Marshall and Huberman (1999, p. 117). The organization process occurred in substantial depth and included content coding referenced later in this chapter, but it was also an important organizational process at the outset of the study, especially for identifying and categorizing records as the study progressed. There were 23 components of the conceptual framework (Table 3.1) and records were broadly categorized among them, as part of the initial organization. For instance, letters of complaint were labeled as feedback.

The chronology of school district security decisions, as illustrated in Table 3.3, did not include all of the crisis decisions experienced by participants in the case. A means of identifying those decisions in a systematic fashion was developed. That process itself led to the realization that there were many more activities related to the leadership of the school district during the crisis than just the decisions (for example, providing a report to the incident command team about student absenteeism). Therefore, an effort was made to identify these activities for analysis as part of the entire crisis decision making dynamic. A separate category of “crisis management activities” was created, within which were “leadership decisions” and “leadership actions.” This resulted in the ability to identify records associated with a “crisis management activity” and identify

such activities chronologically over the course of the case and in relation to other characteristics of the case. Eventually, the chronology of activities was combined with other identifiers, including elements from the conceptual framework, and a tracking list was prepared over the course of the study (Figure 3.1).

This process was undertaken as the records were collected and organized, initially as a method of framing the material for later analysis. Eventually, it formed the basis of thinking about the events of the case, not as disparate pieces that occurred along the way, but as parts of an organic whole that changed in identifiable ways as the events continued. My thinking and analysis about such things was recorded and retained in a process of note taking and memoing. To assist in this process, I created an “artifact analysis memo” that served as an organizing tool for the various documents, materials, and other artifacts and records (Figure 3.2). It was particularly helpful for noting a record’s description, associated event, potential significance, content summary, and relationship to other information. The form was influenced by a sample referenced by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 55). It was also influenced by a record-keeping strategy identified from the research file of the late Jacqueline Haas, whose dissertation (2005), as noted elsewhere, influenced the preparation of this study.

The collected documents were stored and managed in properly labeled boxes within areas under my supervision. Special or unique documents were treated with great care, with attention maintaining their status as research artifacts of an ongoing study. Nonetheless, I was mindful of the advice from Yin (2003, pp. 87-88) regarding an over-reliance on documents. He urged a critical perspective in reviewing any document as a

Phase 1: Decisions/actions on First Day (October 3, 2002) through the Morning of the Student Sho						
Date	Crisis Management Activity	Initiator	Reference Artifact	Audience	Critical Leadership Tasks	High Relia Princ
10-03 9:30 a.m.	School security office informs deputy superintendent and chief operating officer about multiple shootings and police suggestion to restrict outsider student activities	Assistant director, school safety and security	Meeting minutes for Oct. 3	Deputy supt. and chief operating officer	Making sense of the crisis	Defer exper
10-03	Selected senior staff gather in deputy superintendent's office with superintendent and discuss	Deputy superintendent	Interviews	Senior staff	Making sense of the crisis	Sensit opera
10-03	Superintendent requests secretary to take notes on all actions and decisions	Superintendent	Interviews	Senior staff and public record	Meaning making for others	Preoc with f
10-03	Superintendent uses large map to plot impact areas of shootings in relation to schools	Superintendent	Interviews	Senior staff	Making sense of the crisis	Preoc with f

Figure 3.1 Excerpt from Chronology of Crisis Management Activities

Format adapted from Haas, J. C. (2005). A case study of the actions taken by a school district in planning and implementing a strategy to establish school-based professional learning communities. Unpublished Ed.D dissertation. University of Maryland, College Park.

protection against being misled, either purposefully or by mistake. As noted earlier, the documentary information was just one part of the story.

#### Personal Setting

The data collection procedures for this study included a personal acknowledgement to the other participants in the case about my dual perspective as a participant researcher. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) cautioned that the participant researcher, notwithstanding personal attachments to the case, must maintain the position as “an outsider to the scene and needs to accept and exploit that perspective...[with] a researcher’s view that is sufficiently distanced to encompass the

ARTIFACT ANALYSIS MEMO	
1.	What is the artifact?
2.	Who created it?
3.	Why was it created?
4.	Who is the intended audience/recipient?
5.	What is the context in which this artifact was produced?
6.	What can I observe from this artifact about the crisis activities of the case?
7.	What was my role, if any, as evidenced in the artifact?

Figure 3.2 Format for Personal Insights about Data and Records

various sources of data, the broader physical and ideological landscape and the developing vision of the whole” (p. 69). This was a stance I pursued with vigor.

It was a difficult position to be in. In ethnographic studies, for example, researchers often have to carefully balance the two sides of being the insider and the outsider, and they confront special considerations of identity and relationship when circumstances prompt role changes (Creswell, 2003, p. 123). In this case, I conveyed my position as an outsider looking in, but undoubtedly others saw me entirely as an insider. And, their viewpoint probably continued even after I retired from the school district’s employment and began to interview the participants.

At every step of the process, both before and after my departure from the district, I followed the “full explanation” procedure, as described by Schram (p. 90), to ensure



that people who I came in contact with were informed about my role. This was ethically important, as well as necessary for ensuring the quality of the study.

‘Critical Friends’

One of the measures I took to address issues associated researcher with effects, including potential researcher bias and the limits of a single case, was the enlistment of two individuals who served as *critical friends*. Their role, as outlined by Handal (1999), was to provide expert knowledge of the topic of study and serve as a confidant and advisor in providing guidance in the course of the research. One was Kitty Porterfield, former director of communications for the Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia, a position she held during the sniper incident. She now is a partner with Porterfield & Carnes Communications in Alexandria, Virginia, and co-author of the book, “Why Communication Matters: Strategies for PR Professionals” (2008, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers). The other was Judith S. Bresler, a partner in the law firm of Carney, Kelehan, Bresler, Bennett & Scherr in Columbia, Maryland; and an adjunct professor of school law at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, and Goucher College in Towson, Maryland. A co-author of the book “Maryland School Law Deskbook” (2009, Second Edition, LexisNexis Publishing), she is general counsel to several school districts in Maryland, including the Montgomery County Public Schools.

Both Bresler and Porterfield provided the additional benefit of insider and outsider perspectives, each from their own point of view. They were invited to share their professional insights and comments “without reservation,” and they were provided with written guidance regarding verification and quality in qualitative research, including standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, application, and completeness

(Personal communications, 2009). Both read drafts of the narrative report of the study and provided extensive commentary and insights, suggestions for improvement, and questions about areas of concern. Their commentary was used in the further refinement of the narrative report of the study.

#### Memoing Impressions

One method of helping me straddle the conflicting divide between observer and participant was to keep careful notes about personal observations, interpretations, emerging theories, shifts in perspective, and any other observations about the ongoing conduct of the proposed study. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 188) described this process in portraiture as creating an “impressionistic record” of the events, ideas, and problems of the day. The procedure is similar to daily “memoing,” as described by Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 72-75), in which the researcher creates personal narratives as a sense-making tool during the conduct of the proposed study. These impressionistic records or memos were dated, labeled for record keeping, and included in the data analysis procedures, as with any other record.

As noted earlier, more than 600 memos of varying depth were produced in the course of the study. The vast majority were associated with the analysis of individual records (Figure 3.2), which started at the outset of the study and continued throughout. Additional types of memos, which reflected more of a running record or journal, began as the study progressed into deeper analytical phases. Memos about the participant interviews were also produced, along with my own commentary identified in the transcripts of the interviews.

At the outset of the data collection, I also revisited the sites where most of the case took place, among the offices and conference rooms of the school administration building. My visits to these familiar areas (conducted after work hours prior to my departure) were helpful in providing contextual references and prompts for my own recollections. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe this as part of conducting a “visual scan” of the entire setting of the case, including the landscape, buildings, and interior and exterior spaces, with the widest viewpoint possible and then narrowing the focus from “the macro to the micro environment, the outside in” (p. 45). This I did and recorded my thoughts and impressions in a memo for the record.

### *Voice and Perspective*

The voice and perspective of participants in this study were used in the identification of emergent themes from the data and the overall construction of the portrait. The participants formed an elite sample, and they were interviewed using retrospective interview techniques consistent with the analysis of critical decisions. The interview protocol was developed based on the initial data collection and analysis and the specific purpose of each interview.

Not all of the interviews were the same. They reflected the relative degree to which the participant was involved in the events of the case. Nonetheless, all of the interviews were noteworthy and produced valuable insights about points of view; added unknown information, substantiated information, offered clues about potential other information to be collected, and helped to create a more complete picture of one or more events. This is a fundamental aspect of portraiture, in which the voice of participants is paramount in illuminating the details of the portrait, shaping its perspective, and

informing the narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Consistent with observation by Maxwell (1996, p. 16) about participants adding “meaning” to the interpretation of data and shaping the “reality” of what is being explored and described (p. 16), the participants in this study offered a rich trove of perspectives, insights, and commentary. Their voices not only contributed to the development of the overall emergent themes and findings, they also permeate the narrative report of the study.

The participants’ willingness to share their experiences with me was, in a large measure, a reflection of our professional associations and friendships. Indeed, the interviews were lengthy conversations. The familiarity reflected an important interview technique in qualitative research for helping the perspectives of the interviewees emerge in the research (Schram, 2003, p. 103). While such familiarity gave me pause, as I wrestled with maintaining some level of professional distance, it did provide what McCracken (1988) described as “the advantage of...an extraordinary intimate acquaintance with the object of study” (p. 32). The problematic issues that were associated with this aspect of the study are addressed later in this chapter.

#### Elite Interviews

The 15 people identified as participants in the case were, in the parlance of Marshall and Rossman (1999), the “elites” in the qualitative research sample, because of their unusual or special expertise and knowledge (p. 113). In other words, they were highly valued, and great care was taken in conducting the interviews in this study. The interviews were held after extensive research was conducted in assembling data about the events of the case, distilling the information from the record collection and content analysis, and organizing the data into coherent reflections of potential themes and

chronologies. This was done consistent with the preparation strategies advocated for long interviews by McCracken (1988, pp. 32-33), in which an immersion process takes place, providing background and insights for the interview questions and preparing the interviewer with the independent expertise in the subject in order to maintain professional distance.

The interview procedures were patterned, in part, on the critical decision method identified in Chapter 2. In summary, the method includes specific questions or probes that unlock long-term memories and establish a productive two-way discussion. The strategy is designed to allow the development of details about events that emerge in the process of telling and retelling (Graesser, et al., 1996, p. 19).

Various studies and lists of sample questions from Miller (2001), Klein et al. (1989), Militello and Hutton (1998), and O'Hare, Wiggins, Williams, & Wong (1998) were reviewed in the development of the interview questions and protocols used in this study. I was also influenced by the work of Pryor (2004) and Paden-McAlpine (1999) who described incremental processes tailored to the specific individual and event. I found the latter insights to be generally consistent with my experiences. Several of the participants had limited time and opportunity for interviews; others had lots of time and wanted to chat; and still others were simply hard to schedule and their sessions were tantamount to an interruption of a busy day. Consequently, each of the interviews were conducted differently, based on the circumstances, but all of them followed the basic outlines of a scripted set of questions prepared in advance. Each of the interviews included opportunity for verbal as well as visual prompts in an effort to assist in the recollection of events or focus attention to a specific subject.

### Interview Process

The interviews, notwithstanding the advance preparation and use of prepared questions, were highly subjective, flexible, and dependent on differing variables with each situation. This was consistent with the process in the critical decision method, as described by Hoffman, et al. (1998), in which both the interviewee and the interviewer engage in a back-and-forth discussion about key points, clarifications, and repetition where necessary. The interviews were conducted in an open-ended manner, consistent with the strategies common in qualitative research. While Yin (2003, pp. 89-90) suggests the use of a standardized protocol to ensure consistency, I found that the interviews were often more reflective of what Marshall and Rossman (1999) described as unfolding “as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it” (p. 108). Nonetheless, I found the interviews productive and, for the most part, enjoyable.

The interviews were conducted during the months of November 2007 through January 2008. All but two of the interviews took place in the offices of the participants, while one occurred in a participant’s home and another in a conference room at a university library. The interviews lasted from one to three hours.

Each of the participants signed a consent form authorizing the audio recording of the interview sessions. The audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriber, reviewed by me for completeness and consistency with the audio-record, and submitted to each participant for their review and approval. They were asked to review the transcripts for any changes or additional comments, and then sign a written release form authorizing the use of the transcript in the study. A subsequent review and approval process occurred for any excerpts of the interviews identified for use in the narrative

report of the study. Generally, the transcripts and excerpts were approved without change.

### Data Analysis

The analysis of the data collected from this case focused on the development of emergent themes that formed the basis of the portrait. The analysis involved qualitative methods of coding, pattern recognition, and thematic construction of the data in ways that helped me build, understand, and explain the portrait in a coherent narrative format, supported with representations of data in tables and figures, including illustrations of artifacts from the case.

The use of portraiture as the methodology for this study involved analytic processes common in qualitative research. Coding was used to identify recurring themes in the words, phrases, and other statements collected, as suggested by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 188). A systematic process of coding was used for all documents, records, artifacts, verbatim transcripts, and the memos or impressionistic records. The organization of records by date and time, participant, and subject, as well as source, was done as the first steps in the process of coding and the preparation of the data for detailed analysis. Each day of the crisis was identified as a separate case, and a process of cross-case analysis was used to analyze the events of the overall case in chronological order. The subsequent organization of the data through coding that reflected the components of the conceptual framework further deepened the analysis.

The coding scheme used in this study—in which the data were organized into meaningful bits and pieces that were relevant to the elements of the case and the conceptual framework—was consistent with qualitative data analysis techniques

identified by Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 55-65). This included coding that identified descriptive data, interpretive data, and patterns in the data.

The analytic process was assisted with the NVivo 8 software program that enables coded data to be organized in a relational database that can be manipulated to search for patterns, missing data, responses to queries, development of matrices, identification of outliers, and other aspects of data analysis. Given the vast number of records (more than 700), plus a nearly equal number of memos, the coding aspect of the study was nearly overwhelming. However, because of the coding allowed for very specific entries—including dates, participants, and the components of the conceptual framework—the data analysis was able to discern patterns and themes regarding information that was not otherwise available. These results are reported in subsequent chapters.

#### Patterns and Themes

A deliberate process of data analysis was used to identify the patterns and themes in the data from this study, consistent with the procedures outlined by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, pp. 197-214) and (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp. 69-72). This included searching for words and phrases repeated by participants and personal metaphors used in the description of events of the case. It also included using the process of triangulation to identify the convergence of information from different sources and uncover patterns—or the absence of patterns—in the data.

As illustrated in Figure 3.3, the findings associated with the conceptual framework regarding the distribution of decisions and activities across the components of the critical leadership tasks, social system structures, reliability principals, and crisis management targets helped to illuminate other ways of interpreting the events of the case



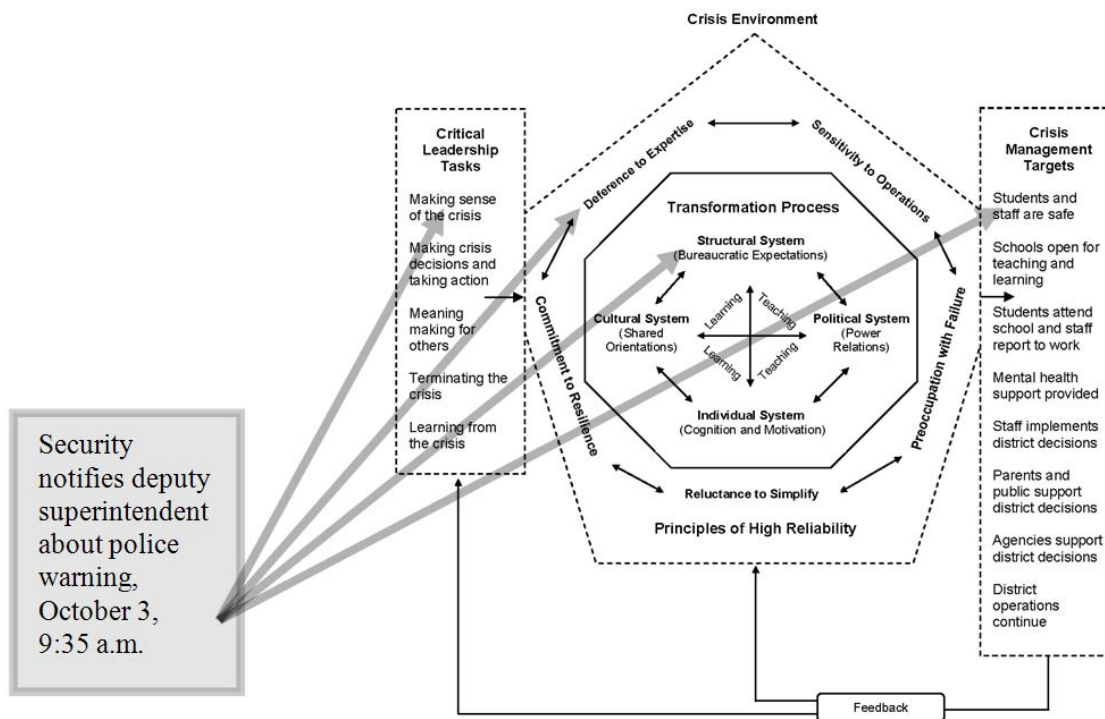


Figure 3.3 Analytical Coding Illustration with Conceptual Framework

Underlying conceptual framework adapted from “social systems” by Hoy and Miskel (2008); “critical tasks” by Boin, et al. (2005) and “high reliability” principles by Weick and Sutcliffe (2007).

and to consider potential associations that might not otherwise be evident. The process of identifying the distributions and associations was conducted by performing matrix queries in the NVivo8 program among the coded words and phrases that represented the crisis management activities of the case and the coded components of the conceptual framework and other organizational codes for dates, etc.

The process of developing the emergent themes is important in portraiture, because the narrative story is built on the framework of the themes, noting evidentiary material for each theme and making cross-theme comparisons, in order to create a comprehensive and coherent picture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Such themes

or patterns can include identification of relationships among characteristics of the case and participants, common experiences, and other elements, including those that serve to summarize information in meaningful ways (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 70).

### Production

The completion of this study involved the production of a narrative portrait, a process that began with the emergent themes identified from the data analysis. The intent was to contribute substantive research to the knowledge of crisis decision making among school district leaders by creating an authentic story that describes and explores the events of the case and the lived experiences of the participants.

The narrative production of the portrait was based on the emergent themes, data evidence, situational context, voices of participants, and other information that was developed from the data collection and analysis, including the comparative queries that revealed potential associations and other relationships among the events of the case and the conceptual framework. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, pp. 247-259) describe the compositional art of portraiture as a metaphoric process of “weaving” the thematic elements of structure, form, and coherence into an authentic, readable, and accessible story. This was the goal of the narrative report.

### Narrative Report

The narrative report of this study provides a detailed description of the exploration conducted about a specific case involving the lived experiences of a set of school district leaders and their decisions during the sniper incident of October 2002. The report reflects the participants in the recounting of their experiences, as they revealed personal memories during interviews and subsequent conversations and described, in

their own words, what happened to them and why. Their understanding of the crisis events and their role as decision makers served as the basis for anchoring the portrait in what Bloom and Erlandson (2003) describe as an integration of details that situate the events of the portrait in “the past, present, and future” (p. 875). By focusing on them, the participants serve as the witnesses and interpreters of the events (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 877). The intent was to produce what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis called “a narrative that is at once complex, provocative, and inviting, that attempts to be holistic, revealing the dynamic interaction of values, personality, structure, and history” (p. 11).

### Verification and Quality

In portraiture, authenticity is the key standard. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe an authentic portrait as one that captures “the essence and resonance” of the participants in a study and reveals their “perspective through the details of action and thought” (pp. 12-14). They further suggest that a portrait is authentic if it is believable, makes sense, and causes “that click of recognition” as credible (p. 249). Miles and Huberman (1994) equate authenticity with internal validity in describing the “truth value” of the study, in terms of such qualifiers as content-rich descriptions, internal coherence, and comprehensiveness (p. 278). Every effort was made to double-check and authentic information collected during the study and to cross-check ideas and interpretations in light of reasonableness and plausibility.

### Personal Responsibilities

This study required adherence to personal responsibilities for the maintenance of professional integrity, personal honesty, and truthfulness. I understood from the outset that portraiture, as with all qualitative research, is not immune to errors that can

undermine the quality of the final narrative if reasonable safeguards are not placed into practice at the beginning. In particular, on a personal note, I was very much aware of the specific threats of bias and reflexivity that are inherent in qualitative research generally (Maxwell, 1996, pp. 90-91) and participant researcher studies specifically (Yin, 2003, pp. 94-95). I was very sensitive to the problems identified by Schram (2003) “involvement” in the case and “familiarity” with the participants (pp. 88-91).

I also understood from the outset the prescription Maxwell (1996) offered for overcoming researcher bias and reflexivity by identifying “how a particular researcher’s values influence the conduct and conclusions of the study” (p. 91). Therefore, I endeavored to uphold my personal perspectives about truth and goodness and the value I give to the lived experience shared among the participants in this case, as acknowledged earlier. At the same time, I was aware that this personal stance can lead to the possibility of other potential threats associated with researcher bias that Miles and Huberman (1994) describe as “holistic fallacy,” in which events of the case are seen as more congruent than they really are and inconsistencies are overlooked; “elite bias,” in which overweighting of data occurs for high status informants; and “going native,” in which the research perspective is abandoned in favor of local perceptions and explanations (p. 263). I endeavored to avoid such threats by adhering to the verification and quality tests described below.

I also addressed the second major threat of reflexivity, in terms of how people responded to me, particularly in interviews. Maxwell (1996) suggests that responses in an interview are “always a function of the interviewer and the interview situation” (p. 91). In my situation, I interviewed people who were previously coworkers and

colleagues and, in some cases, organizational superiors. Maxwell (1996) suggests that there are no surefire methods to avoid the potential negative influences of reflexivity, but they can be diminished through an upfront acknowledgement of the challenge when contacting informants and conducting interviews (p. 91). This I accomplished in my interaction with the other participants, particularly since the interviews occurred not long after my retirement from the school district. I was also aware of other techniques, such as of what Schram (2003, p. 101) describes as “impression management” and “posturing” in order to balance the multiple relationship roles and maintain integrity in the relationships (p. 101). I was mindful of the reflexivity threats and implemented the verification and quality tests accordingly, as described below.

#### Verification

The tactics for testing or confirming findings in a study included eight essential steps, as adapted from the recommendations by Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 262-277) and Creswell (1998, pp. 201-203). As noted by Maxwell (1996, p. 92), such strategies offer plausible tests for the existence of potential threats (p. 92). The eight strategies conducted in this study were:

1. *Checking for Researcher Effects.* The study was open and straightforward about my relationship with the topic, my involvement in the case, the purpose of the research, and the process of data collection and analysis. The procedure of involving two critical friends was used to review aspects of the study implementation, including the narrative report, and to gain advice, consultation, and reaction to any issues of potential criticism.

2. *Triangulation.* The research methodologies of the study reinforced my ability to substantiate findings and conclusions by incorporating multiple sources of data (official, informal, and from different places internal and external to the school system); multiple methods of collecting data (observations, documents, contacts, informants, and interviews); and multiple kinds of data (text, audio recordings, memos, and notes). This was done, as described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), to identify “points of convergence in the data” (p. 204).
3. *Weighting the Evidence.* The organization and analysis of data in the study emphasized that not all data are equal, and I placed greater reliance on data that reflected primary sources, repeated contacts, and observed behavior, as well as data checked against hard facts, alternative accounts, and personal knowledge. In portraiture, this reflects the process of “referential adequacy,” in which the researcher tests personal knowledge and expertise against the phenomenon being studied (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 246).
4. *Following Up Surprises.* The study’s procedures included repeated inquiries, reflection, and comparisons to allow ample opportunity for considering new information that may reveal inconsistency, incongruence, and necessary revisions.
5. *Looking for Negative Evidence.* The study’s procedures allowed me to test and document assumptions about data, events, explanations, and theories by looking for accounts and interpretations that refuted, contradicted, or discounted findings

and conclusions. This was a regular part of the ongoing analysis prior to and during the preparation of the narrative report.

6. *Checking Out Rival Perspectives.* I incorporated procedures in the study that prompted me to look for alternative, rival perspectives that might emerge from the data collection and analysis, including outlier perspectives, and present plausible “next best” meanings for the data. I was aware that Yin (2003, p. 163) considered this step one of the key elements of an exemplary case study. I was also aware of Yin’s other verification measures, including case topic significance, data collection completeness, sufficient evidence display, and reader engagement in the case report or narrative (2003, pp. 160-165).
7. *Getting Feedback from Informants.* The procedures in this study for following-up the participant interviews with what Maxwell (1996) calls “member checks” (p. 94) were conducted in two phases—first every participant received a copy of the typed transcript of their audio-recorded interview for their review and approval; and, second, they received a copy of any excerpts from the approved transcript that were identified for possible inclusion in the narrative report of the study; and this, too, they were asked to review and approve.
8. *Intentional Redundancy.* I endeavored to follow what was described by Creswell (1998 p. 202) a key feature of verification—the intentional redundancy in the collected data as a way to confirm assertions, interpretations, and inferences notes that, in addition to verification through triangulation. Yin (2003, p. 162) also describes this as a key element of a case study’s completeness.

Maxwell (1996) calls this the “rich data” phase of validity testing, and it includes verbatim interview transcripts and detailed, descriptive note taking (p. 95).

### Quality

In addition to procedures for verification, procedural measures were included to ensure that the study maintained a high level of quality. This is defined as authenticity in portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 277-280) offered five tests for quality that I was aware of and incorporated as procedural safeguards:

1. *Confirmability*. The study’s methods and procedures were described and implemented in detail; updates and changes to the procedures were documented and preserved, with attention given to noting the organizational relationship and sequential implementation of the research methods; and care was taken to guard against researcher bias.
2. *Dependability*. The processes of the study were implemented consistently, with an emphasis on clarity, uniformity, and completeness in data collection, data analysis, and triangulation; and critical friends were utilized to review and comment on the narrative report of the study.
3. *Credibility*. The development of conclusions and the narrative rendering of the portrait emphasized authenticity, comprehensiveness, and coherence, with attention to the convergence of data through triangulation and the continual link to the research questions and theoretical framework.
4. *Transferability*. The characteristics of the study’s elements and conclusions were fully described, with an emphasis on preserving a procedural record that



can be understood, compared, and replicated; along with a goal of producing conclusions and a narrative that were well-documented and complete.

5. *Application.* The creation of the overall portrait strived for intellectual accessibility and value, providing the reader with a narrative report that is useful to researchers and practitioners.

#### Ethical Responsibilities

The development and implementation of this study included a determination to maintain ethical standards that strive to protect the integrity of both the study and its participants. I was aware of the range of ethical issues, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 291-297), which were addressed throughout the conduct of the project. These ethical responsibilities included protecting study participants from avoidable harm and risks, maintaining relationships based on honesty and trustworthiness, and shielding participants with appropriate levels of privacy and confidentiality. I upheld these responsibilities.

Special care also was taken to ensure the openness of the study, its attention to goodness, and the free choice of individuals on whether they wished to participate throughout the course of the study.

## Chapter 4: Short-Term Incident Command

### Overview

The study of crisis management by leaders of the Montgomery County Public Schools during the sniper shootings of October 2002 encompasses a period of 23 days in which the shootings took place and prior events that formed the foundation of the school district's crisis response. The resulting portrait provides a comprehensive description of a single case, bounded within an identified place and time, involving specific actions, decisions, events, and participants. The portrait is informed by a conceptual framework for understanding crisis management in the context of school district leadership, as presented in Chapter 2, and an analytical methodology for understanding the events of the case, as presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the initial events of the case through the fourth day of the crisis. The chapter begins nine months before the sniper attacks.

### Context of Last Crisis Guided New Plan

On January 11, 2002, senior leaders of the Montgomery County Public Schools introduced a new crisis management plan for the central office. The plan was unveiled at an afternoon meeting in the small auditorium where the Board of Education usually met. Invitees received copies of the plan as they entered the room. This was the first time most of them had seen the document, felt the pages in their hands, and learned about their new responsibilities. The plan affected more than 70 people. From a variety of offices

representing the dual sides of the school district’s central office—operations and instruction—they sat side-by-side in theatre-style seats as a slide show conveyed an overview of the district’s current thinking about worst-case scenarios. They heard the term “emergency response” in the name of the new plan, and they heard the terms “incident command” and “incident commander” and “command and control” to describe its administration (*Overview*, 2002).

The meeting occurred four months to the day after the terrorist attacks the previous September, and attacks of anthrax-laden envelopes were even more recent. The meeting represented the school district’s largest assembly of central office staff as potential crisis management participants. On paper, each had a role to play in the new plan’s implementation.

The first speaker was the superintendent of schools, Jerry D. Weast.<sup>10</sup> A set of suggested remarks for him had been prepared by staff and referred to Columbine, the terrorist attacks, and the need for “a formal process for dealing with and responding to all types of emergency situations” (“Talking points, emergency plan,” 2002). Weast knew well about the need for such a process. After the September attacks, he directed his principal deputies, James A. Williams<sup>11</sup> and Larry A. Bowers,<sup>12</sup> with responsibility for

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<sup>10</sup> Jerry D. Weast, Ed.D., was appointed superintendent in August 1999. He was previously superintendent of seven school districts in four states: Kansas, Montana, North Carolina, and South Dakota, beginning in 1976; and a teacher and elementary and secondary principal, beginning in 1969 (“Biography,” 2009; “Board of Education approves,” 1999). He remains superintendent, reappointed twice.

<sup>11</sup> James A. Williams, Ed.D., was appointed deputy superintendent in 2000. He previously worked in Washington, D.C., as a teacher, guidance counselor, assistant principal, and principal of a learning center and a high school. He also was assistant superintendent, deputy superintendent, and superintendent of the Dayton Public Schools in Dayton, Ohio. He is currently superintendent of Buffalo Public Schools, Buffalo, New York (“Board report,” 2000a; “Buffalo,” 2010)

<sup>12</sup> Larry A. Bowers was appointed chief operating officer in 1999 and currently retains that position. He began work for the school district in 1978 as staff assistant to the Board of Education. He then  
(Continued next page)

developing the plan presented that afternoon and subsequently to the Board of Education (Weast, 2002r). He told a national conference audience more than a year later that the events of 9/11 caught the district ill-equipped to respond to the immediate effects and implications of terrorist attacks at the nation's capital just miles away. "We really were not prepared," he told conference participants (*22 days of crisis*, 2003).<sup>13</sup>

In fact, problems arose from a very basic level. In notes prepared for Williams' portion of the presentation of the new plan, schools were described as "well-prepared" for an emergency at individual buildings, but it was a different story at the district level and for events involving multiple schools: "There has been no written protocol in place for a countywide emergency" ("Talking points, emergency plan," 2002). In other words, there was no plan to follow, and district leaders responded to emergencies based largely on personal experience and expertise. As Weast informed the Board of Education a few weeks after the plan's unveiling to staff, the district's new Incident Command System addressed that problem by establishing a formal organization of responsibility and authority and improving the district's "collective ability to respond" (Weast, 2002r, p. 1).

#### Positional Authority

The need for such a plan had been building for years, and reached a pivotal point in the spring of 1999, about four months before Weast was appointed superintendent. On April 20 of that year, in Jefferson County, Colorado, two students shot and killed

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served as administrative assistant to the deputy superintendent; director of management, budget, and planning; chief financial officer, and twice as an acting deputy superintendent. Previously, he worked in the private sector in financial accounting ("Board Report," 1999a)

<sup>13</sup> For an extended description of the impact of the terrorist attacks on the school district and the emergency response, see "Appendix B: Lessons from September 11."

themselves and 12 other students and a teacher and injured 21 other students, in addition to those hurt trying to escape, at Columbine High School (*The Report, 2001*). In the months after the shootings, Montgomery County implemented several new security procedures directed at improving individual school safety, such as the Code Red and Code Blue measures.<sup>14</sup> An institutional shift to formal procedures for districtwide crisis management did not begin until nearly three years later, with distribution of the new plan to the assembly of central office staff.<sup>15</sup> In between those events, there were three turning points that suggested the shift had already occurred.

A new management philosophy accompanied the beginning of Weast's tenure as superintendent in August 1999.<sup>16</sup> Years later, in response to an inquiry about events following a horrific bus accident in May 2000, he described a very concrete view about the exercise of positional authority in relation to official responsibility:

I learned a long time ago...that you actually have more than positional power...it's a power of example, and that power opens doors that help people in times of crisis...I would go to the accident scene, especially where there was a death or a tragic circumstance, not because I wanted to chase the ambulance, but because I wanted to force people to pay attention to the participants. And in our case, it was always children (Weast interview, personal communications, 2007).

The bus accident involved the death of the driver, while the bus was full of students going home from an elementary school. Weast went to the scene, using a contact with the police department to get past the barricades, and became the district's first superintendent in recent times (if ever) to engage in that manner. It did not end

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<sup>14</sup> For an extended description of the effects of the shootings and changes made in Montgomery County, see "Appendix C: Impact of Columbine."

<sup>15</sup> A detailed description of the plan is provided in "Appendix D: Incident Command System."

<sup>16</sup> An extended description of changes in management philosophy and operations of the school district that followed Weast's appointment is provided in "Appendix E: Positional Authority."

there. He accompanied the students to a nearby hospital, another unprecedented action, and continued to demonstrate the exercise of positional authority by marshalling resources and assistance in front of the school district staff assigned to do the same thing.

Judy Madden,<sup>17</sup> then supervisor of counseling services, was at the hospital with crisis support teams. The teams were trained to take commands only from the team captains, which included Madden. She recalled years later the confusion that erupted when their training was challenged by new circumstances and new commands that emerged as a result of the unexpected presence of the superintendent. The experience sparked the most basic of questions, she said, about “who do you respond to, who do you take directions from—to make sure that there is a coherent response?” (Madden, personal interview, 2007).<sup>18</sup>

#### Central Command

Edward A. Clarke,<sup>19</sup> a retired county police captain, was then the newly appointed director of school safety and security for the district. His first crisis response for the district was the bus accident when he gained access for Weast and Williams to the accident scene and gained some insight about the superintendent’s exercise of authority (“Appendix F: Bus Accident”). One of his immediate responsibilities was the development of a new

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<sup>17</sup> Judy Madden, Ed.D., was appointed supervisor of counseling services in 1999. She began work in the school district in 1985 as a school counselor, pupil personnel worker, and counseling specialist. She is currently director of educator learning for College Summit in Washington, D.C. (Madden, personal communications, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> For an extended description of the accident response and associated changes in expectations for emergency management in the school district, see “Appendix F: Bus Accident.”

<sup>19</sup> Edward A. Clarke was appointed director of school safety and security in 2000. He was previously a captain and director of the training academy for the Montgomery County Police Department. He also served as a patrol officer, sergeant, commander of two offices (field training and evaluation, and planning and policy management) and two districts (Wheaton-Glenmont and Bethesda), and director of special operations. He is currently a consultant in private practice in Olney, Maryland (“Board report,” 2000b; Clarke, personal communications, 2010).

emergency response plan, which was delivered the following year, after the terrorist attacks.<sup>20</sup>

Years later, Clarke recalled framing the new plan around a structure that was familiar to police yet retained the school district's own identity and authority. He recalled thinking that the purpose of the incident command model was to provide a common structure across all governmental agencies in response to an emergency. "They can co-exist, and they should co-exist, in an efficient way in the resolution of a variety of emergencies or crisis," he said (Clarke, personal interview, 2007).

The new response plan covered any incident "defined as an emergency or crisis that threatens the health and safety of students, staff, and parents at an individual school or office, multiple schools or offices, or across the school system" (*Emergency plan*, 2002, p. A-1). The envisioned emergencies included injuries and deaths, threats of violence, firearms, building fires, bombs, and hazardous materials, as well as national or state emergencies. The plan was 20 pages in length. Most of the document was descriptions of "duties and responsibilities" of the participants, including an incident commander, the members of the incident command team, and the four sub-groups for operations, planning, logistics, and finance (*Emergency plan*, 2002, pp. B-1 to B-20).

A single-page summary described the plan's purpose and scope, and a short phrase captured the essence of the plan: "central office coordination and deployment of multiple layers of personnel and resources" (*Emergency plan*, 2002, p. A-1). In other words, the plan was less about specific responses to identified emergencies and more

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<sup>20</sup> *Note:* I was a member of a small planning committee that worked with Clarke in helping to prepare the new emergency response plan.

about a common response based on structure and authority, a change in the institutional perspective on emergency management that evolved with important events (Figure 4.1).

#### Narrow Focus

Analyzing the responsibilities of the plan's top position—the incident commander—a narrow focus emerged in five main areas (as developed for this study and introduced in Chapter 2): making sense of the crisis, meaning making for others, addressing matters related of district structure, being sensitive to district operations, and ensuring staff implementation of district decisions. This concentration was evident when a content analysis of the job responsibilities was undertaken in relation to the components of the conceptual framework (Figure 3.1). The limited areas of focus meant that the other areas were largely unmentioned. These were primarily the people-oriented components, including explicit actions to ensure that students and staff are safe.

#### Schools Trained

Three months before the central office staff were informed of the new plan, Clarke distributed an initial draft of the plan to principals in late October 2001, along with a new draft “guidelines and procedures” for updating school crisis plans and a memorandum explaining the packet (Clarke, 2001a, p. 3). The guidance provided principals with a list of the required components a “comprehensive school emergency/crisis plan” and identified new measures such as “chain of command,” “command post,” an “emergency kit” for managing a crisis, and updated instructions for conducting a Code Red or Code Blue (*Draft guidelines*, 2001, pp. 1-3). At the time, the districtwide plan for the central office was under development. The focus on schools first



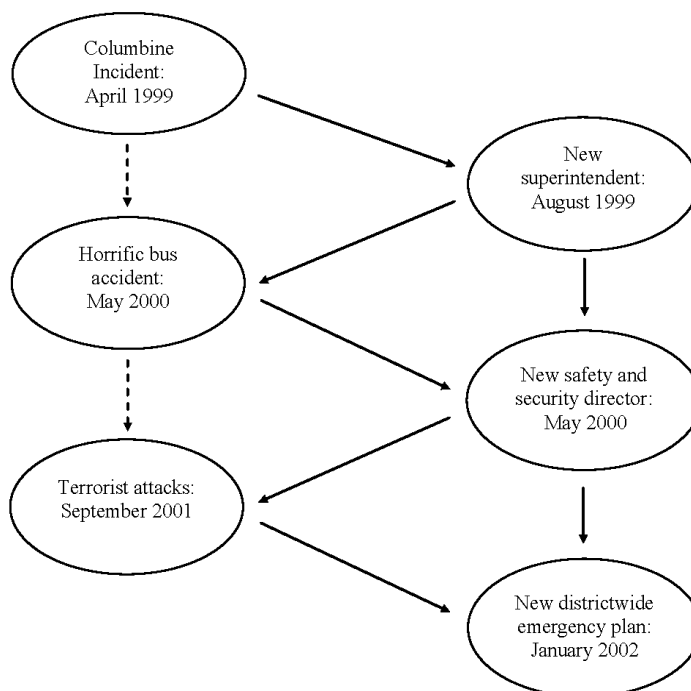


Figure 4.1 Chronology of Crisis Plan's Development

was a continuation of past-practices in the school district, which quietly emphasized that safety and security among the nearly 200 schools across the 500-square-mile school district was largely a local affair.<sup>21</sup>

Robert B. Hellmuth<sup>22</sup> was then the assistant director for school safety and security. He later recalled that at the time the schools received the new guidelines the district was moving rapidly to provide updated instruction on security measures following the 9/11 attacks and the anthrax attacks. The training began on December 4,

<sup>21</sup> See extended description of the school district's safety and security efforts in "Appendix G: Montgomery School Security."

<sup>22</sup> Robert B. Hellmuth served with the Montgomery County Police Department from 1970 to 1992, the last five years in the Special Investigations Division. He began work for the school district in 1995 as a middle school security assistant and then as a high school security team leader, field security coordinator, and assistant director of school safety and security. He is currently director ("Board report," 2007; Hellmuth, personal communications, 2008, 2010).

2001, and ended in March 2002, with 11 classes offered at various times, each lasting from two to three hours. Participants needed to attend only one session, and the sessions were filled with school administrators, teachers, school-based security and building service personnel. Also participating were community superintendents and other staff from the Office of School Performance, which oversaw the supervision of schools—the only central office personnel invited to attend. Ninety percent of schools participated, and the training was voluntary. “We provided training for anyone who responded to our offer,” he recalled (Hellmuth, personal interview, 2007).

In a report to the Board of Education, Weast said the training was “an ongoing and dynamic process” with sessions tailored to specific groups, with the departments of transportation and maintenance added (Weast, 2002t, p. 2). The initial training for school-based staff was designed as the first phase of a two-part lesson plan, with the more advanced training set to continue in October 2002. Ultimately, the reported tally of participants included more than 3,100 school district employees. Absent from among targeted employees were the superintendent’s leadership team and the personnel who attended the meeting in January 2002 to implement the new districtwide emergency plan. Among these people were those who ultimately participated in the Incident Command Team convened in October 2002, in response to the sniper shootings. Instead, their training consisted of a table-top exercise during the summer, just prior to the opening of schools, without any pre-training.

#### Hand-Picked Team

The people who were chosen to attend the meeting in January 2002 were well regarded. In his orientation comments, Clarke told them they were essentially hand-

picked for their new roles and assignments. The slides on the projection screen described them as “highly skilled and trained” and selected for the teams on the basis of their “collective knowledge, skills, and abilities” (*Overview, 2002*). This message was repeated to Board of Education the following month at a public meeting in which the same overview was provided.

The large number of people involved in the plan reflected one of its defining characteristics—there were three team members identified by name for nearly every position, one person as the primary team member and two others as back-ups. Several people served on multiple teams (for example, I was a primary for one position and a back-up for another). This “three-deep” strategy, as it came to be known, was designed to ensure that every position was covered if an emergency occurred and people were unavailable for any reason. The only position without three designated assignments was the incident commander, which had two (Larry A. Bowers, the chief operating officer, and Richard Hawes, director of facilities management). Weast was not named to any of the team positions, and on the organizational chart, he was identified as the superintendent, overseeing the entire organizational structure (Clarke, 2002c).

By omission, the assignments also identified people who were *not* chosen, including senior staff. Each appointment was approved by Weast. He later told participants at a conference that he learned a lesson after watching some senior staff reactions during the terrorist attacks in 2001. “Not everybody works well in a panic,” he said then (*22 days of crisis, 2003*). In response to an inquiry years later, Weast recalled that he wanted people in the command team positions who could act on the basis of skills and abilities, not necessarily bureaucratic authority:

Some of the people we found in positional power...couldn't hold up under a crisis, and yet they were darn good at what they were doing educationally, but in a crisis [they] either took too long to make a decision or were more paralyzed in making the decision (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

As a result, some individuals who held lower-level positions in the district's main office were chosen over more senior administrators.

#### Table Top Drill

By late spring of 2002, no training was scheduled for central office staff in their new roles in the incident command system. Bowers, as the chief operating officer, oversaw the day-to-day operations of the school district, including such diverse elements as student transportation and school performance. Although school safety and security reported to James A. Williams, the deputy superintendent, Bowers wrote directly to Clarke, the director of school safety and security, on May 8 about the delay in training. In his memorandum, which was shared simultaneously with the senior staff, Bowers specifically inquired about scheduling a "tabletop exercise...within the next month" and noted previous discussion about "the importance of practicing our response to a crisis situation" (Bowers, 2002c). The exercise had been expected much earlier. Weast told the board the previous February that "a tabletop emergency/crisis exercise... will be conducted in the near future" (Weast, 2002r, p. 3).

The exercise was announced on June 28 as scheduled for the last week of July. In announcing the event, Bowers wrote to all of the participants, encouraging their attendance and acknowledging the potential conflicts with summer schedules. He emphasized the importance of being as "prepared as possible" in the event of an emergency (Bowers, 2002a). The day before the planned exercise, the event was postponed when the air conditioning system in the main meeting room broke down. The

new date was set for the next month, in late August, on a Friday morning, four days before opening of schools. Clarke told participants in an e-mail that there were no other options. It was “imperative,” he wrote, “that we conduct this exercise prior to the first day of school” (Clarke, 2002b). Nonetheless, several participants responded by e-mail to the school safety and security department with their regrets, saying they were unable to attend (“Table top exercise,” 2002). Their reasons included a niece’s wedding, a daughter’s college visit, an office staff retreat, medical appointments, and personal leave.

#### No Prior Training

The table top practice was held on August 23, 2002. The participants were assigned to one of five teams. In addition to the central command group, there were teams for operations, logistics, planning, and finance, in accordance with the incident command structure (Figure D.1 in “Appendix D”). The teams gathered in separate rooms within the headquarters building. This was their first meeting as a team since the orientation seven months earlier. There had been no other training since then. When Bowers announced plans for the exercise in late June, he asked participants to prepare themselves by reviewing the materials they received the previous January. They were “expected,” he wrote, “to be familiar with the responsibilities of their designated roles within the Incident Command System” (Bowers, 2002a).

They were to know what to do, he informed them, because the event was expected “to test the readiness of all components” of the newly designed plan (Bowers, 2002a). The exercise involved a tabletop drill designed to practice crisis management skills under controlled conditions. Participants were seated around tables in conference rooms, essentially role-playing to a scripted event. The drill required responses to escalating

scenarios of mayhem associated with a tornado “destroying everything in its path” (*Tabletop presentation*, 2002). The planned destruction included the collapse of school gymnasium roof, an overturned tanker truck in front of a school, and other subsequent emergencies affecting several identifiable schools and locations in nearby Olney, Maryland. Bowers led the exercise.

The drill felt strikingly realistic. Tensions were raised. The pace was fast. Participants were warned to say “this is an exercise” if they talked with anyone not also role-playing within the drill (*Tabletop presentation*, 2002). Over the course of four hours, participants responded in real time to the unfolding developments as they learned about them from the exercise planners. Clarke and his staff used a tightly scripted schedule to maintain a heightened awareness of time and the pressure of deadlines.

In the plan for the exercise, the first three objectives were to self-assess the readiness of team members, identify new ideas, and build team collaboration. The fourth objective was to “evaluate the school system’s response” overall in the preparation for a real crisis (*Tabletop exercise*, 2002). Participants also were to record their activities for later review and assessment. At the start of the exercise, they were instructed to “maintain a written activity log” and participate with the response team officers in a debriefing “to assess, evaluate, and discuss lessons-learned” (*Tabletop presentation*, 2002). Observational notes were taken by school safety and security staff and kept on file in a binder. Two weeks after the exercise, Weast informed the Board of Education about the exercise in a report on school security preparations for the new school year. “This exercise,” he wrote, “tested all components of the plan and evaluated its strengths and weaknesses. We will continue to evaluate the process...” (Weast, 2002t). A draft

evaluation was prepared by school safety and security staff, but it was never submitted, nor acted upon. The mock emergency was overshadowed a few weeks later by the real thing.

#### Observant Leader

Weast did not participate in the training exercise. He observed. Officially, there was little for him to do in the role assigned to him in the new plan. His main responsibility was to decide when to activate the system and whether to delegate authority to the incident commander (*Emergency plan*, 2002, p. B-2). He deferred to Bowers for the training exercise. Bowers' name appeared as incident commander on all the documents associated with the plan. Weast agreed with the command structure from the outset, communicating his approval in a memorandum to the Board of Education six months earlier. "Mr. Bowers," he wrote in February, "has been designated as the primary incident commander and has been given the authority and responsibility for developing the school system response to the emergency/crisis" (Weast, 2002r, p. 2).

In all other respects, the command framework retained the existing governance structure for the school district, with the Board of Education and superintendent of schools at the top of the organizational chart (Figure D.1 in "Appendix D: Incident Command System"). Once the command system was activated, the plan described the superintendent's major functions as ensuring "the continuity of the school system," in terms of activities other than those directed toward the emergency, and to serve "as a liaison" to governmental and political authorities (*Emergency plan*, 2002, p. B-2). There was no mention of being involved in the minutia of operational command decisions, except possibly in an advisory role in communications with the incident commander, who

was ensure that “the superintendent...[is] fully briefed on all aspects of the emergency/crisis” (*Emergency plan*, 2002, pp. B-3) .

For Bowers, this alignment made sense based “on the premise,” he told command team members several months later, that the superintendent would be elsewhere in a major emergency, working primarily with county emergency management authorities (*Lessons learned*, 2002, p. 1). In such a scenario, Weast and Bowers were to work in tandem, relying on close communications and coordination. Even though this was not what the new structure described, it was what Bowers recalled as the best possible scenario.

Decision making itself has got to be directed by either the superintendent or the commander on site [at the central office], which many times is me, because the superintendent likes to go out to the scene. It’s his communication with me that really should drive everything else, and the challenge is then to have a communication system where that actually works... (Bowers, personal interview, 2007)

At the outset, however, the formal structure had its doubters. Judith Madden, the supervisor of counseling, recalled years later being unable to reconcile the new structure with her own experiences, including the bus accident two years earlier and then the terrorist attacks. “I remember thinking that was a crazy incident command structure to begin with,” she later said, “because I knew in reality that [it] would never happen. There’s no way he would—that Jerry [Weast] was going to yield decision making” (Madden, personal interview, 2007).

In early September, a few weeks after the table-top drill, Weast expressed confidence in the district’s emergency readiness in an update to the Board of Education. “While we hope that we are never faced with any situation that requires the activation of



the emergency/crisis plan, it is important that we are prepared in case the need arises,” he wrote (Weast, 2002t). The first test came less than a month later.

*Superintendent Took Over after First Shots*

On Thursday, October 3, 2002, school security was not an urgent issue on an otherwise typical school morning. The district’s website displayed images of smiling students and reports of school improvements (Figure 4.2). The day before was National Walk to School Day, an event described by the school district as a way to improve physical fitness as well as child safety (*Schools participate*, 2002). The morning newspaper described the latest academic initiative (“Schools,” 2002). There was no indication of a pending crisis.

The initial shooting happened at about 7:45 a.m., but it was of little notice, until a second shooting within 40 minutes, followed by a third shooting within another 30 minutes.<sup>23</sup> It was not yet 9 a.m. The regular process of opening schools was in effect, with the last of the elementary schools set to open at 9:15 a.m. (*Management plan*, 2001, pp. 17-21).

The focus shifted abruptly to security, as word of the shootings spread. The county was later described as “an ideal place to unleash the terror,” in part, because it lacked much experience with public violence (Londoño & Rich, 2006).

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<sup>23</sup> The first shooting killed a man mowing the grass near Rockville Pike at White Flint Mall at about 7:45 a.m. The second shooting occurred about 35 minutes later at about 8:25 a.m., and killed a man pumping gas at a Mobile service station on Connecticut Avenue at Aspen Hill Road. Less than a half hour later, the third shooting killed a woman sitting on a bench in front of a restaurant along Georgia Avenue, on the outskirts of Olney (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003; “John Muhammad v. Maryland,” 2007, pp. 5-6).

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Figure 4.2 Public Face Prior to the Shootings

Image of district's website on September 23, 2002, retrieved August 15, 2007, from Internet Archive (online database) at <http://www.archive.org>. Copyright 2002, Montgomery County Public Schools. Used with permission.

In the span of less than an hour, most of the preparations of the previous year in the development and implementation of the new emergency response plan—including the designation of Larry A. Bowers as the incident commander—were set aside and the superintendent retained authority for the emergency management of the school district (Figure 4.3). Weast proceeded to direct a series of quick decisions with a small group of staff, including Bowers and me, before convening the rest of the senior staff.

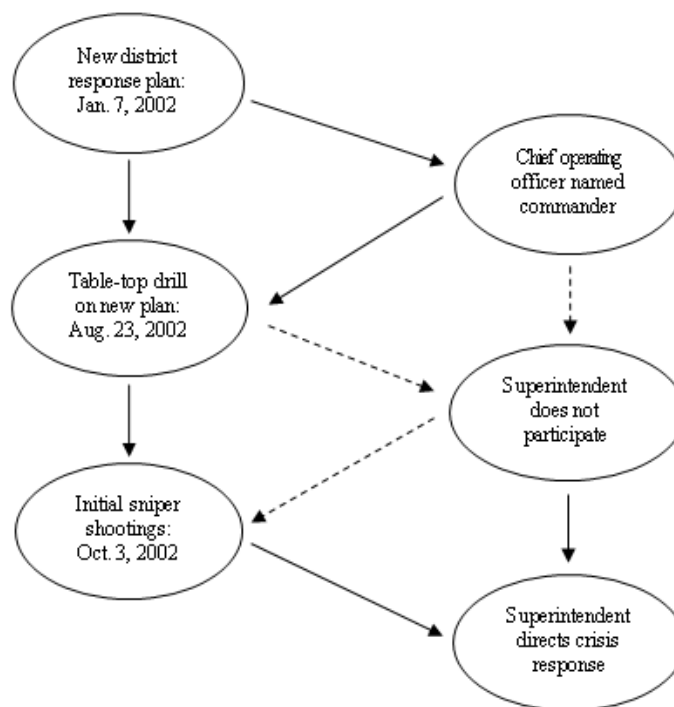


Figure 4.3 Chronology of Incident Command

#### Initial Police Warning

School operations, at the district level on the morning of October 3, 2002, were not part of the initial police response.<sup>24</sup> Almost one hour elapsed after the third shooting, and nearly two hours after the first shooting, before police notified the school district.<sup>25</sup> Robert B. Hellmuth, the assistant director of school safety and security, was in his office that morning. His supervisor, Edward A. Clarke, was attending a funeral in Silver Spring of a former police colleague. Years later, Hellmuth, who also had been a police officer

<sup>24</sup> The police response evolved into a large-scale manhunt, with assistance from state, federal, and local agencies, with officers searching vehicles “with guns drawn” (Cannon, 2003, p. 25). The county’s transportation staff monitored remote traffic cameras, looking for clues (“9/11 lessons,” 2002).

<sup>25</sup> A police spokeswoman that morning, as quoted in a later book, said the shootings were a “crime that we have not experienced before” (Cannon, 2003, p. 24). It was so unusual that the county’s murder rate increased by 25% in one day, according to another account of the incident (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003, p. 87). Five years later, a police commander said in a television news report: “In the beginning, it was chaos. We didn’t know where to go” (“Minds,” 2007).

for Montgomery County, recalled receiving a call from a police lieutenant at about 9:30 a.m. He said the conversation was semi-official in tone, more of a concerned tip by someone he knew than a deliberate component of an organized tactical response by the police command. The lieutenant told him about three shootings in the previous two hours, all in different public places near residential communities and all fatal. He suggested that children be brought off playgrounds at nearby schools (Hellmuth, personal interview, 2007).

At the time, the three known killings had been added to a similar shooting the night before.<sup>26</sup> The combined shooting sites marked a swath through the center of the county. The geographic area was later described as “roughly five miles long and three miles wide,” including several “densely populated” communities (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003, p. 78). In reality, as later revealed in court testimony, the assailants considered the potential killing field as much larger.<sup>27</sup> Police had contacted a few schools five miles north of the third shooting, in an extension of the presumed murder route along Georgia Avenue toward Olney.<sup>28</sup> Brooke Grove Elementary, the first school along that route, implemented its own Code Blue precautions as a result. Other nearby schools took similar precautions, also on their own.

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<sup>26</sup> The shooting occurred at about 6:00 p.m., Wednesday, October 2, killing a man with a shot through his back as he walked across a parking lot of a shopping center in Wheaton (“John Muhammad v. Maryland,” 2007, p. 3).

<sup>27</sup> Lee Boyd Malvo later testified that he and his older accomplice, John Allen Muhammad, “scouted out the entire Montgomery County” for potential shooting sites (“State of Maryland v. Muhammad,” 2006, p. ¶ 10:16:27). They had pre-planned routes marked on a computer. “If there was nothing, we moved on because there were plenty of other areas,” he testified (“State of Maryland v. Muhammad,” 2006 ¶ 10:16:27). He said their plan was to kill five people the first day.

<sup>28</sup> Instead, as Malvo later testified, the assailants reversed course and turned south to another previously “designated spot,” after bypassing four to five other “potential areas” that they rejected as “too busy” (“State of Maryland v. Muhammad,” 2006 ¶ 10:16:27).

The actual number of schools and students within five miles of the shooting sites that morning (a large area measured linearly but consistent with the travel distance to some schools warned by police) was enormous—97 schools and more than 77,000 students, as later calculated by school district staff (Figure 4.4). At that size, the impact area represented nearly half the school district.

#### Path to Code Blue

During the half-hour following the police lieutenant's call, a series of decisions were made that resulted in the implementation of a districtwide Code Blue at about 10:00 a.m. The decision was unprecedented, and the decision process was brief, as reconstructed years later from the recollections of participants and the school district's archival file of notes, documents, and other artifacts from that morning.

The process began after the police notified Hellmuth. He alerted his on-site supervisor, James A. Williams, the deputy superintendent, and then Larry A. Bowers, the chief operating officer, was informed, among others (including me). This was the typical notification process—in person or by phone, followed by a small group of senior staff taking a measure of what was happening and discussing options. The group gathered in Williams' office. He had the largest and most centrally located workplace in the building. A big conference room was next door, the same room where the command team members conducted the table-top drill six weeks earlier. Under the emergency response plan, the conference room was the designated command post, a non-descript space of cinderblock walls, florescent lighting, and office furniture. A large table was surrounded by lots of chairs, all on wheels, positioned arm to arm, with another back row of stationary chairs, against the walls, for the overflow.

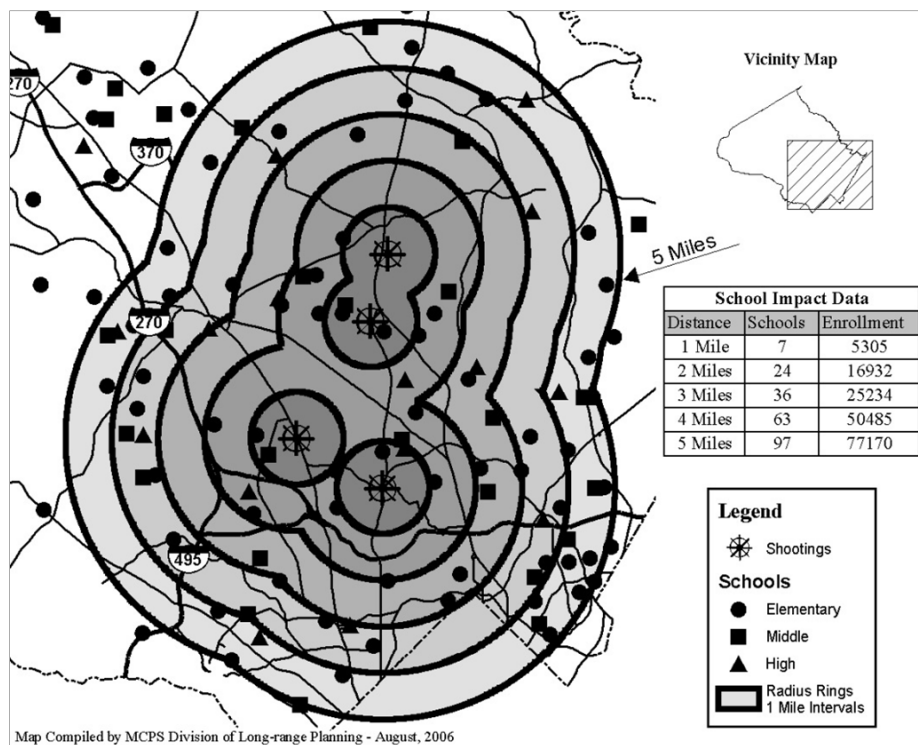


Figure 4.4 Impact Areas of Shootings on October 3

Illustration prepared by the Division of Long-range Planning, Montgomery County Public Schools. Copyright 2006, Montgomery County Public Schools. Used with permission.

The room was down the hall and around the corner from the superintendent's office, on the first floor of a historic school building, located not far from the county government offices in Rockville, the county seat.<sup>29</sup> The room overlooked a back parking lot rimmed by tall trees adjacent to a nearby school. However, the building's front door,

<sup>29</sup> The building was once the George Washington Carver High School and Junior College, a segregated facility that closed in the 1950's. It was renamed the Carver Educational Services Center, in honor of George Washington Carver, when it reopened as the school district's headquarters ("Carver high," 2006).

opening to other parking areas, on the other side of the facility, faced the same highway where the first shooting occurred less than five miles away.<sup>30</sup>

Weast was not part of the initial notification of staff. Bowers notified him within 10 minutes of the police warning and he joined the group in Williams' office. The gathering began informally but most of the participants were standing after Weast arrived. In the room were Bowers, Williams, Matthew A. Tronzano<sup>31</sup> who was Bowers' executive assistant, Hellmuth, and me. Weast wanted an update from police and directed Hellmuth to get the lieutenant back on the phone.

The requested police update was concise: an unknown suspect, three people dead, plus one the night before, each with a high impact injury, single shot, from a distance, apparently with a rifle. Discussions turned to options. Weast had a secretary present to take notes. He also had a large map spread across the deputy superintendent's desk and looked closely at the locations of the shootings and nearby schools, describing his interpretations to others. He later recalled observing their reactions. "It wasn't like there was a whole body of people around me saying, yeah, this is what we ought to do. It was like, what are you doing?" he said (Weast interview," 2007).

Weast also discussed the police information from the perspective of an experienced hunter. Robert B. Hellmuth, who was also trained in firearms, joined the

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<sup>30</sup> The shooting site was along one of oldest and most prominent commercial corridors in the region. Rockville Pike evolved from colonial roads (based, in part, on Indian trails) that connected the port of Georgetown on the Potomac River to the western crossroads at Frederick, Maryland, in the foothills of the Appalachia mountain range (Choukas-Bradley, 2003, p. 18). The portion of the road in front of the school district's headquarters was named Hungerford Drive.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew A. Tronzano was appointed executive assistant to the chief operating office in 2000. He previously worked in the district as a classroom teacher, administrative assistant, principal of two elementary schools, and director of school administration. He became associate superintendent for human resources in 2004. He is currently executive director, The Jones Center for Families in Springdale, Arkansas ("Board report," 2004a; Tronzano, personal communications, 2010).

discussion as it focused on the threat of an apparent marksman. Weast said years later, in a newspaper article, that the details of the shootings meant to him that “nothing’s safe” (Sedam & Ford, 2007).<sup>32</sup> At the time, the hunting analogy was met with initial skepticism among others in Williams’ office. The skepticism continued after Weast convened a meeting of the senior staff in the conference room next door. Donald H. Kress,<sup>33</sup> the coordinating community superintendent, recalled the challenge people had in understanding the superintendent’s suggestions of the unthinkable:

I think the fact that [Weast] and I are both hunters made us understand that it was possible for a trained shooter to deliver a fatal shot from 200 yards or more. We had an earlier understanding of the vulnerability of kids at bus stops and on playgrounds and athletic fields than did some other team members (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

#### Unprecedented Idea

As the earlier discussions continued in Williams’ office, Bowers suggested to Weast that a districtwide Code Blue was possible. At the very least, it would keep students and staff indoors until things settled down. For schools, this was the purpose of a Code Blue. At the district level, no such plan existed. The idea was unprecedented. The district had never been locked down essentially, with all students sheltered in place.

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<sup>32</sup> Police later that morning were quoted describing the killings as the work of a “skilled shooter” (Manning, 2002). The term “sniper” was used widely in the media the next day, from descriptions of “a sniper who killed five people” in *The Washington Post* (“For parents,” 2002) to “roaming sniper picks off five in suburban terror” in *The Times* of London (Watson, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Donald Kress began work for the school district in 1969 as a junior high school teacher and later served as a resource teacher, administrative intern, assistant principal at two schools, and principal of a junior high school and then a high school. He became a director of school accountability in 1996 and then a community superintendent, prior being named coordinating community superintendent. He is currently a consultant in Germantown, Maryland (“Board report,” 1999b; Kress, personal communications, 2010).



Weast later called it “the far end of the extreme in terms of protection” (Sedam & Ford, 2007).<sup>34</sup>

The idea evolved as calls were made to various offices, especially student transportation, placing them on alert. Weast shared the outlines of the idea with county officials and wrote them down in his notes, referencing the time of 9:48 a.m. He also wrote “Head Shots” in the notes, as he received more details, and described the victims as both male and female with no pattern as to gender, race, and age (“Sniper crisis,” 2002).

The decision window was about to close. It was almost lunch time for high schools, including schools that allowed students to leave their campuses to eat at local restaurants.<sup>35</sup> The mid-day transportation of nearly 6,700 students for morning and afternoon kindergarten and early childhood programs also was scheduled to begin soon.<sup>36</sup> Bowers asked me to draft an announcement and wait for a decision. In the adjoining conference room, a computer was tucked into a corner. There was much commotion in the room, as people arrived for the meeting with Weast, initially unaware of what was taking place.

The Code Blue decision occurred about 28 minutes after the police lieutenant’s warning. Based on a timeline reconstruction from archival records and interviews with participants, there were seven primary decision points along the way. Analytical coding

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<sup>34</sup> The next morning, an editorial *The Washington Post* described the school district’s actions as part of a heroic progression: “[As] courageous police officers and citizens rushed in vain to assist the victims at the various bloody sites...thoughts turned immediately to the safety of children” (“Roving gunfire,” 2002).

<sup>35</sup> Off-campus travel also was available for high school students with internships and special education students engaged in life-skills activities in local communities.

<sup>36</sup> The half-day kindergarten programs involved 4,300 children, as well as another 2,380 children in Head Start and other pre-kindergarten programs (*Schools at a glance*, 2003). The schools most affected were those in the immediate impact area of the shootings.

of the decisions suggested that each faced a different aspect of crisis management, in terms of the critical leadership tasks, social systems, reliability principles, and management targets in the conceptual framework developed for this study. When envisioned together, the result was a complex image of overlapping focus areas, illustrating the dynamics involved in the process of crisis management (Figure 4.5).

The decision also overlapped events elsewhere. A fourth victim was shot in the middle of the county, not far from the first three shootings, at about the same time as the superintendent ordered the Code Blue.<sup>37</sup> Weast and the others learned about the shooting later, and the location suggested an ominous turn. The shooting occurred near the first incident, on the same highway as the second, and on a route heading south from the third—in effect, doubling-back toward the beginning.

The school district's decisions created a ripple-effect in the region as private and public schools “near and far followed suit,” sheltering students indoors in nearby Maryland counties and limiting outdoor activities in some Virginia counties (“For parents,” 2002). News media coverage increased rapidly, adding drama to already intense circumstances. I later told a conference: “We entered into what can easily be called a media frenzy” (*22 days of crisis*, 2003).<sup>38</sup> The coverage translated, in part, into an aggressive and repetitive cycle of news reporting and commentary. Televised reports flowed into the conference room, where the coverage was monitored and recorded in the

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<sup>37</sup> The shooting occurred at about 9:58 a.m., killing a woman with a shot in the back while she vacuumed her car at a Shell gas station on Connecticut Avenue (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003, pp. 75-77; “John Muhammad v. Maryland,” 2007, p. 7)

<sup>38</sup> An editor at *The Washington Times*, in an online posting, for example, later described the effort taken to photograph “a female victim sitting on a bench covered in a bloody sheet” and publish it “as the lead photo [the next day]... This play set the tone for our staff. Our editors made an aggressive decision to show the impact of this senseless killing and we were not about to let them down” (Owen, 2002).

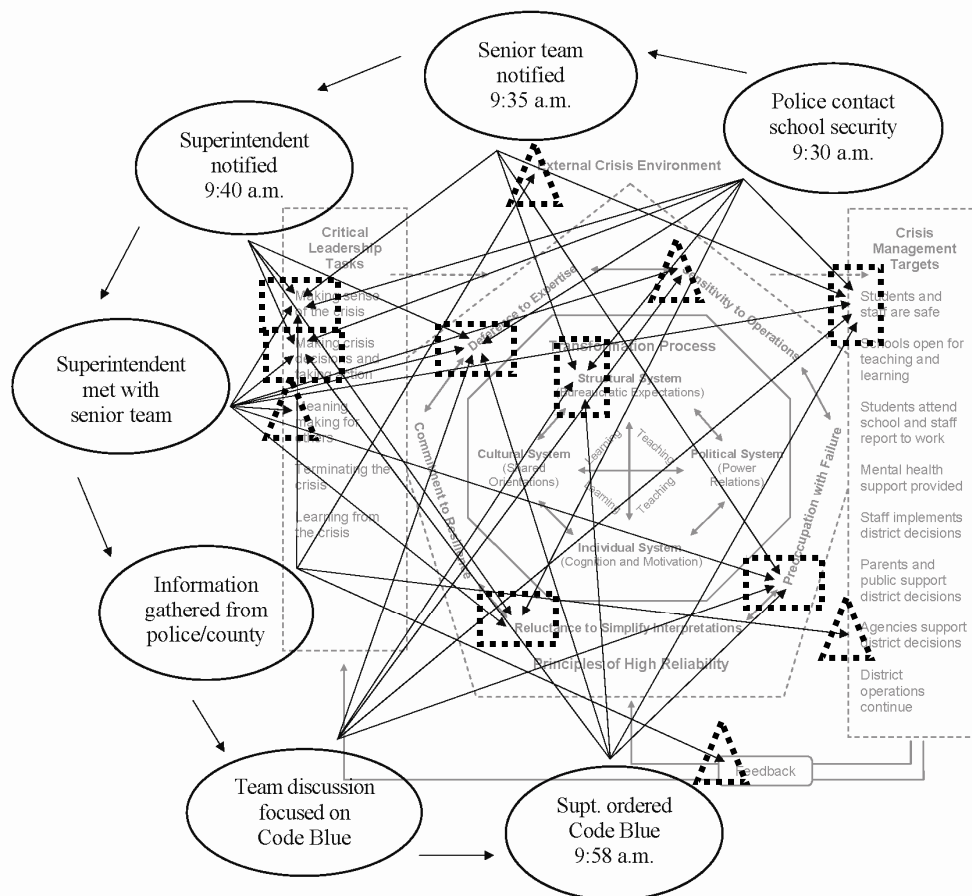


Figure 4.5 Patterns and Outliers in Conceptual Path of Code Blue Decision

Underlying framework adapted from “social system model” by Hoy & Miskel (2008); “critical tasks” by Boin, et al. (2005); and “high reliability” principles by Weick & Sutcliffe (2007).

team meeting notes (*Meeting notes October 3*). Television stations interrupted their regular programming with live, seemingly breathless reports that gained in frequency and length, if not banality, as the day continued.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> An article in *The Baltimore Sun* the next morning illustrated the dramatic storyline: “From its bloody epicenter in Montgomery County...[the] stunning burst of...random killings sent waves of fear and disbelief through schools and stores from Northern Virginia to the Pennsylvania state line...As word spread...so did fear” (Kiehl, Hopkins, & Bishop, 2002).

The media reports became controversial in their own right, sparking debates within the journalism community about whether the reporting was responsible or sensational (see, for example, Kurtz & Kalb, 2002; Lisher, 2002; Smolkin, 2002). One television station, in particular, was found later in a study of media coverage to have “purveyed fear from the outset” (Censer, 2006).

The coverage was seen across the country. A school board member from Weast’s former school district in North Carolina, for example, called to offer encouragement about “this crisis today in Montgomery County,” after seeing reports on television while attending a conference in Seattle (Trevino, 2002). The communications manager for the Alabama Department of Education sent an e-mail to me saying, “Just heard your interview on Fox News Channel...Let’s hope they catch the guys soon” (Salter, 2002).

In the meantime, the emergency took on a life of its own and emotions were running high. The events tested my own resolve when talking to the news media about steps being taken to keep children safe. I commented later, in recalling the experience for an interview in a newsletter article, that there was little room for error:

No matter how emotionally challenging the stress becomes, and no matter how chaotic the rest of the world may look at any given moment, you must always remain calm, controlled, and purposeful in your public comments...a panicky spokesperson just breeds more panic (Grunig, 2002).

I had made two mistakes that morning, both as statements in the first Code Blue announcement. The announcement incorrectly said “a man has been seen using a rifle” and “people have been injured, including fatalities” (Porter, 2002c). The first mistake resulted from a misunderstanding of police reports; there was no sighting of a man with a rifle, only speculation about a likely scenario. The second resulted from haste and hope. I had not absorbed the reality that all the victims were dead.

‘Kitchen Cabinet’

A few minutes after Weast made the Code Blue decision, the larger emergency response group assembled around the table in the conference room. This was the first gathering since the table-top exercise six weeks earlier. The conference room had been outfitted with new equipment. In addition to the computer, there were extra telephone lines, electrical outlets, an emergency radio, a special kit with supplies, and a television mounted high on a wall. Weast sat at the head of the table, a huge slab of dark walnut laminate that dominated the comparatively small room. Weast had his back to the windows, facing the team and the television. The television was on, tuned to a news channel.<sup>40</sup> Virginia Brooks, an administrative secretary, sat to his left, taking notes continuously.<sup>41</sup> To his right was Larry A. Bowers, as was the typical arrangement. James A. Williams, the deputy superintendent, sat farther along the side of the table, towards the middle, where he often conducted his own meetings. Others were distributed in a seating order that reflected their familiar places. (I typically sat at the far end, directly opposite Weast, near the computer and the door.)

There were new people in the room. The group included most of the executive staff and others who were not involved typically in the district’s emergency management. Some were given assignments and left soon after, and others stayed as the group settled in. One of the early participants was Roland Ikheloa,<sup>42</sup> the staff assistant for the Board of

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<sup>40</sup> The television remained on for the entire day, with staff taking notes and highlighting breaking news as a description about the unfolding events (*Meeting notes October 3, 2002*).

<sup>41</sup> Brooks also collected “pertinent documents as a permanent record of the...school system’s actions” (G. R. Murphy & Wexler, 2004, p. 107).

<sup>42</sup> Roland Ikheloa was appointed staff assistant to the Board of Education in 1995. He was previously a high school business manager and an adult education teacher, and a management and budget

Education office. Years later he recalled encountering Weast in the hallway, and asked if he could attend the meeting. “He said, yeah, take good notes,” Ikheloa recalled (Ikheloa, personal interview, 2007). Another was Michael L. Subin,<sup>43</sup> then chairman of the County Council’s education committee. He remembered years later a flurry of activity at the council’s offices about the shootings that morning. “And then I got a call from the superintendent asking me to come over, that he was calling a meeting,” he said (Subin, personal interview, 2007).

When Kress arrived, he recalled knowing little more than what he had heard from the news on the radio at a secretary’s desk next to his office. “I knew that there had been these two [shootings], but I’m not sure if I heard about the third,” he said (Kress, personal interview, 2007). Matthew J. Kamins,<sup>44</sup> supervisor of psychological services, remembered the reaction he received from school district staff in a class on crisis strategies he was teaching that morning. He told them about the shootings and he had to leave. “People in the audience thought we were...putting them on, that this was part of our plan...that a crisis can happen at any time...It was no plan, it was real,” he said

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*(Continued from previous page)*

specialist for the school district. He also previously worked as a financial accountant, college lecturer, and resource teacher. He is currently the chief of staff for the Board of Education ("Board report," 1995; Ikheloa, personal communications, 2010)

<sup>43</sup> Michael L. Subin, J.D., was elected to the Montgomery County Council in 1986. He was appointed to the public safety and education committees, the latter as chairman. Reelected four times, he served 20 years on the council, the entire time as education committee chairman. His tenure also included three terms as council president. He served in the U.S. Naval Reserves, retiring as a captain. He is currently an attorney in private practice and executive director of the Montgomery County Criminal Justice Coordinating Commission in Rockville, Maryland (Subin, personal communications, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Matthew J. Kamins was named supervisor of psychological services in 2001. He began work in the school district as a school psychologist beginning in 1989 and became a psychologist services specialist in 1999. Previously, he worked in private practice as the owner and director of a learning center and director of behavioral support at two private schools. He is currently a school psychologist in the school district’s student services unit (Kamins, personal communications, 2010).

(Kamins, personal interview, 2007). Weast later told a conference audience: “We were reacting before the public was reacting” (*22 days of crisis*, 2003).

When he entered the team meeting room for the first time, Roland Ikheloa, the staff assistant to the Board of Education, recalled a feeling of unease, if not rejection, from some others. “They were in war mode...and here their leader comes in with someone who they are probably comfortable with on an informal basis, but they had not been told ahead of time that this was going to happen,” he said (Ikheloa, personal interview, 2007).

Weast said later that “establishing the team,” after having already made the Code Blue decision, was part of an effort to demonstrate the district’s independent authority and ability to take care of itself (Weast, personal interview, 2007). Five years later, in a newspaper article, Weast characterized the group as part of his “kitchen cabinet,” in recalling the events of that morning (Sedam & Ford, 2007).<sup>45</sup>

#### Permanent Command

Weast had the option of delegating the role of leading the school district under the Emergency Response Plan adopted the previous spring, but he continued to direct the response, without acknowledging the formal plan or the need for one. He became the incident commander in form and function and the other members of the emergency response team adjusted (see Figure 4.6). “From a leadership standpoint, he was in charge

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<sup>45</sup> The term “kitchen cabinet” originated during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, initially as a derogatory reference by his critics to an unofficial group of advisors, and the group likely had the modern “appearance of a close-knit, informal group of aides” who were highly trusted and involved in political and personal activities that reflected “Jackson’s determination to direct his administration and to make himself the center of the decision-making process” (Latner, 1978, pp. 367, 388).

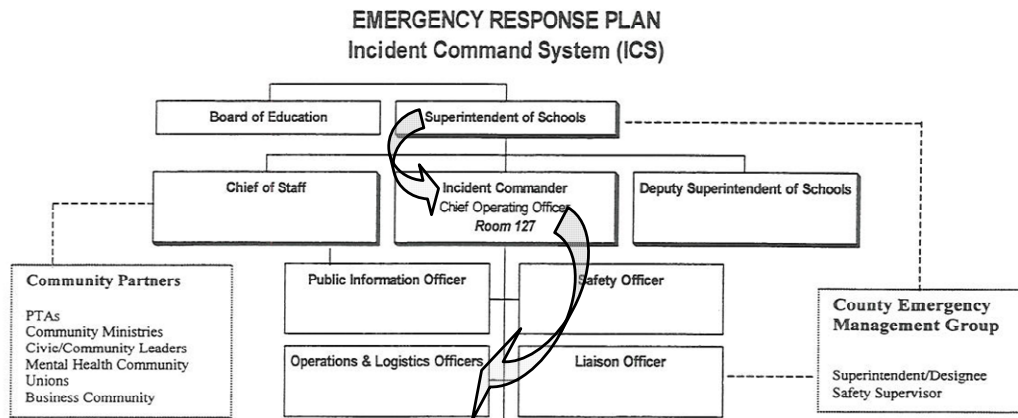


Figure 4.6 Change in Command Structure, October 3

Illustration adapted from *Emergency Response Plan* (2002). Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools. Copyright 2002 Montgomery County Public Schools. Used with permission.

and everybody knew it,” recalled Michael L. Subin, the member of the County Council who also joined the team (Subin, personal interview, 2007). Bowers, who was the designated incident commander under the Emergency Response Plan approved the previous spring, acknowledged the change later, in comments to team members, and described it as a permanent modification in the authority structure, with him as second in command. “I will take over if he has to leave,” Bowers said then (*Lessons learned*, 2002, p. 1).

Weast recalled being unwilling to walk away from the situation, believing it would have been unfair to do so. “I wasn’t going to duck and dodge,” he said (Weast, personal interview, 2007). He referred to the leadership choice as similar to the improvisation of a military commander on the battle field:

Any general...will tell you the best battle plans are changed immediately when the battle opens, and any leader that I’ve ever read about...[who] not only had the courage, but also opened themselves up to the criticism, led from the front” (Weast, personal interview, 2007).



Weast's choice was unavoidable, given the unique conditions that day, recalled Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent. "So, in that sense, I wasn't surprised that the incident command structure broke down rather quickly," he said (Kress, personal interview, 2007). The decision made little difference at the time in terms of the goal of an organized command response, recalled Edward A. Clarke, the director of school safety and security. "I'm not sure that we set out initially following the model, but when the superintendent convened that body of decision makers, or leaders, it kind of followed the natural construction of our plan," he said (Clarke, personal interview, 2007).

#### Focus on Structure

Over the 90 minutes following the Code Blue, Weast made a series of rapid decisions, several as a result of recommendations by Bowers (Figure 4.7). Other actions were taken by command team members. The events during that period of time were reconstructed, based on interviews with participants and the school district's archival file. The decisions and actions formed a cascade of activities, built one on top of the other, as the clock ticked toward mid-day. At one point, school district vehicles were sidelined as the police investigation widened, and personnel at training sites were told to stay where they were and not travel back to schools. Matthew A. Tronzano, executive assistant to Bowers, remembered the calls made to the maintenance supervisors and other departments with vehicles on the road:

We explained...do a general call to everybody, to stay put where you are, either get to the closest school or just pull over on the side of the road and stop driving until we can find out what's going on (Tronzano, personal interview, 2007).

The decisions resulted in extensive efforts to alert staff and parents, with formal and informal activities overlapping each other as different members of the team began

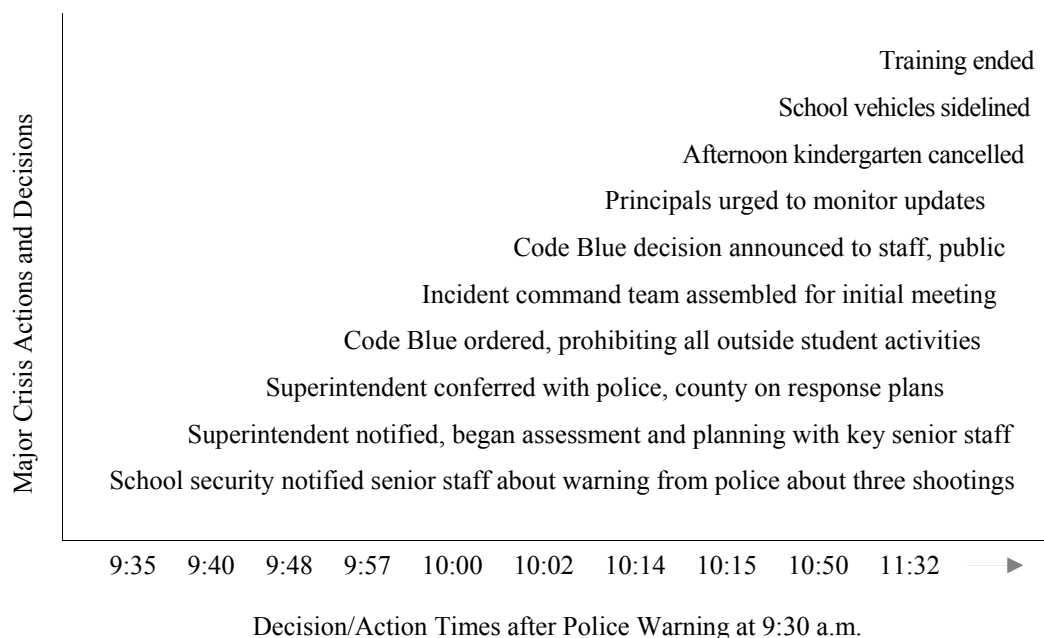


Figure 4.7 Timeline of Major Actions and Decisions, October 3

contacting their respective areas of responsibility (Figure 4.8). As reconstructed from interviews and archival records, the process reflected a network of decision communications chiefly aimed at school communities from multiple sides.<sup>46</sup> The redundancy was designed to offset a basic shortcoming in the e-mail system at that time—there was no quick way to prompt anyone to read the messages, let alone a natural cue (such as snow falling) to suggest an emergency message might be waiting. Principals were told to expect more changes, monitor their e-mail, and watch “current

<sup>46</sup> An elementary school teacher later described the reaction when the decision was announced: “Code Blue, Code Blue, people going up and down the halls saying this really loud...running up and down the halls to check that outside doors are locked...I pull the blinds down and close them tight...” (Ochs, 2002).

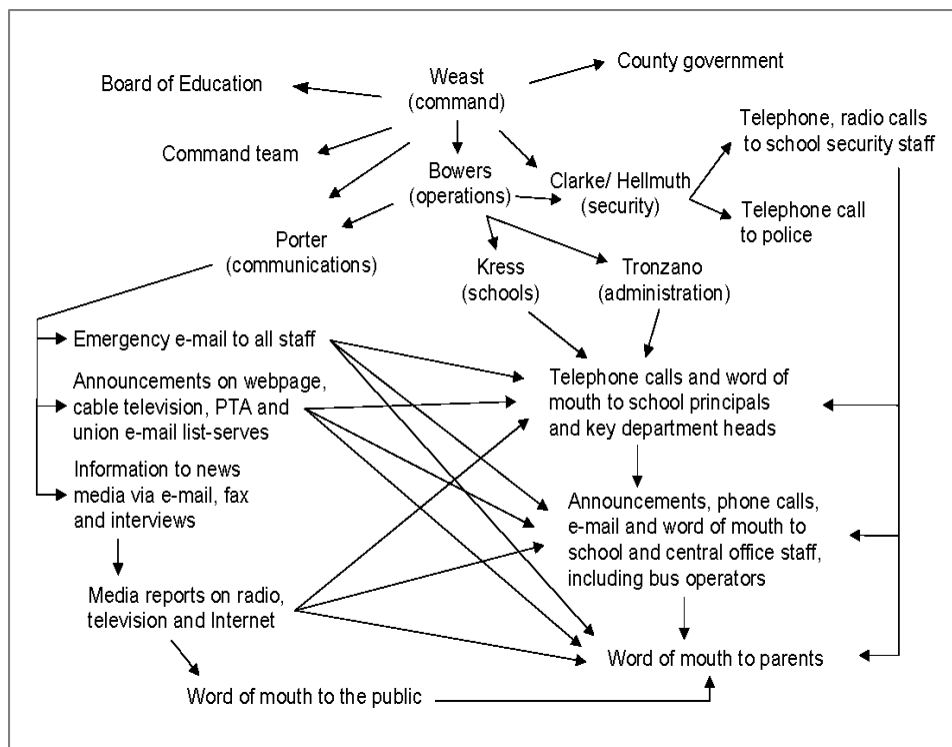


Figure 4.8 Complex Decision Communications Network, October 3

television broadcasts of breaking news regarding today's events involving the random shootings” (Porter, 2002m).<sup>47</sup>

The actions and decisions of the team, over the course of the day, focused overwhelmingly on making sense of the crisis and attending to the structural and operational components of the school district in an effort to keep students and staff safe (Figure 4.9). These focus areas were evident when 70 crisis actions involving one or

<sup>47</sup> The county government also lacked means for emergency communications. Kathleen Henning, program manager for the county’s Office of Emergency Management, told a Congressional committee two years later: “We went from calls to our public information office immediately to the broadcast industry [which] started putting the information out...and the story was picked up” (“Hearing,” 2004, p. 19).

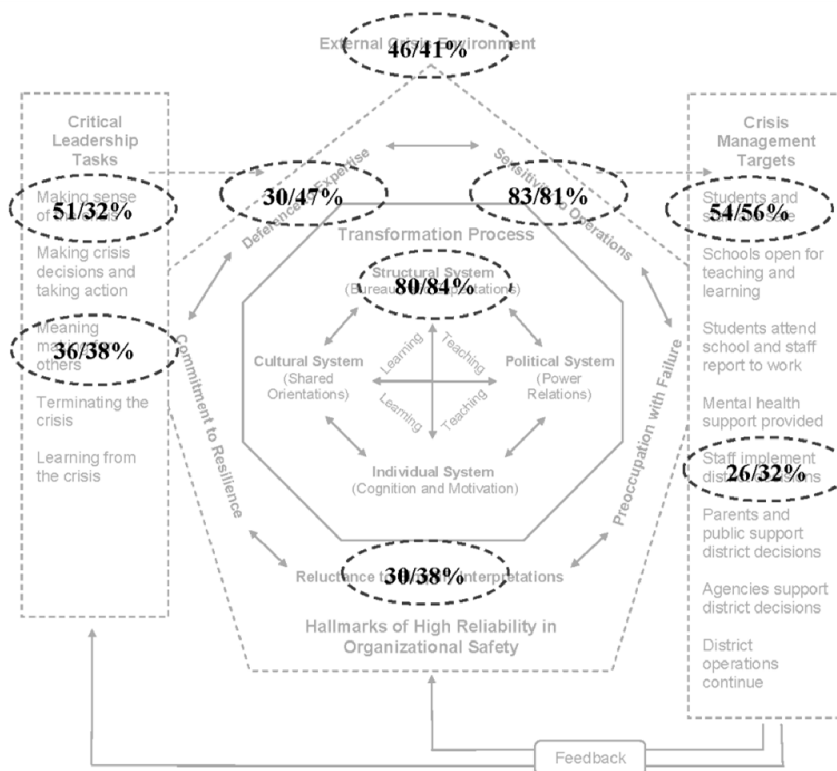


Figure 4.9 Conceptual Focus Areas of Crisis Actions/Crisis Decisions, October 3

Data reflect highest two percentages of crisis activities and crisis decisions associated with one or more conceptual framework components (see Table J.1 in “Appendix J: Tables”). Data overlap. Percentages rounded. Crisis actions include crisis decisions.

Underlying conceptual framework adapted from “social system model” by Hoy & Miskel (2005); “critical tasks” by Boin, et al. (2005); and “high reliability” principals by Weick & Sutcliffe (2001).

more members of the team, including 32 crisis decisions primarily by the superintendent, were identified through a reconstruction based on participant interviews and archival records and an analysis in relation to the conceptual framework developed for this study (see Table J.1 in “Appendix J: Tables”). The analysis identified a general symmetry among the top two associations for actions and decisions, except in two areas—“making sense of the crisis,” in which there was a higher associated percentage of actions than

decisions, suggesting more information gathering activities; and “deference to expertise,” in which there was a higher associated percentage of decisions than actions, suggesting more reliance on others with pertinent knowledge and skills.

*Authority Demonstrated in Decision Delay*

On Thursday morning, October 3, after the Code Blue decision, there was an argument brewing over the authority to open and close schools. Weast and others, including James A. Williams, deputy superintendent of schools, worked to prevent county officials from asserting control over the schools. Weast announced to the team at mid-morning, according to notes of his remarks and his recollections and those of others, that he had received assurances from county officials that he had the authority, unless there was a state of emergency (*Meeting notes October 3, 2002*). He later recalled there was little room for debate about the issue. “We’re going to be the ones making the decision to open and close the schools. It’s not going to be somebody else” (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

A demonstration of the authority occurred later that morning, regarding a decision on whether to dismiss schools on time or hold students in place under the continuing Code Blue. Based on a reconstruction of events from archival records and interviews with participants, the decision was made shortly after 11:00 a.m. to dismiss on a normal schedule, pending any further incidents. School safety and security staff, along with the police, began making plans for controlling traffic and looking after children as they departed the school buildings. The decision, however, was not shared with the team by Weast until more than an hour and a half later, at 12:38 p.m., prompting a rush of last-minute communications to principals, who had been promised a decision by 1:00 p.m.

Police Chief Charles A. Moose did not delay. He announced the decision during a press conference televised on *CNN* that began at 11:19 a.m. A few minutes into the conference, according to a transcript of the televised conference, he said:

We've been in constant contact with Dr. Weast and his staff... We have no information that this has anything to do with the schools. None of the victims have been of anything close to school age. None of the locations are close to the schools... I think the school kids are safe. They're being educated. They will be released under normal schedule.... ("Montgomery police," 2002)

The reaction was swift. In the meeting room at the school district's headquarters, about an hour later, Weast emerged from a conference call in Williams' office next door and told the team, according to the notes of his remarks, that his "decision making procedures" now included "working in concert with Police Chief Moose," and he added that he had received "assurances" there was to be "as much police presence at schools as possible" for dismissal (*Meeting notes October 3, 2002 ¶ 12:28 p.m.*). A short while later, a police spokesperson, in another press conference telecast on *CNN*, corrected the chief's earlier statement: "...in terms of the schools, Chief Moose has been in consultation with Superintendent Weast. They will be announcing how the schools will be released shortly" ("Maryland authorities," 2002b). The announcement was made at 12:55 p.m., about 17 minutes after Weast informed the team.

Weast described the decision, in a letter released to parents and staff that afternoon, as based on "the police department's advice and the recommendations of the county's emergency management team" and, as a result of working with the police and

county officials, “it was deemed safe and appropriate to dismiss children from school at the regular time” (Weast, 2002g).<sup>48</sup>

The police spokesperson said that officers were deployed “not because there are any threats to the schools,” but because they wanted to make “sure our kids are safe when they're released,” in reference to traffic control (“Maryland authorities,” 2002b). Moose later wrote in a book he co-authored that the assignment of police and low-flying helicopters at and around schools were made “partly in case there was a sniper lurking in the woods, but largely because we wanted the community to see that we were there” (Moose & Fleming, 2003, pp. 31-32). The county government was under intense pressure from parents to protect the schools, recalled Douglas M. Duncan,<sup>49</sup> the county executive. He said he supported the Code Blue decision and the “show of force and just the public display of police officers,” as necessary to maintain public confidence and sense of security (Duncan, personal interview, 2008).<sup>50</sup>

Years later, Matthew A. Tronzano, the executive assistant to the chief operating officer, recalled the problem faced by principals in not knowing sooner. Tronzano, who was also a former principal, said he knew principals had few options if students were not dismissed on time. As the day progressed, he said, their questions would have multiplied

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<sup>48</sup> *Note:* As the director of communications, I wrote or assisted in the writing of the superintendent’s correspondence to parents and others during the events of the case, including those excerpted in the narrative report of this study.

<sup>49</sup> Douglas M. Duncan was previously a city council member and mayor of Rockville. He was elected Montgomery County Executive in 1994 and re-elected twice, leaving office in 2006. He later worked for the University of Maryland, College Park, as vice president of administrative affairs. He is currently a consultant in private practice in Rockville (“Former County,” 2008; Duncan, personal communications, 2010).

<sup>50</sup> By then, the assailants were not in Montgomery County. Malvo testified they spent the afternoon near Howard University in Washington, D.C., scouting potential targets but finding none because there were “too many witnesses” (“State of Maryland v. Muhammad,” 2006 ¶ 10:16:27).

along with their anxieties: “What do I do with my children, where do I put them, where do I send them?” (Tronzano, personal interview, 2007).

#### Reaction of Parents

Parents swarmed at schools early in the day, especially near the shootings sites.<sup>51</sup> Clarke later told a conference audience that such parent behavior was expected: “As we saw on September 11<sup>th</sup> [2001]...parents were coming to retrieve their school children, their loved ones, and that was a natural reaction” (*How to lead*, 2003, p. 73). His department prepared for more of the same.

There were thousands of young children from morning kindergarten classes who were held at schools at mid-day, unable to leave. Security personnel at high schools were deployed to elementary schools. The scenes at schools were unlike anything ever seen by Clarke, a police veteran. He later testified in court that the security measures, especially the presence of low-flying helicopters, “clearly left me with an eerie feeling and a sense of uncertainty” (“Commonwealth of Virginia v. Muhammad,” 2003 ¶ 4277).<sup>52</sup>

The subsequent media coverage mixed parent fear with images of police at schools (Figure 4.10). The police were described as standing “guard in groups of two at campuses, directing anyone away except for parents” (“For parents,” 2002). Among the parents were frightened moms and dads who “arrived at their children's schools, their faces harried and drawn, scared” (Fisher, 2002). One parent wrote later: “I had been

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<sup>51</sup> Police Chief Moose, in statements at a press conference, asked parents to “not make a rush on our schools,” and saying that while he could not “arrest a parent” who insisted on coming to school, “it doesn’t help the situation at this point” (“Montgomery police,” 2002).

<sup>52</sup> The use of helicopters flying over schools was a point of contention later. A federal study said some experts thought “the aggressive use of military-style helicopters induced more fear than they alleviated,” while others valued the tactic “to suppress sniper activity” (G. R. Murphy & Wexler, 2004, p. 85).



## For Parents and Students, Safety First

### *Schools Lock Their Doors, and Some Keep Information Scarce in Fighting Fear*

By Washington Post Staff Writers

Normally, Jane Batwinis is content to let her daughter, a student at Tilden Middle School, walk alone from the bus stop to their Rockville home after school.

But yesterday afternoon, she met Kathryn at the corner when the bus arrived.

"We just gave each other a big hug," Batwinis said. "She knew she was safe."

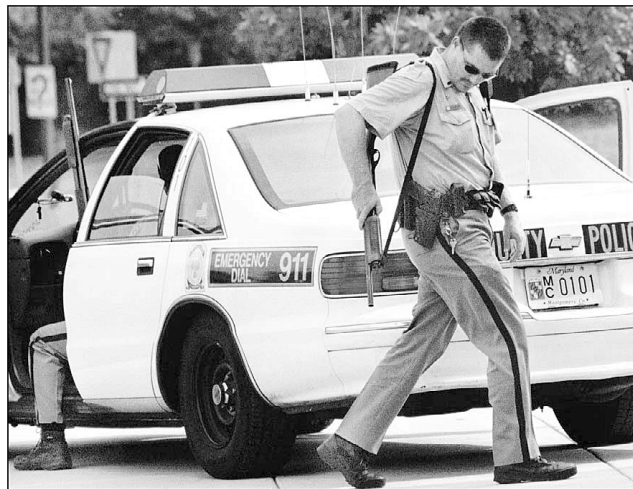
At dinner tables and in living rooms across Montgomery County last night, parents calmed themselves and tried to reassure their school-age children at the end of a frightening day.

Many parents didn't wait until after school to embrace their loved ones. Upon hearing that a sniper who killed five people had not been caught, they arrived in droves at county schools to take children home early.

Campus phones also rang at a furious pace. Larry Plotkin of Rockville called Kennedy High School in nearby Wheaton to find out how school officials planned to safeguard children—such as his daughter, Elana—who walk on Kandolph Road to get home.

Not satisfied with what he heard, Plotkin instructed them to keep his daughter at school until he arrived in the afternoon to drive her home. "It was going on live, and the criminals are out there very close to where we live," Plotkin said.

This morning, he and his wife, Kathryn, plan to drive their daughter



BY A WASHINGTON POST PHOTOGRAPHER

Outside John F. Kennedy High School in Silver Spring, Montgomery County police officers have their shotguns ready.

School districts near and far followed suit. Students in Prince George's, Howard and Frederick counties were behind locked doors until dismissal time. Calvert County schools let high school students take part in after-school activities only in

ly.

Inside schools, confusion reigned throughout the day as some students were told details about the shootings and others were kept largely in the dark.

Jared Schneider, 13, an eighth-

Fields said she informed students over the loudspeaker that there was a Code Blue emergency and gave as little detail as possible—on purpose. "We're doing as much as we can to have a normal day," Fields said.

Figure 4.10 Media Focus on Fear and Police at Schools.

Excerpt of page reproduction from *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2002, p. A-13.  
Copyright 2002, The Washington Post. Reprinted with permission.

riveted—and shaken—like everyone else I knew. The mere sight of my two sons after school on Thursday had released in me a sense of relief so profound that my boys smelled my fear” (Frerking, 2002).

#### Ease Back to Normalcy

At mid-day, Weast was described telling the team that, preliminarily, he planned to open schools on time the next morning unless something happened (*Meeting notes October 3, 2002* ¶ 12:50). Still unresolved was the question of the Code Blue, which remained in place. Elsewhere, however, the county government moved to keep school buildings available for public use that afternoon and evening, including outdoor use of

athletic fields and courts, despite the school district's decision to cancel school activities for students (*Meeting notes October 3, 2002 ¶ 1:05*).<sup>53</sup> The sense of urgency was evaporating. In the superintendent's office, for example, a letter was received that afternoon from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry offering assistance for students "in response to today's shooting spree" (Benoit, 2002). The office staff forwarded the letter to another office to prepare an appropriate a response, attaching a routing slip with a due date of October 16, two weeks away (*Sniper crisis, Week 1, 2002*).

That evening, in events reconstructed with all participants, Bowers called me at home and alerted me to a probable decision about ending the Code Blue for the next morning and asked me draft a statement. We discussed the details, and I then conferred with Weast on the final wording. The announcement was released to principals by e-mail just after 8:30 p.m. and to the news media a half-hour later. Schools were to open on time and the Code Blue was lifted, but the prohibition on outdoor activities remained. The continuation was described as "a precautionary measure only to address parental and staff concerns about potential threats to student safety and security," and the announcement noted the school district "continues to work closely" with the police and county government (Porter, 2002b).

At just after 10:00 p.m., a little more than an hour after the statement was released, County Executive Douglas M. Duncan said in a television interview on *CNN* that police protection remained in place for schools the next day ("Baffling," 2002). This

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<sup>53</sup> After-hour community use of school facilities was controlled by the county government, not the school district, and the program operated independently of school district decisions.

was information not contained in the school district's announcement, nor communicated to principals and other staff. Duncan, in the television interview, went on to describe the actions being taken to protect schools as part of a coordinated effort: "After September 11, we instituted a good security plan for all the schools...They performed that plan today...We had extra police security at the schools. We're going to do that tomorrow. We're going...to school at normal times.... ("Baffling," 2002).

#### Football as Symbolism

On Friday morning, principals received an announcement that all outdoor student activities were back on schedule for that afternoon and evening. The decision meant the resumption of athletic events for 23 high schools, including several Friday night football games under the lights in stadiums, typically attracting large crowds of students, parents, and community members. The games were seen as symbolic. Duncan was quoted later in a newspaper article saying that resuming high school football that night was "a sign of determination to maintain community life" (Johnston & Van Natta Jr., 2002).

The decision to resume outdoor activities was made Friday morning, largely in the same manner as the night before. There was no record of the decision, except the message sent to principals and staff in an e-mail and the later public announcement. There was no command team meeting to discuss it or review options. There was no meeting at all. Weast received a report indicating that student attendance was mostly normal, except for a few secondary schools near the shooting sites. The report was provided by Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, who conveyed the information in a brief summary table. The report, which was retained in the district's archival record, showed a few secondary schools with drops in attendance of as

much as 12 percentage points (*Sniper crisis, Week 1, 2002*). Whether the spike indicated a small or large problem, residual fear or an opportunistic holiday, was not known.

No reference to the previous day's events was made in the decision announcement, except indirectly in a statement that noted "every effort is being made to return to normal operations...No changes are anticipated, unless otherwise notified" (Porter, 2002n). The announcement did not mention activities beyond Friday, but the decision was interpreted as covering the entire weekend.<sup>54</sup> Bowers and Tronzano, his executive assistant, had been working with the athletic department since the previous day and produced an impact statement and contingency plan if something happened to cancel athletic events. The remaining schedules included games prior to league championships and the competition for athletic scholarships among graduating seniors.

Weast sent no letter sent home to parents. Instead, a letter of appreciation was sent from him to three groups of employees—cafeteria workers, transportation staff, and security staff—to acknowledge their roles in helping to maintain calm and order during the previous day's events. The letter to the food services personnel, for example, noted that by maintaining uninterrupted breakfast and lunch service "...you added a sense of stability and care to a difficult situation" (Weast, 2002c). The recipients of the letters numbered in the thousands.

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<sup>54</sup> An e-mail shortly afterwards by the assistant director of transportation, for example, informed bus depot managers that "all sports trips and activity runs" were to resume for Friday afternoon and Saturday (Watkins, 2002).

Later in the day, there were reports of two shootings, one the night before and the other that afternoon, but neither were connected initially to the previous attacks.<sup>55</sup>

Before leaving work Friday evening, based on a reconstruction of the event with all participants, Bowers and I spoke about arrangements for weekend announcements to confirm that activities at schools were ongoing and schools were opening on time on Monday. Such announcements were typical after a major disruption, such as weather emergencies, in order to reaffirm normal school operations. The statement did not include any information about plans to have police assigned to schools. The information was then known, but deference was given to the county government and police regarding disclosures on law enforcement matters. The announcement included the same cautionary hedge from the morning's statement: "No changes are anticipated, unless otherwise notified" (Porter, 2002j).

#### Police Plans for Monday

Additional police were at the football games Friday night and Saturday. At Richard Montgomery High School in Rockville, police officers guarded the gates to the field (Potter, 2002). Crowd attendance was down, including less than half the normal attendance at Albert Einstein High School in Kensington, which was located between two of the shootings sites ("Safety gone," 2002). On Sunday evening, at a press conference televised by *CNN*, Police Chief Charles Moose announced that police were returning to schools the next morning for the start of the new school week. Moose said he planned to

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<sup>55</sup> The first shooting occurred at about 9:20 p.m. on Thursday evening, October 3, killing a man with a shot in the chest as he crossed a street in Washington, D.C. The second shooting occurred Friday afternoon, October 4, at 2:27 p.m. in Fredericksburg, Virginia, wounding a woman in a parking lot ("John Muhammad v. Maryland," 2007, p. 10).

have “increased visibility around each and every school” (“Montgomery,” 2002). He also cautioned, however, that officers were not expected to be standing guard “at every school, every minute. But we will absolutely do our best” (“Montgomery,” 2002). The plan was to move officers from school to school over the course of the morning.

Duncan recalled years later that he offered the protection of police at schools to Weast during a conversation about how to maintain community security and manage public perceptions of safety. “We said, okay, here are some things we’re doing and, by the way, we want to offer some more security [for schools],” he recalled (Duncan, personal interview, 2008). Weast also recalled the offer years later, and said he welcomed the assistance of the police. Their presence initially was one of the “symbolic things,” he said, that were necessary to address parent concerns and later became an irreplaceable stop-gap as shootings continued and fear increased (Weast, personal interview, 2007). He noted the police deployment’s actions reinforced the image of cooperative and proactive county leadership at a time of great uncertainty. He said parents needed the reassurance that first weekend, not the worries associated with cancelled activities. “As often is the case, when we close down school for the weekend, people start getting more hysterical rather than less hysterical,” he said (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

The deployment of police was consistent with the school district’s efforts earlier in the year to strengthen its ties to police through the facilities officers program that assigned police to schools. The size of the deployment was noteworthy, but not the basic idea. “We never objected to having the police presence in front of buildings, around

buildings, stopping in at buildings, checking them. We wouldn't have objected to it," recalled Bowers (Bowers, personal interview, 2007).

Clarke later testified in court that he assisted police in designing the plan "to ensure that there would be some level of police presence, uniform police presence, in and around our schools during arrival times and departure times" ("Commonwealth of Virginia v. Muhammad," 2003 ¶ 4277). Clarke recalled years later that he worked with a police lieutenant over that weekend "to address our needs" regarding schools that were "within the 'impact zone,' and possibly the surrounding ring of the impact zone" of the initial shootings (Clarke, personal interview, 2007). The deployment plan was outlined in a memorandum on Sunday, October 6, from the deputy chief of police to district commanders. It identified certain schools as priorities for police protection because of publicly accessible locations near major highways and "their proximity to shopping centers" (B. O'Toole, 2002). As such, the police prepared for a shooting based on the earlier incidents.

That Sunday night, in the City of Bowie in neighboring Prince George's County, preparations were under way for an entirely different spectacle.<sup>56</sup>

The next morning, Moose said at a press conference he wanted the officers "to be visible, to be diligent, to be aware, hopefully provide some comfort to the parents, to the young people" ("Montgomery County," 2002). He acknowledged later the risks were much higher than suggested at the time. "From an officer safety perspective, the dumbest strategy was assigning officers to high visibility posts, such as in front of the schools,"

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<sup>56</sup> Malvo later testified that he prepared Sunday for a shooting the next morning. He described digging a shallow hole behind some bushes in a wooded area, covered the hole with leaves, and sat there through the night, waiting with his rifle ("State of Maryland v. Muhammad," 2006 ¶ 1:33:51 to 3:06:04).

Moose said (G. R. Murphy & Wexler, 2004, p. 81).<sup>57</sup> The deployment included county, state, municipal, and park police at both public and private schools.

The plan was unique in the Washington area. Robert B. Hellmuth, the assistant director of school safety and security, recalled years later that school security staff at the time viewed the attention given to student safety, beginning after the initial shootings and continuing through the weekend, as wrongheaded. He said it presented students as a challenge to the assailant, an attractive target, and that if the focus of attention did not shift away from students, “we’re going to get somebody shot” (Hellmuth, personal interview, 2007). Duncan came to a similar conclusion later. “I do think that we learned while this was going on, that all the attention on kids backfired,” he recalled (Duncan, personal interview, 2008).

#### Shared Responsibility

During a press conference on Monday morning, at about 6:30 a.m., which was telecast on *CNN*, reporters asked Moose about the decision to allow outdoor activities for students after police guarded their arrival at schools. Moose said it was Weast’s decision, “and we have certainly agreed with his decision, that it be a full school day, regular hours, regular activities” (“Montgomery County,” 2002). In a separate event about a half-hour later, Duncan told an interviewer on the *NBC Today Show* that the decision was arrived at mutually. “We talked about it with the superintendent, and the feeling was that let’s get back to a normal day and let kids go outside a bit, let them have open lunch,” he said (“Duncan NBC,” 2002).

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<sup>57</sup> Two police commanders later described the risk: “They stood, morning and afternoon, in front of schools like sitting ducks, and they knew they were vulnerable” (Demme & Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 17).



Duncan also described, in the televised interview, another decision involving the schools. “We’ve also said, if there are parents who are uncomfortable with [outside activities], please contact your local school. We’ll make provisions to keep people indoors if parents feel...that’s the way to go,” Duncan said (“Duncan NBC,” 2002). At the morning press conference with Moose, the idea was described as having originated with Weast. “Dr. Weast, our school superintendent, also has said...they will make arrangements for the children...to stay inside,” Duncan said (“Montgomery County,” 2002).

The idea reflected an accommodation typically available at schools for any student whose parents might request an indoor assignment during recess. But this was different, with the potential of prompting requests for alternative activities for a much larger number of children. Schools were not informed of the offer. Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, recalled years later that there was nothing done in advance of that Monday as “special in preparation for the opening of schools” (Kress, interview, 2007).

Within a few hours, Duncan’s announcements about parents opting to have their children stay inside were no longer relevant.

At the time, Weast was host for a long-scheduled breakfast meeting with the president and officers of the Montgomery County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations (MCCPTA). Also in attendance were Larry A. Bowers, who as chief operating officer, was expected to talk about the upcoming budget. James A. Williams, the deputy superintendent, was there, too, to handle issues related to instruction. They

were joined by the superintendent's chief of staff, Frieda K. Lacey.<sup>58</sup> The breakfast was held in the conference room adjoining the superintendent's office, beginning at 8:00 a.m. It was to be followed at 10:00 a.m. by a staff briefing on the monthly human resources report prepared for the Board of Education. The breakfast ended early and the later meeting was cancelled as events of the morning altered everything.

Matthew A. Tronzano, the executive assistant to Bowers, recalled years later that there was little mention before that morning of the possibility of someone actually shooting a student. It seemed so far-fetched. "I'm not sure I was thinking much about children being shot," he recalled (Tronzano, personal interview, 2007). Even Moose publicly expressed more anxiety about the safety of commuters than students during the press conference early Monday morning. He described the pending rush hour as "an enhanced target-rich environment," adding that he and Duncan were "both very anxious—remain very hopeful and positive, but we're very anxious" ("Montgomery County," 2002).

Although reporters asked about student safety at the police chief's press conference, there was no mention of concerns about school safety in *The Washington Post* that morning in the stories about the status of the investigation and the funerals of victims. The day before, one of the newspaper's local columnists chided community and police leaders for their concerns about school safety "in a relatively wealthy suburb"

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<sup>58</sup> Frieda K. Lacey, Ed.D., was appointed chief of staff to the superintendent in 2001. She previously worked in special education as a teacher, teacher specialist, assistant supervisor, supervisor, and principal of a learning center. She was also an equity assurance officer and director of equity assurance and compliance before being named executive assistant to the superintendent in 1999. She is currently the deputy superintendent of schools ("Board report," 2004b).

compared to longstanding conditions at an elementary school in Washington, D.C., where nearby “gunfire is a common occurrence” (Milloy, 2002).

*Student Shooting Came as a ‘Wakeup Call’*

Reality replaced speculation a few minutes after 8:00 a.m. on Monday, October 7. A teacher at Benjamin Tasker Middle School in Bowie later described her initial astonishment after hearing a loud noise and then someone banging on the school’s front door. She thought it was a student horsing around and opened the door:

I saw the boy close to the curb, doubled over and on his knees. ‘What are you doing?’ I asked....‘I’m shot,’ he said....I was unsure what to think. Was this kid playing with me? Would he joke about something like that given recent events? ‘Are you kidding?’ I asked.... (Pumphrey, 2003).

The injured boy was a 13-year-old student, wounded by a single bullet that struck him in the chest “as he waited in front of the school for the doors to be opened” (“John Muhammad v. Maryland,” 2007, p. 12).<sup>59</sup> The shot came from a wooded area on the side of the school, across from the entry way. The site had a clear field of vision along the entire front sidewalk (Figure 4.11). Malvo later testified in court that a single victim was not the plan. He said the original “mission” was to “take at least five shots,” selecting from among the first group of children exiting from a school bus and shooting them one at a time, and then shooting one or more students at a nearby elementary school (“State of Maryland v. Muhammad,” 2006 ¶ 1:33:51 to 3:06:04). The victim arrived at school early, a half-hour before the school was scheduled to open. It was also the time middle schools opened in Montgomery County.

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<sup>59</sup> Malvo also allegedly aimed for the body, not the head, in order to avoid a mess in front of other children, according to a reported statement to investigators (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003, p. 112).

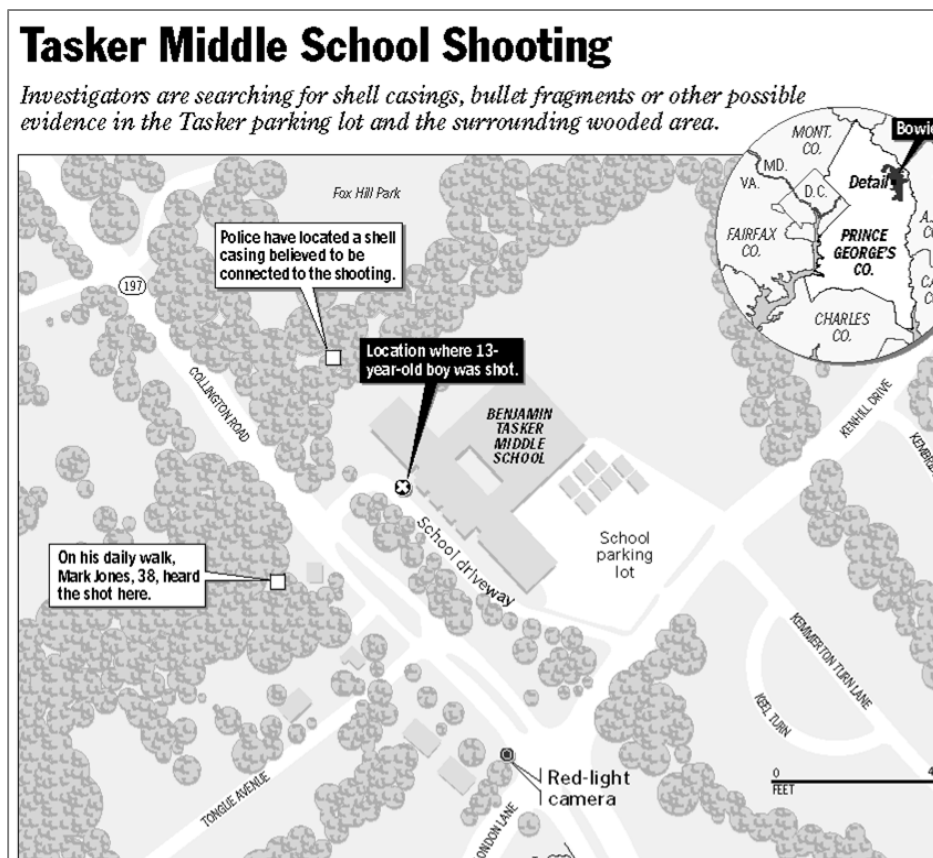


Figure 4.11 School as Potential Killing Field

Excerpt of page reproduction from *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2002, p. A11.  
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As details of the shooting became better understood, the dynamics of the threat facing schools in Montgomery County also changed, as it did for all schools in the region. “It was a wakeup call about...our level of exposure,” Weast said years later (Sedam & Ford, 2007). The investigative details of the shooting later established a well-planned assault, far beyond anything expected by police or school officials. “Before then we were still a little relaxed, if I may use the word,” recalled James A. Williams, the deputy superintendent (Williams, personal interview, 2007).

Police Chief Charles Moose, in his later book, referenced the shooting as transformational: “We had no reason to be worried about the schools. That wasn’t true anymore” (Moose & Fleming, 2003, p. 105). Students became potential targets of opportunity. Schools became potential killing zones. The assailant entered the rarified world of potential child killers.<sup>60</sup> Michael L. Subin, who was the chair of the County Council’s education committee, and joined the superintendent’s command team as an inter-agency liaison, said the clarity of the threat became obvious. “It was the first hard evidence that nothing was safe...and nobody was safe,” he said (Subin, personal interview, 2007).

#### ‘Scared Us to Death’

The shooting “just scared us to death...it really changed everything,” recalled Edward W. Shirley,<sup>61</sup> who also later joined the command team as president of Montgomery County Association of the Administrative and Supervisory Personnel, which represented principals (Shirley, personal interview, 2007). Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, recalled that “everybody’s anxiety went up about 10 notches once the kid was shot” (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

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<sup>60</sup> Even among sniper victims, the shooting was rare. The FBI later reported that victims 18 years old or younger represented about 13% of sniper killings in the United States between 1981 and 2002 (“Special Report,” 2003).

<sup>61</sup> Edward W. Shirley, Ed.D., was named the first full-time president of the Montgomery County Association of Administrative and Supervisory Personnel in July 2002. Previously, beginning in 1967, he was a high school teacher, assistant principal, and then principal of a middle school and three high schools, and a director of school administration in Montgomery County. He is currently superintendent of the Caroline County Public Schools in Denton, Maryland (Shirley, personal interview, 2007; “Caroline County,” 2010).

Judith Madden, supervisor of counseling, said she was at a training session for a high school's guidance staff at a community center in Wheaton, Maryland, when they took a break and saw a news report on the lobby television:

The counselors were very concerned, wanting to go back to be available to support their students....but they were also scared to drive back to school, scared to get out of the car, worried about their own children, their spouses, their mothers, you know, anyone else who was part of their lives in the community," she said (Madden, personal interview, 2007).

At an elementary school that morning, a teacher later described the panic among her colleagues when they heard the news: "A woman yells out 'My son goes to that school' and trips and falls as she tries to run out" (Ochs, 2002). One county parent later wrote, as a newspaper columnist: "We were trying mightily to be good citizens and obey school administrators who asked that we leave our children in area schools, because they were safer there. We tried that—until the latest victim was shot at school" (Frerking, 2002).

A few hours after the shooting, Douglas M. Duncan, the county executive in Montgomery County, described the public response: "I think this community is in a state of fear, a state of anxiety..." ("Shooting," 2002).

Kress said the shooting cast a shadow over whether schools could operate safely. "It made us talk about, should we close? It made us go back and re-visit that whole decision that we had made before about—we're going to keep the schools open," he said (Kress, personal interview, 2007). The threat seemed immediate and close. Matthew A. Tronzano, the executive assistant to the chief operating officer, said his thoughts were about potential dangers nearby, given that the shooting occurred "within miles of schools in Montgomery County" (Tronzano, personal interview, 2007). There was little regard for jurisdictional boundaries after the shooting. Edward Clarke, the director of school

safety and security, recalled measures being taken as if the threat was imminent. “That was a pretty chaotic day...for all of us, because of a student, so close to us, being shot,” he said (Clarke, personal interview, 2007).<sup>62</sup>

#### Decisions with Police

Clarke recalled learning about the shooting from a television news report. He contacted his counterparts in the neighboring school district “to glean as much information as we could,” he said (Clarke, personal interview, 2007). At 8:53 a.m., an emergency message was sent by me to all school personnel, citing security information from Prince George’s County, but the message was guarded and ultimately mistaken. The message said the shooting “doest *not* appear to be related to the incidents last week” (Porter, 2002o). It was corrected later. Moose described the situation in his book, saying the initial information from the crime scene as too little and initially wrong: “We didn’t know much...It sounded like some kind of school fight” (Moose & Fleming, 2003, pp. 103-104).

The few details were enough to prompt a decision by Weast. Around 9:00 a.m., he met with a few senior staff and decided to cancel all outdoor activities. It was initially intended as a temporary measure, until more information was available. There was no record of the decision, except the school district’s announcement at 9:12 a.m. (Porter, 2002p). There was also a statement released by the police. Moose received the information quickly and reacted almost immediately, releasing the information to

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<sup>62</sup> Montgomery County shared a common mission with its neighboring school district, served adjoining communities, and many of the command team members knew the district’s leaders and other staff. I also grew up there, worked for the Prince George’s County school district for 11 years, and knew well the site of the shooting.

reporters at a press conference televised on *CNN*, about 6 minutes before the school district's announcement. "We've talked to Dr. Weast. It is not—and I want to specifically say—it is not a Code Blue at this time. It is simply a precaution to close lunch and to close recess," he said ("Police hold," 2002).

Moose's timely access to the information reflected his new relationship with Weast. Moose noted to reporters that the superintendent's decisions were based, in part, on personal collaboration, and he expressed confidence in him:

Clearly, Dr. Weast will stay on top of this situation with us. As it changes, he will make any and all necessary adjustments....There is a set of protocols for Code Blue, and I think Dr. Weast is making a wise decision that until he has more information, specific information, then this is the proper step ("Police hold," 2002).

Weast reinforced the closer ties, as well. In a letter to parents that day, he used stronger language about the level of cooperation than he did the previous week, saying school security decisions were made "in consultation with" county police and that he was "confident that we are receiving the best advice possible" (Weast, 2002). Clarke went further. Speaking on Weast's behalf at a press conference with the police chief that afternoon, which was televised on *CNN*, Clarke described the decisions as part of a larger public safety strategy: "Dr. Weast continues to be in contact with Chief Moose in terms of joint decisions that need to be made..." ("Police news," 2002).

#### More School Security

Moose commented two years later to researchers conducting a federal study of the police investigation that the shooting left little alternative other than to keep posting officers at schools. "We had no choice, and the officers gallantly accepted these assignments," Moose said (G. R. Murphy & Wexler, 2004, p. 81). The lack of choice, Moose later wrote in his book, was influenced by strong public demand for school



protection that was impossible to reject. He described the demand as reminiscent of lopsided public policy battles with the county's powerful school lobby:

We see this in the budgeting of county money...You're not allowed to say anything about the schools getting an unfair percentage. We joke around the police department that if we want money for something we have to paint it school-bus yellow first (Moose & Fleming, 2003, p. 105).

The political influence was evident a few hours after the shooting. At his noon press conference, televised on *CNN*, Moose announced participation of the uniformed division of the U.S. Secret Service in guarding schools in Montgomery County ("Police news," 2002). The unprecedented deployment of federal officers was in addition to state, municipal, and park police already enlisted. Guarding hundreds of public and private schools was still a mammoth task. Moose urged parents to stay home and out of the way and to leave their children in place, suggesting as he had the week before that thousands of parents arriving early everywhere was beyond the capacity of the police. "It will simply confuse matters to a point that we really will not be in a position to handle it," he said at the press conference ("Police news," 2002)

#### Team Command Again

The command team settled into a meeting with Weast just after 9:30 a.m. in the conference room adjoining the deputy superintendent's office (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 9:35*). This was the same room where they met the previous week. Weast was again at the head of the table, his back to the windows. To his left was Virginia Brooks, the administrative secretary who had been the person tasked to create a paper trail of the emergency response the week before. She was again taking notes at his side, at times a verbatim record of ongoing discussions.

There was pressure to act, but there was some time to discuss options. Outside activities had been prohibited a half-hour earlier. The issue was whether to escalate and return to Code Blue.

Kress informed the group that he had placed field trips on hold pending a decision on other activities. Weast responded by saying he wanted the district to stay unified and consistent. He was quoted in the notes saying he did not want “staff making independent decisions” about school security measures (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 9:35*). He asked for recommendations about next steps. Clarke proposed moving to a districtwide Code Blue until more was known, and others agreed. The team discussed cancelling afternoon kindergarten. Bowers suggested giving more guidance to principals on implementing the security measure. Weast dismissed the idea on the premise, as quoted in the notes, that “most principals” understood what was already required (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 9:35*).

Weast subsequently ordered the districtwide Code Blue, along with the cancelation of afternoon kindergarten and the field trips (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 9:48*).<sup>63</sup> Kress recalled from his own notes of the meeting that he quoted Weast urging everyone to be “abundantly cautious” even if it meant overreacting for safety purposes (Kress, personal interview, 2007). The total discussion and decision time was about 18 minutes. The Code Blue was announced three minutes later at 9:51 a.m. in an emergency e-mail to all staff, describing the Code Blue as “heightened level of security” taken only

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<sup>63</sup> By then, schools in Prince George’s County also were in a Code Blue, the middle school was a crime scene, and the school’s students were being sent home (“Maryland boy,” 2002).

“as a precautionary action” (Porter, 2002f). The quick announcement meant the statement was prepared in advance, pending the outcome of the meeting.

In the meantime, Bowers raised again his concern about procedural misinterpretations at schools and the need for guidance for staff, and this time Weast agreed. The statement was released at 9:54 a.m., three minutes after the Code Blue announcement (again reflecting advance preparation). The statement addressed problems regarding local understanding of security measures, in which some schools opted for extreme interpretations. The update clarified, for example, that teachers were “allowed to open windows for ventilation” and “school lunch should continue with proper supervision” (Porter, 2002d). It also reminded schools that a Code Blue did not mean to stop teaching.

The variance among schools in implementing the Code Blue was greater than Weast understood when he initially rejected Bowers’ recommendation. He later told a conference audience that the variance reflected a wide range of interpretations, in which “some principals locked down their buildings and the kids didn’t even get to go to the bathroom. Other people said, I’m not going to pay attention to that—I’ve never paid attention to the central office” (*22 days of crisis*, 2003). Robert B. Hellmuth, the assistant director of school safety and security, said years later that the variations depended on where the schools were located—the closer to the original shooting sites, the stricter the interpretations:

We had to laugh a little bit because in some schools we had more of [a] purple, it was more of a Code Red-Code Blue. In other schools it was like—Jerry [Weast] liked to call it a ‘light blue,’ because they weren’t necessarily locking the doors, all the doors, and things like that (Hellmuth, personal interview, 2007).

### Communication Backlog

Weast informed the team that he told Duncan about the Code Blue and other decisions at about 9:58 a.m. The records of the team meeting noted that a police spokeswoman announced the decisions on television about 12 minutes later (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 9:58-10:10*). A few minutes later, the district's announcement was released. The sequence of events meant the county's communications to the media and public were ahead of the internal notification of principals and staff.

By noon that day, the police press conferences literally supplanted the school district's announcements. Moose had invited Weast to participate in the press conferences, but he declined, sending Clarke to represent him, as he had the previous week. Clarke joined Moose at the mid-day press conference and announced that schools were to close at normal times ("Police news," 2002). There was no corresponding district announcement about school dismissal, nor was there an internal record of the decision. Clarke's statement was the only one, other than a notation in the meeting notes that suggested the television in the team meeting room was being watched when Moose made the same announcement a few minutes later (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 12:12*).

Weast urged principals that morning to rely on the district's formal announcements. He told them in a memorandum, forwarded by e-mail at 11:40 a.m., that he planned to "do everything possible to keep you informed of changes in the situation as quickly as possible. Please be attentive to the announcements being made on [e-mail]. There will be changes, frequently, as the day proceeds" (Weast, 2002u).

One such change involved the decision about after-school activities. Weast, in his memorandum to principals at 11:40 a.m., said a decision was pending within the hour.

Just prior to noon, according to the meeting notes, Bowers recommended cancelling the activities (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 11:50*). The scheduling issue affected 34 athletic games in various sports across the county. A decision was made sometime afterward. The only record was an emergency e-mail to all staff that announced the cancellation at 12:33 p.m. (Porter, 2002). At the same time, a press conference televised on *CNN* was ongoing. Duncan and Moose told reporters that a school district decision was still pending ("Police news," 2002). Two hours later, Moose introduced Clarke at another press conference, also on *CNN*, and he relayed the information on Weast's behalf as part of an update on school district activities ("Shooting," 2002).

#### Focus on Avoiding Failure

By early afternoon Monday, there was no confirmed connection to the earlier shootings when Weast sent a letter home to parents, students, and staff. The letter served as his formal statement about the incident. He referenced the shooting in context of the limited information available: "...the events of the past week require all of us to maintain a sense of vigilance and flexibility" (Weast, 2002).<sup>64</sup> The letter was written in anticipation of further changes but was unspecific about details. "Events may require continued changes in school operations, and I ask that everyone be patient and understanding," he said (Weast, 2002). The request was an advance notice that Weast wanted room to maneuver and support for decisions not yet made.

A report by mid-afternoon from Nancy S. Grasmick, the Maryland state superintendent of schools, indicated that heightened security and cancellation of activities at

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<sup>64</sup> A federal agent later underscored the potential connection, speaking at a press conference with Moose: "All of us have children in school today. We're just as concerned, even more concerned now, that it's stooped to the level of shooting children" ("Police news," 2002).

schools were widespread throughout the state. The reported security measures included a "lock down in effect" in Anne Arundel County, which bordered Prince George's County near the shooting site, to an "increased police presence" and "indoor activities only" in St. Mary's County in Southern Maryland (Grasmick, 2002c, pp. 2, 4).<sup>65</sup> By the end of the day, the manhunt involved a growing number of local, state, and federal agencies.<sup>66</sup>

Over the course of the day, there was a new component to the actions and decisions of the team—a preoccupation with failure—as efforts focused on greater meaning making for others and attending to the structural and operational components of the school district in an effort to keep students and staff safe (Figure 4.12). These focus areas were evident when 70 crisis actions involving one or more members of the team, including 33 crisis decisions primarily by the superintendent—nearly the same as the first day of the crisis, October 3—were identified for analysis. The analysis included a reconstruction of the day's actions and decisions, based on participant interviews and archival records, and the analytical coding in relation to the study's conceptual framework (see Table J.2 in "Appendix J: Tables"). The analysis identified a greater preoccupation with a failure among the crisis decisions than the crisis actions, suggesting greater caution. The other associations were closely aligned, suggesting continued agreement among leadership and implementation as the crisis entered a completely new phase.

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<sup>65</sup> In the Washington area, extensive security precautions were reported: "Some restaurants sat empty, and others removed their outdoor seating. Private security officers guarded supermarkets. Even members of Congress were advised to limit their outdoor activities" (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003, p. 113).

<sup>66</sup> The agencies included the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the U.S. Marshals Service, and the U.S. Secret Service ("Police news," 2002).

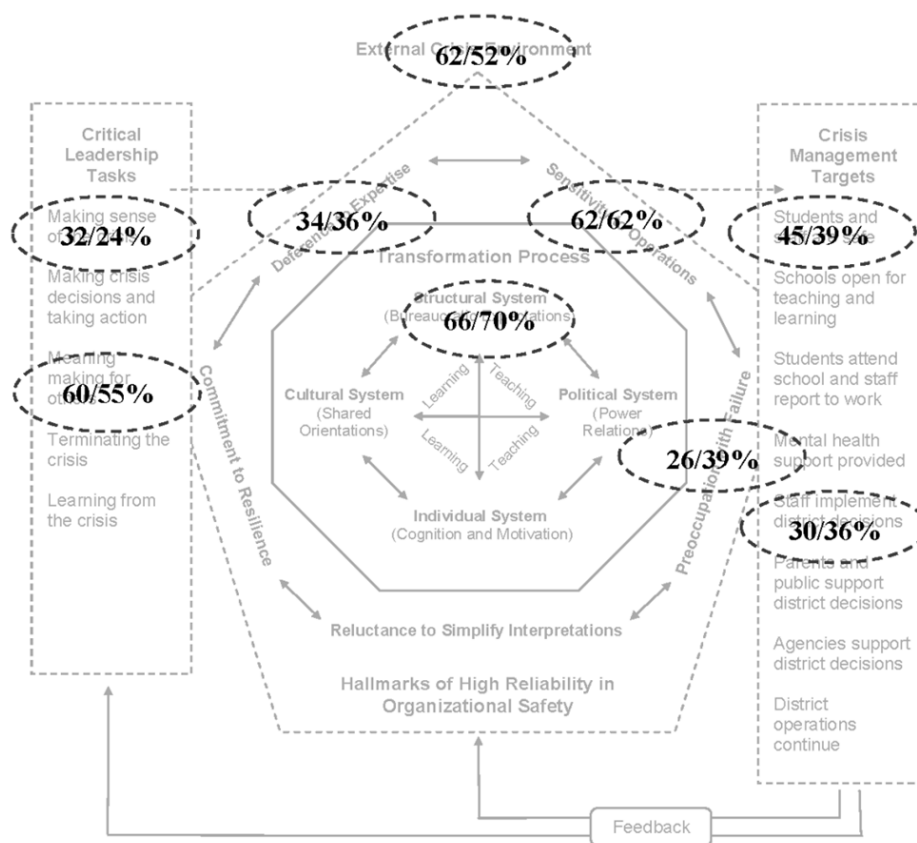


Figure 4.12 Conceptual Priorities of Crisis Actions on October 7

Data reflect highest two percentages of crisis activities and crisis decisions associated with one or more conceptual framework components (see Table J.2 in “Appendix J: Tables”). Data overlap. Percentages rounded. Crisis actions include crisis decisions.

Conceptual framework adapted from “social system model” by Hoy & Miskel (2005); “critical tasks” by Boin, et al. (2005); and “high reliability” principles by Weick & Sutcliffe (2001).

## Chapter 5: Long-Term Crisis Management

### Overview

The wounding of a student during the sniper shootings of October 2002 marked the dividing line in the study of crisis management and decision making by leaders of the Montgomery County Public Schools. The events prior to the wounding reflected short-term crisis management, as presented in the previous chapter. The events afterward were different. The crisis continued another 19 days, all part of a single case, bounded within a time and place, and the actions and events of the participants. Presented as a comprehensive portrait, the narrative continues, informed by a conceptual framework in Chapter 2, an analytical methodology in Chapter 3, and the description of prior events in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents the rest of the case, beginning about nine hours after the shooting of a student in a neighboring school district.

### Moment of Silence Honored the Dead

On Monday afternoon, October 7, 2002, a few minutes before 5:00 p.m., a few senior leaders of the Montgomery County Public Schools paused at the doorway of a conference room. It had been a long day, and it was far from over. The television on the wall overhead featured a news report about a new development. Law enforcement officials linked the bullet fragments retrieved from the wounded student that morning in Prince George's County to seven shootings the previous week. The most senior member



of the group, Jerry D. Weast, superintendent of schools, nodded and said he knew that. The others did not. He also shared that county officials supported continuation of the Code Blue implemented that morning and endorsed the effort to keep schools open (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 4:55*). The information about the bullet fragments reinforced the description of the assailant as a serial attacker who killed six people and wounded two more since the previous Wednesday. It also strengthened the belief that students were at risk, a paradox given the decision to keep schools open.

With this backdrop, Weast and the others, including me, walked down the hall and started a hastily-called meeting with some 200 principals and central office administrators and staff. Weast began by asking for a moment of silence. Reference was made to the deceased and wounded, including “the parents of our students” who were buried earlier in day, as quoted in notes from the meeting (*Principals meeting notes, 2002, p. 1*).<sup>67</sup> It was an emotional moment. Principals were praised for “the way you have held schools together,” as evident by good student attendance and staff who were “continuing to come to work” (*Principals meeting notes, 2002, p. 1*).

The audience included people already stressed by the events of the day who had left their school buildings early to get to the meeting or who had wanted to be home with their own families. Hours earlier, Larry A. Bowers, the chief operating officer, noted this as an important problem, likely to backfire, and urged that the meeting be held later in the day, not earlier as originally suggested (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 1:50*). “We debated, quite frankly whether or not that was the right thing to do,” said Frieda K.

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<sup>67</sup> The five people who were killed on October 2-3, 2002, in Montgomery County included the mother of one student, the father of another, and the uncle of two others (*Sniper crisis, Week 1, 2002*).

Lacey, the superintendent's chief of staff, in public comments later to the Board of Education ("Dialogue," 2002). Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, invited the principals with an e-mail message at 2:10 p.m., less than three hours before the meeting was to start, and noted it was scheduled at "a difficult time," but he urged their participation in "a timely discussion" about school issues and the district's "response to this tragic wave of shootings" (Kress, 2002).

The audience sat on folding chairs on an old wooden basketball floor in a high-ceilinged auditorium, a gymnasium when the headquarters building was a segregated high school in the 1950's. Over the course of the meeting, they received information and asked questions about Code Blue procedures, law enforcement, mental health materials and counseling support, building security, field trips, parent visits, community use of schools, and staff and student attendance and absenteeism, among other topics (*Principals meeting notes*, 2002, pp. 1-5).

#### Student Safety

The meeting settled into a litany of top-down pronouncements, somewhat ordinary even under the circumstances, until principals learned that student safety patrols were prohibited from their posts in the morning and parents were needed to walk children to school. The decision had been made an hour earlier (*Meeting notes October 7*, ¶ 4:05). It reversed a position taken the previous week when Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, said principals were worried about the exposure of their safety patrols and Weast responded, as quoted in the notes of the meeting, that such decisions were "for individual principals to make" (*Meeting notes October 3*, ¶ 12:38).

It was a stunning announcement, along with learning that outside activities including athletics would likely be prohibited for a while. After all, schools remained *open* and tens of thousands of students still *walked* to school. Edward A. Clarke, director of school safety and security, later testified in court about the safety patrol decision, saying “we could not guarantee their overall safety” (“Commonwealth of Virginia v. Muhammad,” 2003 ¶ 4275). The student patrols presented too inviting a target, with the brightly colored uniform belts and shiny badges and the isolated assignments on street corners. Police Chief Charles A. Moose endorsed the decision, saying in a press conference televised on *CNN* the next day that he “felt very comfortable advising and agreeing with Dr. Weast that the student safety patrols need to be in the schools” (“Sniper on the loose,” 2002). School officials in Prince George’s County also restricted their patrols, as did other jurisdictions.<sup>68</sup>

The meeting concluded after nearly two hours, with principals urged by Weast to be mindful of their leadership responsibilities and, as quoted in the notes, to be careful in “what you say, how you say it, and carry yourself as a leader and role model to our employees and parents” (*Principals meeting notes*, 2002, p. 5). Weast’s overall message to principals was summarized by me in a newspaper article the next morning: “We are going to be in for a long siege. We need to be prepared physically and emotionally” (Leonard, 2002).

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<sup>68</sup> The American Automobile Association, Mid-Atlantic, announced the next day: “This is the first time in our memory—going back more than two decades—that areas schools have opened without their patrols on their street corners” (“Sniper forces,” 2002 ).

### Emotional Wound

The meeting with principals came just a few hours after news coverage featured a riveting image of the police chief crying. James A. Williams, deputy superintendent of schools, recalled watching the scene with amazement and surprise: “He just broke down, he just broke down” (Williams, personal interview, 2007). The image of Charles A. Moose was shown during a press conference and later photographs with his eyes moist and a cheek wet from a tear as he lashed out at the person who shot the student that morning. He set the shooting apart from the earlier attacks, calling the incident “really, really personal,” and saying the attacker stepped “over the line because our children don't deserve this” (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003, p. 114; “School shooting,” 2002). He also spoke directly to parents and urged them to “do your job tonight, engage your children, be there for them,” suggesting their help was needed to maintain calm in the community and schools: “We're going to need it. We're going to need you to support them” (“School shooting,” 2002).

The police chief’s statements struck a cord for people who viewed the shooting as an emotional wound, especially those who cared for children as a parent or as a profession and envisioned themselves and their children as potential victims. The extraordinary image was described later as “a dramatic moment, replayed on national television” (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003, p. 114). On the other hand, it did little to calm an already tense situation.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> The snipers reportedly targeted the student, in part, to upset the police chief and his investigation: “It worked, because he cried on TV,” Malvo told prison guards later, according to a newspaper article about testimony in a Virginia court hearing (Ahlers, 2003).

When schools dismissed on Monday, parents descended onto schools in large numbers, similar to the week before.<sup>70</sup> Tensions were high. A middle school security aide used a clipboard to hit a television news photographer who had ventured too close to the school (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 3:00*). Earlier in the day, just before noon, principals received a memorandum from the superintendent, urging them to ask for assistance if counseling support was needed “for anyone in the school” (Weast, 2002u). There were reports that suggested some staff were not coping well. Another reminder, for example, was necessary about appropriate security procedures, reiterating the previous week’s guidelines that it was alright, during a Code Blue, to open the windows for ventilation, eat lunch at the regular times, continue instruction, and use the portable classrooms (Porter, 2002k). The latter option was controversial. Some principals opted to have students packed into hallways, media centers, and other open spaces instead of portable classrooms, which required students and teachers to walk outside to reach them.

#### Mental Health

The shooting of the student changed the focus of the command team’s actions and affected the team’s perspective. Kress recalled the situation as challenging the team’s basic understanding of the school district’s operations:

I think there were people out there who were struggling and they were struggling with the decision to come to work themselves every day, and principals that were dealing with keeping their staffs calm, teachers that were keeping kids calm (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

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<sup>70</sup> A parent later wrote in an article that she was too afraid to stay away, stricken by “a most disturbing and obvious thought: What if the sniper had traveled back our way and chose our kids’ school to strike again? We would never forgive ourselves for not being there” (Frerking, 2002).

Hours after the shooting, psychology and counseling staff were brought into the team meeting to discuss the “best way to talk with principals” and how to address directly the “mental health of employees and students” (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 12:30*). The specialists advised taking preemptive steps to stave off any erosion of confidence and preserve the abilities of staff to remain calm and functional. Weast subsequently ordered the preparation of more mental health materials and other resources, including recruiting volunteers, to assist schools and families. The effort evolved into a major undertaking and a primary focus of the school district as the crisis continued.<sup>71</sup> In his letter after the student shooting, for example, Weast urged the use of school district mental health resources “to address fear, anxiety, and other worries that children and adults may have in response to recent events” (Weast, 2002).<sup>72</sup>

The mental health strategies provided the school district with a specific, high profile part to play in a crisis management arena otherwise dominated by police and government agencies.<sup>73</sup> Aggie Alvez,<sup>74</sup> then the superintendent’s director of special

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<sup>71</sup> For an extended description of the mental health and volunteer initiative during this incident, see “Appendix H: Mental Health and Volunteers.”

<sup>72</sup> A later federal study of the police investigation cited the “crucial” need for school counseling and other mental health efforts in the management of the crisis, noting that “parents looked to schools for advice on what to tell their children, how to reassure them, and for leadership” (G. R. Murphy & Wexler, 2004, p. 110).

<sup>73</sup> A study of news media coverage during the sniper incident also examined the actions by school districts, including the Montgomery County Public Schools, in addressing the sense of fear and anxiety (in part, created by the media) and concluded the districts acted as an important counterpoint: “Schools accepted the reality of the fear and then sought to mitigate its significance and convince parents, students, and teachers and personnel to themselves remain firm” (Censer, 2010, p. 208).

<sup>74</sup> Aggie Alvez, J.D., was appointed director of special projects, Office of the Superintendent of Schools, in 1999. She previously worked for the school district as a human relations compliance officer and a high school teacher. She was also a television news producer and worked as the public affairs director at a non-profit organization. She is currently the school district’s director of communications and family outreach (“Board report,” 2004c; Office of communications,” 2010).

projects, recalled the focus on mental health as a role the school district leadership understood politically:

What do they have some authority over? That's the communication, that's the discussion about mental health, because we have counselors and psychologists. And so it was—the ability to carve out a role that was unique to the school system” (Alvez, personal interview, 2007).

#### District Viability

Weast approached the mental health issue from the perspective of a basic threat to the school district's operations. He told principals in a memorandum on Monday afternoon, forwarded by e-mail, a few hours before the meeting: “For our educational program to continue, it is important to help everyone feel physically and emotionally safe in school and to have strategies to deal with their emotions and stress” (Weast, 2002q). In other words, schools could not function safely with unchecked emotions, and it was the principals' responsibility to ensure the well-being of their students and staff. The issue was more than the physicality of safety. It was the perception of safety, conveyed not through uniformed police stationed outdoors but through the actions and behavior of the adults and children indoors.

The psychology and counseling staff had advised earlier in the day that school-based personnel were likely to be emotionally fragile but unaware of the potential mental health dangers. They outlined responses that Weast approved. His memorandum to principals described two sources of assistance—more materials for self-help and onsite assistance from mental health professionals. He told principals that the school psychologist or pupil personnel worker assigned to each school was to call them each day for the foreseeable future to “determine if you have a need for additional support” (Weast, 2002q). The message was tempered with the suggestion that this assistance was

not to be intrusive or invasive. They were assured that any mental health personnel coming to their schools would “report directly to you for specific instructions” (Weast, 2002q). This act of deference had an important side benefit. It gave the mental health personnel legitimate access to the principal to make their own observations and assessments. It was thought that some principals might not ask for help until it was too late.

#### Likely Shootings

After the principals meeting on Monday evening, the team gathered again in the conference room, where they had spent the day. Weast reviewed their assignments for the evening and the next morning. He wanted community superintendents to contact principals individually that night to ensure they had parent volunteers for the morning and to make sure principals of the 56 schools in the economically impacted areas near the original shootings knew they were to receive assistance from more than 100 police cadets offered by the county government. He requested an attendance report from schools as soon as possible the next morning, Tuesday, October 8. He wanted close monitoring of mental health issues, with an emphasis on classes continuing as normal as possible (“Meeting, Oct. 7,” ¶ 7:00).

The tone of the meeting changed when Larry A. Bowers was told to ensure that site and building plans for every school were available in the command meeting room in case of an emergency. Weast instructed Edward A. Clarke, the director of school safety and security, to let his police and county government contacts know that if an incident occurred at a Montgomery County school, he needed immediate access to the scene (“Meeting, Oct. 7,” ¶ 7:00). The last statement was reminiscent of the superintendent’s



responses to emergencies from an earlier time. Nonetheless, the implication was clear—be ready for another shooting.

*Decisions Came from 'The War Room'*

The impact of the student shooting intensified the work of the team. The team's permanent composition changed, as well. New members were added, and at any given time they were as many as 19 people in the room ("Superintendent's follow-ups," 2002). Weast later described the participants as a "cross-functional" team of individuals who represented key areas of the organization (Weast, personal interview, 2007). The participants had expertise in district operations, school security and law enforcement, school supervision and operations, communications and the news media, community outreach, mental health, interscholastic athletics, and local politics.

The addition of people with mental health expertise—Matthew J. Kamins, the supervisor of school psychology, and Judith Madden, supervisor of school counseling—"changed the structure of the command team and who was sitting at the table, from what was actually on paper," recalled Larry A. Bowers, the chief operating officer (Bowers, personal interview, 2007).

Edward W. Shirley, president of the Montgomery County Association of Administrative and Supervisory Personnel, a union representing principals, joined the team mid-way in the crisis. No other union representative was asked to join, although one attended a meeting toward the end of the crisis. Weast recalled later, in response to an inquiry, that the exclusion was intentional, and his rationale underscored his view of how the command team functioned and how he expected principals to manage their own schools: "This was not a total collaborative effort, this was command and control, and he

[Shirley] was representative of the command and control leadership” (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

The team meetings were often crowded. Individuals squeezed around the table, papers and materials spread in front of them. Coffee perked in a nearby pot, and the overhead television silently displayed news reports about the police investigation. The team meeting notes chronicled the daily sessions: morning meetings every day, usually at 7:30 a.m., and again nearly every late afternoon usually at 5:00 p.m., and again sometimes at mid-day. There already had been two all-day meetings, once after the first shootings on October 3 and again after the student shooting on October 7. The team would meet all day once more before the crisis ended—14 meetings in all.

At every meeting, people were expected to come well prepared and ready to contribute. Punctuality was the norm, recalled Frieda K. Lacey, the superintendent’s chief of staff, noting that there was little choice in the matter. “There were no acceptable excuses—you figured out a way to get here at 7:30 in the morning,” she said (Lacey, personal interview, 2007). There was a routine to the strategy that reinforced expectations and improved team and individual productivity through practice. Larry A. Bowers later recalled that people gained experience with each passing day, helping everyone to “hone-in all our skills” (Bowers, personal interview, 2007).

Weast recalled the meetings as part of a strategy to maintain a reign on the actions of the team members. Within the team, he wanted consistency, continuity, and accountability. He described it as a form of command and control in which expectations were established to keep people accountable through their daily reports and follow-ups, dutifully recorded in the daily meeting notes. The daily reports were intended to

encourage faster and more concentrated inter-team communications. The goal, Weast said, was to establish a mindset and a readiness to respond quickly and correctly when necessary, probably without warning. He said readiness determined a team member's "ability to make it through the crisis" (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

It was a steep learning curve. Members of the team were not prepared for the implications of such a wide-ranging, undefined threat, recalled Donald Kress, the coordinating community superintendent. "None of our incident command training was ever focused on a countywide incident, an area-wide incident, in which no one specifically was threatened, no specific school was threatened—we had everyone in every school... threatened," he said (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

The conference room came to be known as "the war room" early in the process, in reference to the military and political use of intense strategic planning sessions. Weast was heard using the term. James A. Williams, the deputy superintendent, later recalled going "into the war room" every morning and finding out "who the strong leaders were, who could stand under pressure" (Williams, personal interview, 2007). There was a suggestion of boastfulness about the term that caught some disapproval at the time. Roland Ikheloa, staff assistant to the Board of Education, later recalled the nickname being mocked by a few female board members who joked that the participants were "playing their war games" (Ikheloa, personal interview, 2007).

#### Information Access

The meetings included access to information that was confidential or at least sensitive, often times involving reports about police activity and the status of the investigation from Edward A. Clarke, director of school safety and security. There was

intense interest in the police matters among everyone, but especially for those who had children in the schools or whose family members worked there. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, recalled being impressed by a report by the state police on the vulnerability of certain schools, given their location and physical characteristics, and state's plan to assign extra officers to schools deemed the most vulnerable. His said his confidence was tested that same evening when his wife talked about the school where she was employed:

I remember my wife saying how pleased everybody at her school was that a state police officer showed up, and that a state police officer would be there the rest of—and, I remember, I did not tell her why that state police officer was there...until after it was all over....That was one of the most, I think, most troubling times for me (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

The topics of police and schools were part of discussions organized around potential threats to the district's viability in four basic areas, based on an analysis of the meeting notes and participant recollections: school district operations, security, communications, and mental health, and not necessarily in that order or within strict boundaries. Many of the focus areas overlapped (Figure 5.1).

Most meetings began with a report either on security or the news media, followed by other subjects. Bowers credited Weast for encouraging people to contribute. "He would often times go around the table and ask people what they thought...to speak up," Bowers said (Bowers, personal interview, 2007). It was sometimes a competitive atmosphere, with points of view jockeying for attention.

Bowers noted that the participants were considered the school district's "top players" and they were in the room for a purpose, with the expectation "to give advice, to give suggestions, to give reactions, to be able to really speak about their thoughts" (Bowers, personal interview, 2007). Kamins, the school psychology supervisor, recalled

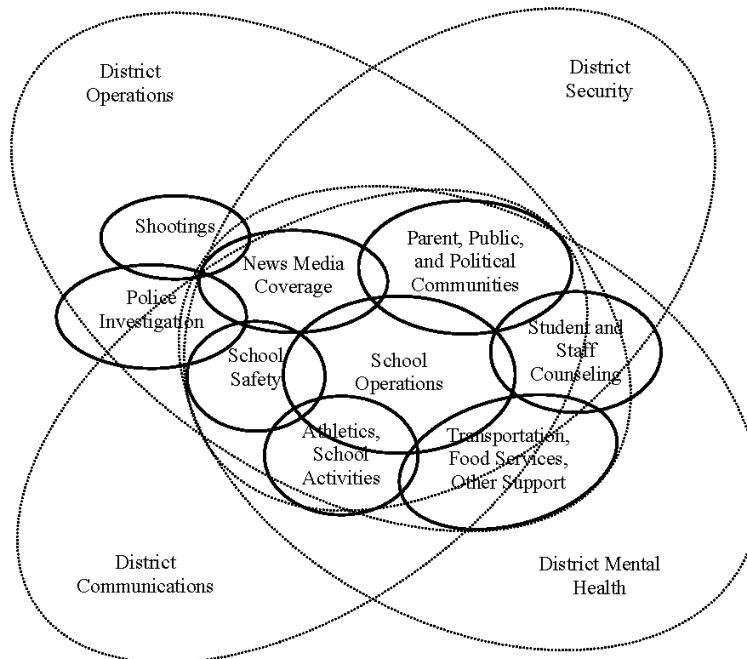


Figure 5.1 Conceptual Configuration of Command Team Focus Areas

being asked by Weast at his first meeting for daily updates on all aspects of mental health affecting the school district: “He immediately turned to us and he said, and mental health, I want mental health reports. So we reported” (Kamins, personal interview, 2007).

The reporting process meant different things to different people. Clarke, for example, described the process as demonstrative, with a responsibility “to keep the superintendent as informed as we could, with accurate and timely information, because that allowed him to make critical decisions based on the best information that we had” (Clarke, personal interview, 2007). Alvez, then director of special projects in the superintendent’s office, recalled the process as reflective, with a “sense that folks were in more of an observer role...it was to learn, it was to do things as necessary, it was to provide information from various parts of the school system” (Alvez, personal interview, 2007).

‘Tight to Loose’

Decision making was one-directional, with all major decisions regarding the school district being made by Weast or by others on his behalf, based on an analysis of archival records and interviews with participants. When the team was involved, Weast conferred with them, discussed options, listened, and made decisions, quickly and often with little debate, if any. He was open to reconsideration, from time to time. “It was not, I’m the superintendent and I’ll tell you what to do,” recalled Frieda K. Lacey, the superintendent’s chief of staff (Lacey, personal interview, 2007). Another participant, ironically, said: “Jerry made the decisions and told us what to do” (Interview, personal communications, 2007).

The superintendent’s position as decision maker was a given, with team members having clearly secondary roles. In a letter from Weast to a parent after the crisis, for example, the decision-making process and the role of the team were described:

Decisions regarding school operations during the three-week period were made on a daily and sometimes hourly basis. These decisions were made *in the presence of a crisis response team* that was formed to guide the school system through this difficult period” [emphasis added] (Weast, 2002d).

Weast sometimes asked team members to indicate their support for an option.

Other times he did not. He recalled later that his decisions reflected the circumstances. He illustrated the point by describing the change in a leader’s relationships with others when conditions required, from making requests to giving orders. He described it as “the ability...[to] say, you will move and you will move quickly, and we will do this, and bing, bing, bing, bing” (Weast, personal interview, 2007). He acknowledged that when more time was available, when a critical deadline was not near, more time was taken for

discussion. He described the process as the same for supervisory functions. “You’re always moving from tight to loose,” he said (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

Weast often tested ideas in the form of trial balloons. Matthew A. Tronzano, the executive assistant to the chief operating officer, recalled that Weast took people’s suggestions and then “would think out loud about what he might to do, sort of get a reaction from people sitting around the table to see if there was agreement or not” (Tronzano, personal interview, 2007). It was a complicated process to observe and required familiarity with the superintendent to understand that his first idea was not always his best or last on a given topic. His style was idiosyncratic and reflected the situation at that moment. Aggie Alvez, the superintendent’s director of special projects, recalled that Weast used his own internal processes for gathering and cataloging information from multiple sources and making sense of it.

It’s the syntheses of everything together, and his own experience, and his instinct. And, so, while people around the table weren’t necessarily making the ultimate decision, they played a role in the decision making because that’s the way he operates (Alvez, personal interview, 2007).

Weast often acted independently. There was no corresponding control over him other than the typical legal and governmental oversight. The Board of Education was not present in the team meetings, nor did he seek its approval. He kept members informed.

#### Command Status

There was an exclusive quality about being on the team and participating in the crisis management of the school district. The new members were selected the same way as the original set—for their expertise not necessarily their position in the bureaucracy. Matthew J. Kamins, the supervisor of school psychology, and Judith Madden, the supervisor of counseling services, for example, were included while several layers of

*their* supervisors were not. Kamins recalled feeling “very proud to be part of that group” but also experienced “some negative feelings from those who were not there—why them, not me?” (Kamins, personal interview, 2007).

At the principals meeting on the first Monday night, the team received a dose of recognition from Weast. He directed them to sit on a raised area where the Board of Education held its public hearings, facing the audience. He introduced them to the principals as his “decision making staff” (*Principals meeting notes*, 2002, p. 1). A week later, several members of the team joined Weast in a public presentation before the Board of Education (*Minutes October 15, 2002*).

Several team members achieved some level of notoriety in the national and local media, which was unique for them, including Clarke who represented Weast at press conferences, Madden who appeared on *CNN*, and Kamins who appeared on *MSNBC* and a national crime program. Clarke recalled the role as an enormous responsibility. He said he worried that he would “overstep my bounds speaking on behalf of the superintendent or understate—or overstate—the position of the superintendent” (Clarke, personal interview, 2007). Early in the crisis, a newspaper article described the team as “a dozen top school officials deciding how best to keep children safe” (“9/11 lessons,” 2002). Another article described the group as an example of the school district’s efforts to “confront a new kind of crisis” (Bowler, 2002). My public profile was elevated, as well.

Whatever notoriety occurred, it was fleeting. When Douglas M. Duncan, the county executive, later recalled working with Weast during the sniper incident, he described the team as Weast’s “little group” (Duncan, personal interview, 2008).



There was an informal hierarchy within the team. Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, recalled that it seemed “there were some people’s opinions who [Weast] valued more than others, just general opinions. And that may have varied from time to time, again depending on what the subject was” (Kress, personal interview, 2007). Weast acknowledged there was “variance” in terms of how he viewed the responsiveness of team members to the crisis management functions he imposed (Weast, personal interview, 2007). Madden, then school counseling supervisor, recalled the meetings being intimidating at first, leaving her feeling she was not “empowered” to speak freely or taken seriously when she offered opposing points of view until she decided “to empower myself” and speak more forcefully (“Madden interview” 2007).

#### County Insider

Weast achieved a team status of a different kind. He worked closely with Duncan, in a behind the scenes role. After appearing at one press conference, the day after the shooting of the student, he stepped out of the spotlight. This was deliberate, part of a strategy that he and Duncan worked through to coordinate their respective activities. Duncan later recalled that Weast, as well as other public officials, voluntarily took secondary public roles in deference to him. They did not try to “to vie for who’s going to the [public] face of this,” he said (“Duncan interview”, 2008). He noted that the superintendent’s decision to work with him was particularly helpful and avoided “an absolute disaster” of two powerful organizations acting independent of each other (Duncan, personal interview, 2008).

Duncan recalled that it was important to convey a sense of unity among government leaders as a measure of reassurance to the community. He said Weast volunteered to refrain from the normal public position available to him in the news media and offered to share information and assistance:

So, we batted forth ideas, back and forth, on different things, and [he] gave me some great advice, and I tried to give him some advice...It was very helpful that we could present one message to the public through this (Duncan, personal interview, 2008).

Weast recalled the relationship as a natural byproduct of the county executive's overall responsibility for community safety and welfare, a responsibility that—in this instance, especially—superseded his own. While he retained authority over the operation of schools, he said the county officials “were in a command and control [mode], too,” and he willingly took a secondary role to show that he was a team player and that “we could subordinate to a larger cause” (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

The arrangement provided Weast with access to behind-the-scenes information, separate and apart from formal communication channels, in addition to the role of Edward A. Clarke, the director of school safety and security, as liaison with the police department; and the role of Michael L. Subin, the county council member, as a liaison to the County Council. Subin recalled that the collaboration resulted in “very good communications...at the county level in the sense of how to react and a consensus of what to do” (Subin, personal interview, 2007).

#### Double Team

In essence, Weast and Clarke were on two teams, their own and their respective relationships with the county government and the county police (Figure 5.2). Clarke recalled that the new roles were challenging to maintain, given his association with

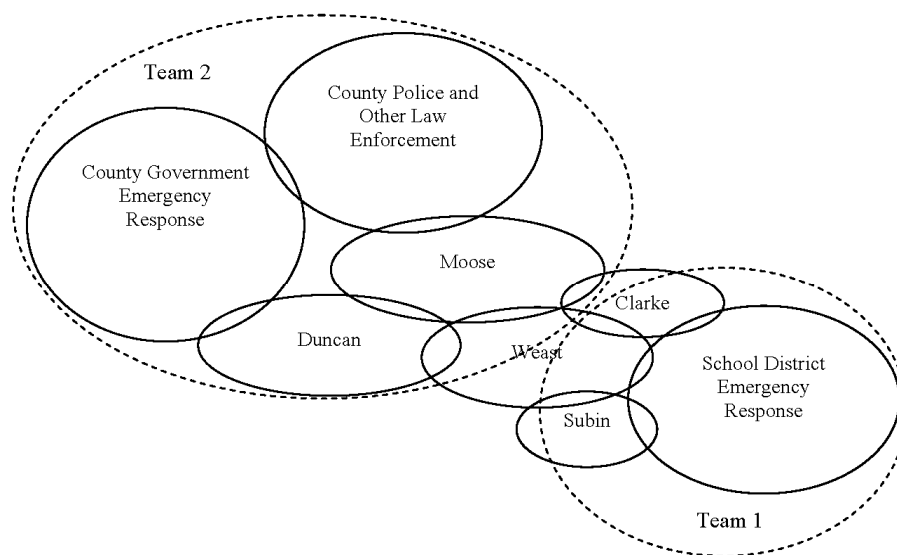


Figure 5.2 Conceptual Two-Team Alignment for School District Leaders

former colleagues and the pressures of his new assignment. “Trying to balance the superintendent’s need for accurate and timely information and getting that information from the investigators, or members of the chief’s leadership team, was a very tenuous...balancing act at times,” he said (Clarke, personal interview, 2007).

The relationship between Weast and Duncan reflected a continuation of an established pattern of collaboration in emergencies. Duncan recalled viewing Weast as “part of our group” and said that when the two of them talked about county and school activities, his assumption was that Weast would “relay what...we were doing to his group” (Duncan, personal interview, 2008). Such a relay of information did not always occur or was not widely shared.

Weast later described the collaboration in terms of political relationships that were necessary in an environment of shared authority and shifting demands and expectations. In comments to researchers conducting a study of the police department’s activities, Weast said he relied on such relationships, both formal and informal, with

county government and police leaders, in making decisions. “It’s all about relationships, and if you do not see the need for these relationships, you are bound to fail,” Weast said (G. R. Murphy & Wexler, 2004, pp. 108-109).

The high value that Weast placed on his relationship with Duncan was illustrated later when he expressed his appreciation in a letter after the crisis, thanking the county executive for “our continued daily collaboration and the insights you provided me” (Weast, 2002p). The relationship with Duncan, as well as with the police, school board and County Council, also was cited in letter to a parent, as part of his defense against a complaint about a decision: “I was personally in regular communications with the county executive and his staff...” (Weast, 2002d).

Weast described the value of such associations in conveying legitimacy, if not actual authority, when he spoke later at a conference. He told the audience that such associations “gave credibility” to his letters to parents, allowing his messages to be accepted with authority and legitimacy, because “we were insiders and they knew we were insiders” (*22 days of crisis*, 2003).<sup>75</sup> He also said the county’s press conferences provided a useful conduit for his own communications: “[Police Chief] Moose was delivering my messages. He always talked about schools....The county executive [too]— I suspended my ego about having to talk about the schools, and talked through them” (*22 days of crisis*, 2003). He made the point again, later in the same conference, in reference being out of the media limelight and deferring to me as his spokesman: “It was really

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<sup>75</sup> For an extended description of the communications effort involving the superintendent’s daily letters, see “Appendix I: Letters from the Superintendent.”

hard because I'm used to being the face [of the school district], but...he became my face, because it wasn't Brian—it was Brian speaking for me” (*22 days of crisis*, 2003).

#### No 'Safe' Schools

In the days after the student shooting, there were concerns within the team about the news media's effort to dramatize the situation in schools and the efforts by some political and community leaders to gain publicity. Weast talked about the “rise in political activity” associated with the media coverage, as quoted in the meeting notes, and told the command team it was “obvious now...there are people who want ‘face time’ and want to be quoted” (*Meeting notes October 10*, ¶ 7:30).<sup>76</sup> The next day, Clarke told the command team that FBI agents urged officials “not to talk about schools” anymore in their comments to the media (*Meeting notes October 11*, ¶ 7:30). Clarke said the agents were concerned that the attacker was following the media coverage and making plans accordingly.<sup>77</sup> The fear of another school shooting was unmistakable.

The media coverage on all matters related to the accumulated attacks continued seemingly non-stop. The school district remained in the middle, surrounded by an ongoing police investigation and the reporters looking for new stories. A week after the student shooting, during which time two more attacks occurred, Weast worried about the risk to schools when “the entire nation is talking about” the shootings (*Meeting notes*

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<sup>76</sup> One of the most prominent examples was a photograph of County Executive Douglas M. Duncan speaking to a class of students, which appeared in *The Washington Post* on Wednesday, October 9, after he accompanied Weast on visits to schools the previous day (“Photograph,” 2002).

<sup>77</sup> *The Washington Post* later reported that investigators also urged government leaders to tone down their rhetoric about the shootings, such as the Maryland governor who called the sniper “a coward,” and said investigators thought “that kind of language could prove counterproductive and evoke a dangerous response” (Witt, 2002a).

*October 14, ¶ 7:30*). The conversation prompted Michael L. Subin, the County Council member, to assure Weast that political leaders recognized the implications of visiting schools or saying something. “Politicians are keeping a low profile,” he said (*Meeting notes October 14, ¶ 7:30*). Later in the day, Subin said he urged members of the council “to please stay away from schools” (*Meeting notes October 14, ¶ 11:00*).

By that point, the school district was denying requests from the media for access to schools and on-camera interviews of school staff and students. Instead, we provided district information over the phone and through written announcements and the superintendent’s letters, by fax and e-mail, on the district’s website and cable television station, particularly about mental health issues.<sup>78</sup> The goal was to avoid any on-camera interviews. The exceptions were Matthew Kamins, supervisor of psychological services, and Judy Madden, supervisor of counseling services, who appeared in settings unrelated to school locations to talk about mental health.

The media clamored for information about schools, the effects of the crisis on children and staff, and anything else that might fill the void between police announcements and the continued shootings. I told the team, as quoted in the notes, that “no school in the country would honor” a media request to report on students under these circumstances (*Meeting notes October 14, ¶ 7:30*). The news media, however, were persistent. A complaint relayed to the command team from a high school principal, for example, said reporters were “taking advantage of parents who are walking their children to school” (*Meeting notes October 14, ¶ 11:00*).

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<sup>78</sup> For an extended description of communication efforts related to mental health, see “Appendix H: Mental Health and Volunteers,” as well as “Appendix I: Letters from the Superintendent.”

Kress reported to the team, as quoted in the notes, that some principals saw the district's actions—the ongoing release of the superintendent's letters, the commentary about mental health, the distribution of information via the Internet—as “trying to make this into a press event” and he told them it was just the opposite, “trying to keep press out of the schools” (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 7:30). In practice, the problem was difficult, if not possible to control. At the meeting, I responded after Kress spoke, saying that, while “we don't want reporters on school grounds...we have not prohibited this...if principals want them there, it is hard to keep them out” (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 7:30). Weast was to the point about the risks involved:

We must be careful about attracting attention. If there is another shooting at a school, I don't want it to be Montgomery County...I am trying to keep our head down. People do not realize how much exposure we have even operating under Code Blue (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 7:30).

Weast was careful to avoid becoming a source of attention, rejecting several invitations to appear on national television programs. His only appearance after the press conference following the student shooting was an *ABC News* interview on October 8 about school security improvements since the terrorist attacks in 2001 (“A closer look,” 2002). In a newspaper interview two weeks later, he explained his reticence to be in the media: “The position I'm in is a very precarious one. I'm trying to keep people informed but not create an attraction to schools” (“Questions,” 2002).

At the time, the overall news coverage appeared to reflect a residential bias for journalists in the Washington area, and I commented to the team at one meeting: “Reporters and editors are writing from personal viewpoint, this is personal for them. If this had happened somewhere else you would not get this type of coverage. It happened

in their backyard” (*Meeting notes October 16*, ¶ 7:30).<sup>79</sup> The temptation for media coverage grew too much for some principals, particularly those with friends or relatives in the media, and I informed the command team: “Most principals are saying no, but a few have succumbed. One will be featured tonight” on a national television news program (*Meeting notes October 16*, ¶ 5:00).

*Ambiguity Prompted ‘Conservative Approach’*

There was pressure to close schools and pressure to cancel outdoor activities indefinitely. Demands came from parents and school-based staff in the form of telephone calls, e-mails, letters, and comments in the media. From the outset, Weast rejected such overtures. At the meeting with principals, he said schools would not be closed “based on fear,” nor would schools be closed “for an indefinite period of time,” as quoted in the notes of the meeting (*Principals meeting notes*, 2002, p. 1). Part of the reasoning stemmed from the large percentage of students who depended on schools for breakfast and lunch and other forms of assistance, including those with disabilities and those with nowhere else to go. “Some of these kids need our food, shelter and support,” he said (*Principals meeting notes*, 2002, p. 4).

Weast told principals further restrictions on schools would make “life more stressful for parents, students, and staff” (*Principals meeting notes*, 2002, p. 1). As

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<sup>79</sup> Two reporters from *The Washington Post* confirmed part of this observation later in a book about the sniper investigation: “We too were deeply affected by the killings. We lived and worked in the threatened communities. Our children attended schools in the area, in one case within a mile or two of the Maryland shootings. We felt the same fear” (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003, p. xiii). However, another reporter for the newspaper, in an interview after the crisis, acknowledged a personal interest but downplayed its effect saying, “I think we all sort of put the immediate issues aside while we were working on it” (“Top news,” 2002).



principals well knew, there were repercussions when schools closed or cancelled activities for inclement weather, even for a day or two. There was also the fatalism inherent in appearing to give up by closing schools, and no reasonable way to know when to reopen if the attacks just stopped, without an arrest.

Weast promised to use a “conservative approach” in his decision making about school operations and student activities—evaluating the circumstances one day at a time for the foreseeable future (*Principals meeting notes*, 2002, p. 1). It was his way of maintaining some level of consistency, a point he made with the principals. He told them the school district depended “on your good judgment” in the decisions they made and “parents need to be reassured that there is going to be consistency with the way situations are handled” (*Principals meeting notes*, 2002, p. 1).

#### Caution, Fear

Other school districts also imposed various restrictions on students, some more limiting than others, throughout the Washington and Baltimore areas metropolitan areas, and Southern Maryland (Desmon & Wilber, 2002; Schulte & Trejos, 2002b). Caution about public activities on school property spread to the county government, when it switched positions Tuesday and banned the community use of county and school athletic fields, tennis courts, and other outdoor facilities (*Meeting notes October 8*, ¶ 11:00).

The Maryland state superintendent reported on Tuesday afternoon, the day after the student shooting, that school districts were maintaining safety provisions until at least the next day, pending developments (Grasmick, 2002d). Their predicament was reflected in an editorial Tuesday morning. The editorial, titled “A New Level of Fear,” appeared in *The Washington Post*:

This is what terror is about, after all... When the police chiefs and school superintendents tell us not to panic, they are right; we know they are right, because chances of any one of us encountering danger remain minuscule. Yet, we also know that, as long as the assailant follows no pattern and betrays no sign of conscience, no one can make us any guarantees (*New level*, 2002).

The media coverage seemed to emphasize the heightened sense of anxiety, amplifying dramatically the concerns of parents,<sup>80</sup> the apprehension of public officials,<sup>81</sup> and the presence of police officers.<sup>82</sup>

#### Counseling Role

Weast took on the role of counselor. In a letter to parents, students, and staff on Tuesday afternoon, he said “children need our constant love and support, especially as we seek explanations ourselves about these difficult circumstances” (Weast, 2002f). The well being of children was linked to the welfare of the school district. That point was made more directly at a press conference Tuesday morning, in which Weast again noted the responsibilities of school staff for taking care of children amid fear and anxiety:

Little students, the younger the age, the more difficult it is for them to understand these types of issues... we're trying to deal with it in a way that is positive and helps keep them focused, not only on their teaching and learning but how to deal with it at home ("Press conference," 2002b).

The press conference was held by Police Chief Charles A. Moose and County Executive Douglas M. Duncan in front of a contingent of television cameras,

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<sup>80</sup> One article summarized the implications of “the shooting of a teenager in front of his school” as having “jolted parents and school systems across the region and raised an already intensive police investigation to a new level of urgency” (Kovaleski & Ruane, 2002).

<sup>81</sup> County Executive Douglas M. Duncan was featured saying: “We’ve got evil in our community. We’ve got someone going around randomly shooting innocent victims and stooping so low as to shoot a child, a 13-year-old child, who is walking to school” (“Area residents,” 2002).

<sup>82</sup> Another article described schools as having the “feel of fortresses,” and said, that while the “show of force” by police was “designed to reassure frightened parents and students returning to school,” it had the opposite affect for “many parents” (Schulte & Trejos, 2002b).

microphones, and reporters in a parking lot next to the police headquarters. This was Weast's first press conference since the crisis began (and ultimately his last). He focused almost exclusively on the school district's mental health initiative and returned to the subject of staff responsibility to take care of themselves and look out for one another, and to avail themselves of counseling and resource materials about controlling stress, "because we expect them to remain as calm and as focused as we possibly can in this very trying time" ("Press conference," 2002b).

The expectations for staff to remain on duty and to do their jobs were underscored by Duncan at another press conference later in the day. He used the term "obligations" in commending school-based staff for doing their part in the crisis, noting that "students feel safe in school" and teacher attendance was "even better than normal" ("Press conference," 2002a). In a television report, he was described speaking positively about bus driver attendance ("Sniper on the loose," 2002). His comments came as a counterpoint to a little-known incident that morning, in which some adult crossing guards failed to arrive at their posts to direct traffic near schools. Duncan later recalled the situation as a tough choice for people who otherwise placed their lives at risk for student safety. "Some people just said, I can't do this, I'm not going to stand out here, be in a uniform and be a sitting duck," he said (Duncan, personal interview, 2008). The crossing guards were part-time personnel employed by the police department. Their only back-ups were police officers and volunteers, and their absence was made more challenging amid the safety patrol restrictions.

Weast also recalled the incident, describing it later as an illustration of the tenuous nature of government service in a crisis and the limited resources available to the county

government when public safety personnel were already stretched thin. The limited resources, he said, were magnified by the size of the school district and the need for nearly 200 crossing guards across the county. Weast said he resisted parent and community demands for more police protection, in part, because he knew the resources were unavailable and the demands imprudent. “We could paralyze police and fire just because of our magnitude of size,” he said (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

#### ‘Vital Signs’

The positive references to the attendance of teachers and bus drivers reflected a deliberate strategy to use such data as benchmarks. The effort began Friday, October 4, the day after the initial shootings. County Executive Douglas M. Duncan used attendance data at a press conference to illustrate the “mood of the county” and said, “We've got great attendance from teachers, from the students in the county, from the county workers, the libraries, [and] all of that” (“Maryland authorities,” 2002a). In this context, the attendance data was a measure of normalcy. Similarly, at a press conference, Police Chief Charles Moose noted the accomplishment of opening schools “on time” that morning (“Police chief,” 2002).

The following week, after the student shooting, the collection and use of attendance data intensified. On Monday night, October 7, Weast urged principals to report attendance as a way to spot potential problems (*Principals meeting notes*, 2002, p. 4). After the meeting, when the command team reconvened, Weast listed his priorities for the command team’s work. Attendance reports were first, followed by monitoring mental health (*Meeting notes October 7, 2002 ¶ 7:00*). The next morning, Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, changed the attendance reports from a

count of students *present* to a count of students *missing*. The new report used the term “absenteeism” for the first time (*Absenteeism*, 2002). The change signified a shift in perspective. Instead of measuring normalcy, the data were used to indicate abnormalities.

The following Wednesday, Weast used the term “vital signs” in describing the attendance data (*Meeting notes October 9, ¶ 5:00*). By then, attendance and mental health were linked, one as the potential barometer of the other. Kress recalled that the absence of such data would have fed rumors and misinterpretation about conditions in schools. “It could have led to more of a panic sense within the community and people keeping their kids at home,” he said (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

Weast recalled later that he came to view attendance as a correlate of the mental health conditions of the community during a crisis, using the school as the focal point. He said attendance was a by-product of a school’s ability to sustain itself as a functional organization, a reflection of its culture. In a crisis, he said, a school’s culture was affected by the mental health of the students and staff. If they were afraid or stressed, they stayed home. It was important, therefore, to reassure staff and students, to address their fears and anxieties, and to encourage their attendance with the mental health support in order to sustain schools and, by extension, the school district. It meant, he said, “sending a message that we’re really interested in not only dealing with the crisis and keeping you safe, but we’re interested in you as a person” (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

For nearly two weeks, Weast required daily reports of attendance for internal use and summary data for export to public officials and the media. The reported attendance

rates remained relatively constant and high for the school district overall, with fluctuations among some schools, especially near the original shooting sites. Such results were characterized as good news, reflecting public confidence in the schools. I told the Associated Press a week after the student shooting, for example, that “people are keeping their kids in school. It’s been a very good turnout” (Hastings, 2002).

#### Distorted View

Judy Madden, the supervisor of counseling services, later recalled that the attendance data created “a public face of calm” on a district level that may have distorted an understanding of reality at the local level (Madden, personal interview, 2007).

I mean the schools were certainly not in chaos but they weren’t calm. But I had a sense, in the sort of daily report outs, everyone had a need on the whole to report—yes, things are fine, everyone is fine. Whereas the emotional climate was very tense.... There was sort of almost two levels of reality, sort of the higher level, big-picture up [on] the balcony—yes, we’re calm—but then when you moved down to the dance floor, it wasn’t quite so calm (Madden, personal interview, 2007).

Kress acknowledged later the inherent disadvantage the team had in getting an “accurate picture” of the crisis from afar, with limited first-hand information largely based on personal contacts:

I think it varied from day to day and from the person you talked to....Every once in a while some of us got a glimpse of just how frayed people’s nerves were becoming, and I suspect if we were seeing that from some of our principals, I suspect our principals were seeing it from some of their staff, some of their parents, and [so on]....I think we were aware at our level that there were mental health issues that [we] needed to be sensitive with, but I’m not sure any of us had an accurate picture of how deep some of those issues went (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

Larry A. Bowers, the chief operating officer, recalled that managing the crisis over the entire district required a reliance on key principals, who were viewed as capable

of giving reliable information and feedback. He used the metaphor of checking the oil in a car engine to illustrate the method of checking on the status of schools:

That's one of the things we try to do, and it's how we would dip stick [by] calling five or six principals who you can really count on in terms of being honest and open, and not the complainers and not the people who are going to hold everything close to the chest, but [principals who] are really going to tell you like it is.... That's an important part of the process (Bowers, personal interview, 2007).

#### Demand Strain

Collecting data about student attendance was a problem from the beginning.

There was no automated system for producing same-day figures (unlike the personnel system that tracked teacher requests for substitutes as a measure of absenteeism). The student attendance system produced reports only after receiving data from schools, and the school submissions were dependent on tedious data-entry tasks after teachers took attendance each morning. Even the centralized reports took at least a day to compile. The only option was to spot check as many schools as possible, getting an early estimate from principals and focusing on schools where problems might occur, with the assumption of normalcy everywhere else. Kress recalled the process:

We ended up having to call the schools and say, what's your attendance today? We had a tremendous amount of push back from principals, and even from community superintendents and their secretaries, about why, you know, why do we have to call these schools? And we got a lot of angry principals about—I have more important things to do than count heads. And, so, it started to get pretty ugly after a while (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

Kress said he felt the pressure not only from principals. “One of the issues became the superintendent's need for data and our inability to get that data,” he said, noting that the reports were due to West by mid-day at the latest (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

Two weeks into the crisis, the daily attendance reports ended. Kress secured the discontinuation from Weast after saying, according to notes from the meeting, that he was receiving “a little pushback” from principals and urged sensitivity about the requests for information, which had grown to include other topics (*Meeting notes October 16, 2002 ¶ 5:00*). After a brief discussion and agreement about stopping the daily requests, as described in the notes, Kress said: “The principals will view this as being responsive to helping them reduce stress” (*Meeting notes October 16, 2002 ¶ 5:00*).

At the time, Kress was holding back on the extent of the problem. He had been a school-based administrator, primarily as a principal, for 17 years—longer and more recently than anyone else at the table (other than the principals’ union president). As the head of the office in charge of their supervision, he had more daily contact with principals directly or through his community superintendents. He knew many of them personally as colleagues and friends, and he acted as a buffer when reporting about what they said. He understood their need to vent and his responsibility to be judicious. He later recalled receiving an e-mail from a principal who reacted uncharacteristically in response to a school district decision: “That was an email that never went beyond me” (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

Matthew A. Tronzano, who also had been an elementary principal, later recalled the isolation of the principals in comparison to the command team. The team had the benefit of inside information from the police and other authorities. The principals, he said, had information provided by the school district or obtained on their own. The seclusion compounded the problems they faced in the decisions they had every day. “When you’re isolated in the school and you’re being left to make...decision[s] by



yourself, that's awfully difficult to have to deal with," he said (Tronzano, personal interview, 2007).

#### Lingering Criticism

The demand for daily attendance data remained a sore point in the relationship of some principals and the central office. Edward W. Shirley, the principals' union president, described the problem in a letter to Weast after the crisis ended:

The number two issue in the minds of school-based administrators [behind inconsistent security rules for public use of school facilities] was the impact on staff in responding to central office initiated information requests. Unfortunately, many administrators feel that the only contact they received from the central office during this period was a request for staff and student attendance (Shirley, 2002).

Shirley recalled later that principals he talked to never had the same sense of urgency for the attendance data as the command team leadership. "From a principal's point of view, central office could get this as soon as it was sent in on-line," he said (Shirley, personal interview, 2007). He said it was issues such as this that prompted him to lobby successfully for a role on the team. "[Weast] kept sending out stuff that was—we're working on this as a team. I said wait a minute—no, we're not working on this as a team. You all are doing this, and you have nobody in your inner circle who is a principal....Don't tell people we're a team, because we're not a team" (Shirley interview," 2007).<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Five of the 15 team members were former principals, with various backgrounds and years removed from schools. Jerry D. Weast, the superintendent, was the most removed, having become a superintendent 26 years earlier. Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, was the most recent, having been a high school principal six years earlier. Edward W. Shirley became the most recent former principal on the team. He was a high school principal three months earlier, before becoming the full-time principals' union president. He was added to the team near the end of the second week.

Weast recalled, in response to an inquiry, the tensions that arose with principals and said he took the criticism in stride: “They did what they needed—they grumbled, they second guessed, they Monday-morning-quarterbacked—that was the way things were at that point in time” (Weast, personal interview, 2007). He noted, however, that the criticism never rose to the level of open insurrection; and, in the end, the principals managed their schools consistent with the directions given to them. “They didn’t have anybody stand up and say, no we won’t go, or yes we will go and do our own [thing] and the hell with these people,” he said (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

#### Weak Point in Plan

Weast was not immune to the plight of school staff. The day after the student shooting, he visited three schools, and he was accompanied by County Executive Douglas M. Duncan and Councilmember Michael L. Subin. Duncan’s presence was highlighted in media reports, with his picture in the next day’s newspaper talking to a high school government class. Subin was pictured in the background. Weast was elsewhere. He went to talk to staff. The visits made an impression about the crush of additional responsibilities and little available support. Later in the day, he directed James A. Williams, the deputy superintendent, “to push for parent volunteers” from among the PTA, businesses, and community leaders (*Meeting notes October 8, 2002 ¶ 5:00*). By Friday afternoon, after Williams’ staff reported more than a 1,400 volunteers tallied by schools, Weast raised the stakes. He wanted 2,000 volunteers and a database for keeping track of them and their expertise, possibly as “reading tutors,” for future reference once the crisis ended (*Meeting notes October 11, 2002 ¶ 5:00*).

The need for volunteers identified a weak point in the plan to keep schools open. Schools were not staffed to handle the extra security duties—including monitoring the hallways and checking visitors at locked front doors—let alone the voids created by cancelled field trips, and the indoor recess, and the impact of worried students, parents, and staff. In a “lessons learned” review later with staff, Weast noted the risks faced by the school district if “we get hit with something that overruns our resources” (*Lessons learned*, 2002). As the crisis progressed, the need for volunteers increased. Staff reported that outreach efforts expanded to include non-English speaking volunteers, especially those fluent in Spanish (*Meeting notes October 15, 2002 ¶ 5:00*) A private security firm from Bethesda was described offering trained personnel to assist schools in the Silver Spring area (*Meeting notes October 21, 2002 ¶ 7:30*).

#### ‘Fine Line’ of Stress

A week after the student shooting, the team meetings discussed the effects of staff and students being confined to their schools and worries about the ongoing attacks. On Monday morning, October 14, Weast told them he was considering “loosening up a little” and moving toward resumption of outdoor activities (*Meeting notes October 14, ¶ 7:30*). The idea of relaxing restrictions was a risk. Edward A. Clarke and Robert B. Hellmuth, director and assistant director, respectively, of school safety and security, reported that police sources agreed the assailant would strike again, based on the pattern thus far.

By mid-day, Clarke reported that police did not support resuming outside activities. There were no officers to spare to cover activities on playing fields. Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, also reported back after contacting 18 secondary principals about whether they wanted to resume outside activities, and most

said no (*Meeting notes October 14*, ¶ 11:00). Weast reported on a visit that morning to a high school and said he discerned “a fine line” about potential stress-related problems when he talked with staff and he could tell the situation was “affecting the students” (*Meeting notes October 14*, ¶ 11:00).

Weast’s observations were in addition to a report by Kress the previous Friday. He said principals were “starting to show more signs of stress as they try to ensure that everyone is safe” and the elementary principals were “showing the most signs of stress” (*Meeting notes October 11*, ¶ 5:00). At the time, Lacey suggested that “fear is increasing” in schools, and she was told to get data to back up the claim (*Meeting notes October 14*, ¶ 5:00). Lacey’s staff worked over the weekend contacting counselors, and Lacey returned to the next team meeting with a report on stress and anxiety in schools.

The report summarized responses to open-ended questions from 58 guidance counselors from 32 elementary schools, 16 middle schools, and 10 high schools (Figure 5.3). The responses were based on what the counselors felt about themselves and observed among students and other staff in their schools (“Touching base,” 2002). The report indicated that staff and students across all school levels exhibited signs of stress that affected their work and activities in increasingly negative ways. Staff, in particular, felt “overwhelmed” and exhausted, physically and emotionally, due to increased demands on their personal and professional time, concerns about safety, and feeling unrecognized for their work (“Touching base,” 2002).

Judith Madden, supervisor of counseling services, joined Lacey in presenting the report, and said school-based staff were dealing with others before taking care of themselves and they needed “emotional oxygen” before they can be called on to be more

Touching Base with Schools: October 14, 2002		
Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Number reporting: 32	Number reporting: 16	Number reporting: 16
<b>Student Concerns:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generalized worry</li> <li>• Physical restlessness due to lack of recess and outdoor P.E.</li> <li>• Some report of nightmares</li> <li>• Counselors are working proactively with whole classes to build feelings vocabulary and coping skills</li> <li>• Not a large number of individuals seeking support</li> </ul>	<b>Student Concerns:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frustration with Code Blue restrictions canceling activities, practices and special events</li> <li>• Higher rate of absenteeism reported at some schools</li> <li>• Reports of increased physical symptoms associated with stress</li> <li>• Annoyance with greater parental control and supervision as a result of the crisis</li> <li>• Media coverage is overwhelming</li> <li>• Schools closer to the incidents report higher level of student fear</li> <li>• Seem to be adjusting to "new normal"</li> <li>• On average, 15-20 students requested crisis related support</li> </ul>	<b>Student Concerns:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frustration with Code Blue restrictions canceling activities, practices and special events</li> <li>• Slight increase in anxiety/panic attacks</li> <li>• On average, 15-20 students requested crisis related support</li> <li>• Seem to be adjusting to "new normal"</li> </ul>
<b>Staff Concerns (across levels)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased levels of fatigue, physical and emotional exhaustion</li> <li>• Concerns about the extra time they are devoting to maintain the Code Blue: monitoring hallways, monitoring lunch</li> <li>• No "down time"</li> <li>• Increase in parent calls and parent concerns requiring extra staff attention</li> <li>• Hard to concentrate on lesson planning</li> </ul>		

Figure 5.3 Excerpt from Summary of Mental Health Concerns

From *Sniper crisis: Week 2, superintendent's crisis management communications*. Copyright 2002, Montgomery County Public Schools. Used with permission.

helpful (*Meeting notes October 14, ¶ 5:00*). She said the continuing stress of the crisis was taking a toll.<sup>84</sup>

Weast knew the problem was affecting more people than the report indicated. He told the Board of Education the next day, Tuesday, October 15, during a presentation on the status of the school district and its response to the crisis, according to an audio recording of the meeting, that the impact was universal:

In normal times, our teachers are under a great deal of stress. In abnormal times, they feel stress even more so.

<sup>84</sup> An elementary teacher later described the stress in a letter excerpted in a newspaper: "The staff and children never knew what kind of day would unfold...At any moment we might be forced to turn out lights and huddle in the back of the room, on the floor (many in a fetal position), as our only defense from killers that may have gotten into our school" (Schulte, 2002a).

It isn't just the teachers. The guy who has to maintain the building to make sure the doors are locked, he's worried doing his job. The cook who is trying to get the nutrition—she or he are worried about their job. The secretary who had a tough job before is beginning to answer the phone more and more rather than less and less. The principal who feels the ever present security issues, along with the educational issues, feels the weight of this on their shoulders. The teacher assistant, the bus driver—everybody, in all walks of life.

Even the parent who has always had a little bit of anxiety about bundling them up and sending them out, feels that anxiety at a much greater level than they were before ("Dialogue," 2002).

Weast said there were few options available to address the problem, describing it as a matter of resources. "We have tried to maintain a very cost [effective] approach and a prudent approach with safety," he said ("Dialogue," 2002).

In the meantime, he remained adamant about keeping schools open, and he thought there was a possibility of resuming outside activities. On Monday, October 14, at the late afternoon meeting, as quoted in the notes of the meeting, he requested a phase-in plan by the end of the week, "if things continue to be quiet" and told everyone to "make no announcement about this plan yet" because the decisions were pending (*Meeting notes October 14*, ¶ 5:00).

Later that evening, another shooting occurred.<sup>85</sup> Two days later, Rosemont Elementary School went into a Code Red with police patrolling the grounds after someone left a phone message threatening the school (*Meeting notes October 16, 2002* ¶ 5:00). The same day, *The Washington Post* published a list of "tips" provided by police on how to stay safe outside, which included walking "briskly in a zigzag pattern" and

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<sup>85</sup> The shooting killed a woman at 9:15 p.m., Monday evening, October 14, while she helped her husband load their car on the ground-level lot of a parking garage at a store in Falls Church, Virginia (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003, pp. 149-150).

“While outside, try to keep moving. A moving target is more difficult to hit than one that is standing still” (“Tips,” 2002).

#### Kindness for Staff

Parents were asked to be more supportive of teachers and staff. Weast was straightforward in his request, suggesting it as a challenge, in his daily letter:

This would be a good time to do something nice for school-based staff...Right now, this week, our school-based staff need the support of parents and community members who value the good deeds of the people who work each and every day in their schools (Weast, 2002h).

The letter did not refer to the mental health report received the day before, but the message drew from the report’s findings and presented an argument on why school-based staff deserved the extra attention. The message was meant as much for teachers and staff, as for parents:

They have been managing their duties under a great deal of stress. Everyone who works in a school has been keenly aware of the heightened responsibilities in supporting our core mission of teaching and learning while taking care of the anxieties and concerns of children (Weast, 2002h).

The letter reached for sympathy and guilt, placing the responsibility for the emotional well-being of teachers and staff partly on the shoulders of parents:

All too often it is easy to take for granted the professionalism and dedication of teachers...Each of these professionals has responsibilities that have become much harder in recent days. They need recognition from parents for a job well done, even if the recognition is a simple thank you (Weast, 2002h)

Such activities were already under way in some schools.<sup>86</sup> One high school principal noted that, while Weast’s idea was not unique, it was important and timely and

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<sup>86</sup> In a personal journal entry prior to the letter, an elementary teacher described increased parent support, as published later as a newspaper article: “It’s gone to a whole new level. To help relieve the stress of the teachers, parent volunteers, licensed massage therapists, are giving massages to the teachers during  
(Continued next page)

well-received. In an e-mail on October 15, the principal described a “wonderful breakfast” provided to staff by parents that morning before they received Weast’s letter and said, “...his idea was a good one and his sentiments were ‘right on’ the money. Our staff really appreciated the food, but more importantly they felt valued” (Doran, 2002).

Later that same day, Kress reported the establishment of voluntary opportunities for principals to meet confidentially with mental health staff (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 5:00). Kress later reported that no principals asked for the assistance.

The appeal to parents was followed by another effort that began the week before. Weast asked staff whether something “symbolically” would be appropriate to send to principals and other key staff to let them know the system “cared about them,” as quoted at the time (*Meeting notes October 11*, ¶ 5:00). He asked Matthew J. Kamins, supervisor of psychological services, for something appropriate. Kamins worked with others, including Frieda K. Lacey, the superintendent’s chief of staff, and Aggie Alvez, the director of special projects in the superintendent’s office. They proposed thick pads of notepaper in pastel colors that featured a cover sheet with the words “Grace Under Pressure” and individual sheets with an adaptation of a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and a note of appreciation from Weast (Figure 5.4). The idea was to send the notes to principals as a token of appreciation, so they could share comments with their own staff, and so on. A printer in Gaithersburg donated the entire project.

It was a small gesture, reflecting the symbolism Weast was looking for. He was impressed with the results and showcased the notepads during a presentation to the Board

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*(Continued from previous page)*

lunch. I'm stunned to see a teacher hunched over in a massage chair getting a massage, soft music playing, silence everywhere else” (Ochs, 2002).



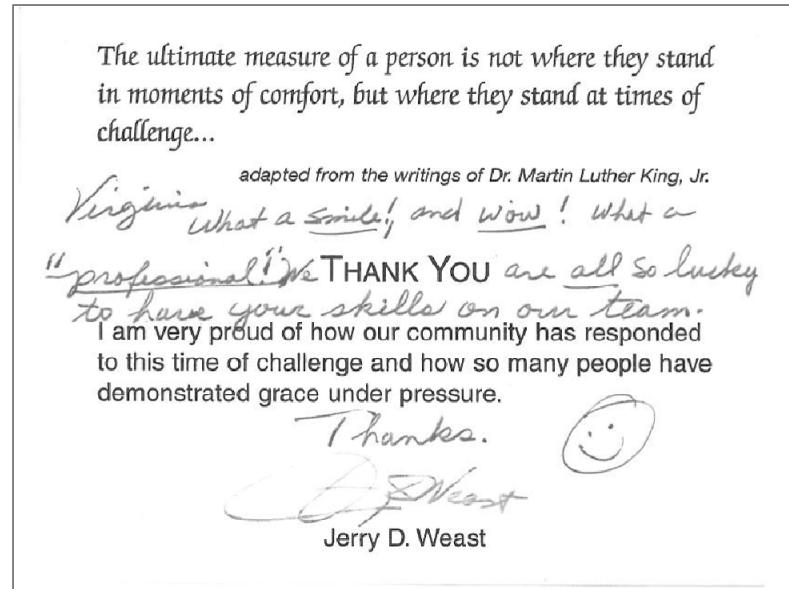


Figure 5.4 Recognition for ‘Grace Under Pressure’

Photocopy of notepad presented in October 2002 to Virginia Brooks, who took most of the team meeting notes and managed the archival collection. Shown approximately 50% of original size. Courtesy of Ms. Brooks. Used with permission.

of Education on how the school district was responding to the crisis. In the process, as quoted from an audio tape of the meeting, he changed the meaning of the phrase to something more akin to divine intervention: “It does symbolize how much we care about our people in a very small way, that they are being graced while they’re under a great deal of pressure” (“Dialogue,” 2002). There was no assessment of how the pads were interpreted by the recipients. Lacey recalled hearing that principals appreciated them and she saw the pads on their desks when she later visited schools (Lacey, personal interview, 2007). Ironically, the gesture also suggested something else entirely—that the school district’s resources were paper thin.

The phrase “grace under pressure” became a metaphor for how the school district responded as the crisis progressed. An article in the school district’s newsletter, for

example, described activities under way during the early part of the crisis: “Each school and office has its own story of grace under pressure and devotion to students...”

("System responds," 2002, p. 1). Weast used the phrase years later in recalling the response of employees to the crisis: “I mean this was grace under pressure, and it happened in every job we had” (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

#### Cancelation Pressure

The swing in events, from one shooting to the next, affected decisions on whether to resume outside activities. One week after the student shooting, for example, plans were initiated to loosen the restrictions, only to be placed on hold after the shooting that night, Monday, October 14. The next morning, the frustration was evident in the command team meetings. “It doesn’t look like we will be able to relax yet,” Weast said (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 7:30). At this point, schools operated with locked outside doors and limitations on inside access but not the full interior restrictions of a Code Blue. These were described as “baby blues” by a principal in an article later about his experiences (J. M. Sacco, 2003). Command team members and police often called them “light blues” (*Meeting notes October 21*, ¶ 11:30).<sup>87</sup>

The Monday night shooting identified a split among superintendents in the region over how to cancel outdoor student activities—daily, as in Montgomery County, or for a longer period of time, as wanted elsewhere, particularly in Virginia. The issue was the main topic of discussion in an afternoon conference call on October 15, sponsored by the Washington Metropolitan Area Council of Governments. The call included local

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<sup>87</sup> The similarity in terminology led to the common misunderstanding that the school district operated under a Code Blue for the entire crisis, which it did not.

government leaders, police commanders, and others. Weast used the speaker on his office phone to let staff in his office hear the conversation, including me.

The superintendents in Virginia, especially those in areas where the three most recent shootings occurred, advocated for longer cancellations. Weast disagreed. The discussion eventually focused on whether a uniform decision could be made among all area school districts to cancel activities indefinitely, as a way to manage planning consistently in the region for outdoor programs, athletic teams, and their support groups, including parents. The idea was similar to informal discussions that typically occurred in regional weather emergencies, when district transportation departments shared decision information among themselves and encouraged uniformity, if possible. On this day, no agreement was reached. Weast later explained his position to a reporter, saying that simply cancelling activities for several days or an indefinite period of time eliminated options and the ability to “maintain some optimism” in the face of the continuing police manhunt (Strauss, 2002).<sup>88</sup> I summed up the problem facing the superintendents for the reporter: “The dynamics of acceptable risk have changed... We are now trying to deal with the boundaries of that risk. What are they? That's what we have to find out” (Strauss, 2002).

After the conference call, Weast suggested to the team that the Virginia superintendents might be right after all. He asked the team members for their advice and, as quoted in the meeting notes, Weast presented his position before the others spoke: “Suspending indefinitely would be sending a message to the shooter that we are

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<sup>88</sup> The article described the different strategies saying, “Virginia superintendents are learning from... Weast, who was the first to order school lockdowns... Though they share common problems, the region's superintendents make their own decisions” (Strauss, 2002).

succumbing...giving up hope, and I do not think it is good public policy” (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 5:00). The discussion that followed, transcribed in the meeting notes, offered a vivid example of the give-and-take in the meeting room.

Larry A. Bowers, the chief operating officer, was the first to respond. He said, as quoted in the notes, that making a blanket statement about cancelling activities was unnecessary and counterproductive:

I think, as a general statement, that people are expecting that we are not going outside, so we really do not have to say anything. If you take the other position, there is no way out. You have approached it in a way so that you can systematically ease off (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 5:00).

As Bowers and others knew, the cancellations did not apply to all outdoor activities. Some student activities received permission to participate in events elsewhere, including parades and athletic competitions in other states. Those decisions happened quietly without any public notice, on a case-by-case basis.

Matthew J. Kamins, the supervisor of psychological services, also responded, saying indefinite cancelations affected behavior management among students, as well as staff: “We cannot take hope away from our kids and staff...If we take that away, we have backed ourselves into a corner” (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 5:00). Michael L. Subin, the County Councilmember, agreed with Kamins: “They are looking for a ray of hope. If you throw indefinite at them, it will compound the problem” (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 5:00).

I offered a potential middle-ground, suggesting that the daily decisions be maintained by making the decision one day in advance and “giving people feedback the day before” (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 5:00). Kamins agreed, saying it provided flexibility and calling it “the 24-hours approach” (*Meeting notes October 15*, ¶ 5:00).

Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, summarized the advice: “I agree on having some lead time. Twenty-four hours is smart. I don’t think we should go with an indefinite decision” (*Meeting notes October 15, 5:00*). Others around the table also agreed, and Weast asked whether the plan was consistent with making “the decision tonight about activities tomorrow” (*Meeting notes October 15, ¶ 5:00*). The team agreed again, and he cancelled activities for the next day.

At the end of the discussion, Weast admitted that the problem worried him and he thanked the team for the advice saying, as quoted in the notes, “I would hate for this to have been laid on me without the benefit of staff counsel” (*Meeting notes October 15, ¶ 5:00*). Weast remained under pressure both to make long-term cancellations and to restart outdoor activities. His office received correspondence urging a change. One e-mail from a parent, for example, urged him to “consider making a blanket statement that all outdoor activities are canceled until further notice” (*After school, 2002*). Another parent questioned the practicality of canceling outdoor activities when students congregate outside on their own: “Would several hundred students on...playing fields really [be] at more danger...than they would be hanging out at the 7-11 or what not during the same hours?” (“Sports season,” 2002).

#### Alternative Fields

As the crisis continued, the pressure intensified to allow interscholastic athletics to resume as football and soccer programs approached the end of the fall season. On Wednesday, October 16, Weast informed the team that he had formed a work group to

identify alternatives.<sup>89</sup> The effort followed two attempts to restart outside activities that were shelved when the attacks continued, first on Friday, October 11, and again on Monday, October 14.

At the time, athletic teams continued to hold modified practices indoors—with team members wearing socks and tennis shoes instead of cleats on gym floors and hallways—in the hopes of staying in condition if outdoor practices resumed. The team received a preliminary impact report on the continued cancellation of games and practices for interscholastic athletics, describing the specific effects for football, boys and girls soccer, field hockey, girls volleyball, cross country, golf, and girls tennis ("Summary," 2002, pp. 1-3). The report noted that student athletes had not practiced on school district athletic fields and tennis courts in 10 days, which the report identified as a potential safety concern for students when they returned to competitions lacking proper conditioning. The report also noted the limited options regarding make-up games and alternatives based on rules for state competitions ("Summary," 2002, p. 3). Those rules involved counties elsewhere in the state where competitions continued unfettered by the attacks in the Washington area or resumed after a short hiatus.

The effect of the restrictions was particularly hard for football teams. Make-up games had already been cancelled (*Meeting notes October 14*, ¶ 5:00). The county's sports community, which included parents of students vying for college football scholarships and booster clubs that partly depended on funding from refreshments sales was increasingly anxious, frustrated, and vocal. In an e-mail from the co-president of a

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<sup>89</sup> A similar group was formed by the county government to identify alternatives for community activities.

booster club, for example, reference was made to the recent Redskins football game: “What evidence or information do you have [that] a few thousand can’t make it safely to Churchill High School this Friday night to see Whitman play Churchill?” (Higgins, 2002).

Weast was sympathetic to the sports program, highlighting the situation in his letter to parents and staff on Wednesday, October 16,

The long-term consequences of the canceled events are important to all of us, but more so for the players, coaches, and families who now face the potential of continued cancellations. They need our support and understanding as these events unfold (Weast, 2002n).

The workgroup appointed by Weast finished a preliminary report quickly and presented options to the command team the next day. Michael L. Subin, the County Councilmember, who chaired the group, described the factors involved in scheduling 92 teams involved in fall sports at secure locations either inside the county or elsewhere and, as quoted in the notes, concluded that such an effort was “a logistical nightmare” (*Meeting notes October 17*, ¶ 7:30). At the center of the discussion was safety. Edward A. Clarke, director of school safety and security, summarized the problem, as quoted in the notes: “You have a low probability of an incident, but if do [have one], the consequences are unacceptable” (*Meeting notes October 17*, ¶ 7:30).

Weast shared the information with parents and staff in his letter that day. “Several scenarios are being pursued, including out-of-county sites and centralized county facilities that would offer the best security and accessibility,” he said (Weast, 2002i). He expressed optimism about the progress made in finding an alternative and sought support, holding out the hope of a resolution in order to keep peace:

...I want parents, students, and staff to know that experts in school athletics, logistics, security, transportation, and high school administration—along with county government leaders—were trying to find the best way for student athletes to play, if at all possible (Weast, 2002i).

Later that day, after the meeting with athletic directors, the school district announced additional details about the “continued development of potential options,” including resumption of tennis at indoor sites, golf and cross-country at alternative sites, and progress made on finding sites for football and other sports (2002g). The announcement said athletic directors and others were to meet the following Monday, October 21, to work out a way to resume outdoor sports.<sup>90</sup> The next morning, Friday, October 18, Edward W. Shirley, the president of the Montgomery County Association of Administrative and Supervisory Personnel, said the high school principals were unanimous in their opinion, as quoted in the notes: “They do not want to take kids outside” (*Meeting notes October 18*, ¶ 7:30).

Over the weekend, on Saturday night, October 19, near the Richmond, Virginia, suburbs, another shooting occurred.<sup>91</sup> Subsequently, Fairfax County canceled further plans to hold football games at undisclosed sites (Witt, 2002b).<sup>92</sup>

The team continued working alternative sites for playing fields, including the potential use of the National Institutes of Standards and Technology (NIST) campus in Gaithersburg, as well as Fort Detrick in Frederick, Maryland. Both sites had large, heavily-secured campuses in which students could play out of site of a potential sniper.

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<sup>90</sup> On Saturday, several Virginia school districts, as well as public schools in Washington, D.C., played football games at undisclosed sites outside their school districts (Sandoval, 2002).

<sup>91</sup> At 7:59 p.m. Saturday, October 19, a man was wounded while walking with his wife in the parking lot of a restaurant in Ashland, Virginia (“Commonwealth of Virginia v. Muhammad,” 2003, p. 16).

<sup>92</sup> An article later reported that one of the Fairfax County football teams visited the restaurant the same night where the shooting took place (Schulte, 2002b).



Choices Made in Managing a Threat

On Monday, October 21, at the late afternoon meeting, the command team heard a story about a letter found at the shooting site in Virginia the previous Saturday night. The letter, as the tale went, contained a threat against schools or children, and an elected official in the county knew about the letter and contacted the headmaster of his children's private school and warned him to keep students indoors. The headmaster's wife was a county music teacher, and she passed the story along, and eventually Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, heard it and shared it with the team (*Meeting notes October 21*, ¶ 5:00).

Kress shared the story after being prompted by Weast. When Kress finished, Weast said, as quoted in the notes of the meeting: "I think we're going to look back on this and be glad we kept notes every day" (*Meeting notes October 21*, ¶ 5:00). He did not mention that he also knew about the letter and the message it contained. He had known for some time and kept the knowledge from the team. He acknowledged this years later, in response to an inquiry, explaining that the letter was evidence from the investigation. "I was sworn to secrecy," he said (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

The next day, Police Chief Charles A. Moose released the relevant portion of the letter—"Your children are not safe anywhere at anytime"—at a press conference televised by *CNN* ("Authorities hold," 2002). Images of the letter later became public (Figure 5.5).

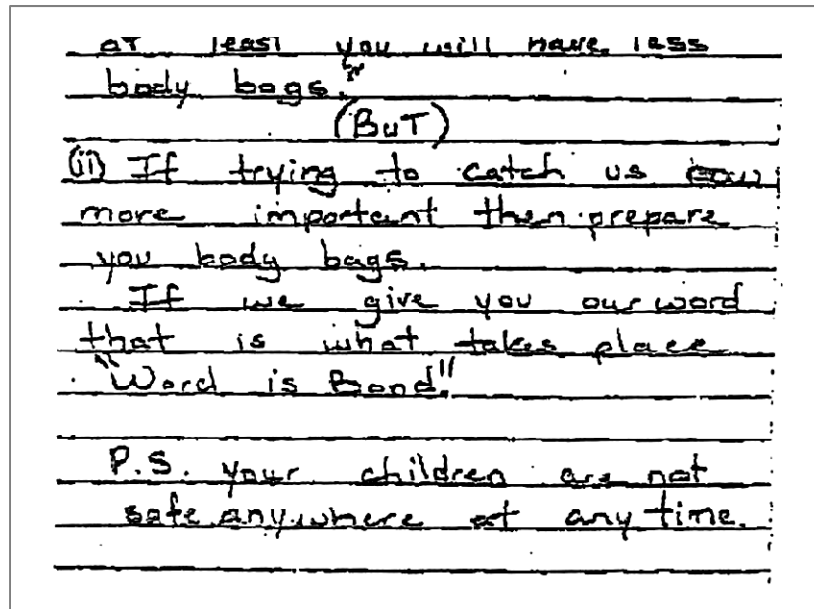


Figure 5.5 Excerpt from Threat to Children on October 19

From "Exhibit #7" (2006). In *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Lee Boyd Malvo Plea Agreement*, October 24, 2006. Retrieved October 11, 2007, from <http://www.spotsylvania.va.us>.

Also, at the press conference, County Executive Douglas M. Duncan disclosed that regional elected officials met the night before in his office with the joint police and federal task force. They discussed, he said, the implications of the letter on school operations in the metropolitan Washington area. "The consensus was to keep kids in schools," he said ("Authorities hold," 2002). He also said information about the letter was provided to officials at the meeting as part of efforts in "sharing information with the elected leadership, with the police chiefs, and then the information's getting around to those who need to be involved in making decisions" ("Authorities hold," 2002).

Duncan later recalled that the decision about schools was based on advice from the task force investigators that the letter did not constitute a different level of warning in the context of the previous attacks. He said the consensus was not to recommend closing schools or take any further security measures:

The decision at the end was, we'll keep doing what we're doing, there is no reason to close anything down, there's no new threat here. If anybody thinks children were safe in this, wasn't paying attention. I mean nobody was safe, at any time, anywhere. You never knew when they were going to strike next (Duncan, personal interview, 2008).

There were no school officials at the meeting, including elected members of boards of education or superintendents. Duncan recalled that their participation, at that point, was unnecessary and, if the group's decisions had been different, school authorities would have been notified and informed of the recommendation. He said he had already talked to Weast and found agreement before the meeting. "When they told me the information," Duncan recalled, "I shared it with him...and we both had decided there's nothing new here, we just keep going" (Duncan, personal interview, 2008).

Weast acknowledged receiving the information and agreeing with Duncan. "We had already decided what our stance was going to be," he said later, noting that his attendance at the meeting "wouldn't have changed anything" (Weast, personal interview, 2007). His decision was made exclusively with Duncan.

#### Confidential Letter

Weast's knowledge of the letter was not revealed until Tuesday afternoon and then only after an inquiry by a reporter from *The Washington Post*. The inquiry followed the announcement by Duncan. At the time, Weast told me that he had been informed about the message and received the "general nature of the note's threat," as noted in the school district's archival file (*Sniper crisis Week 3*, 2002). Weast was interviewed by the reporter that afternoon. There was no further no reference to the letter by anyone, including me, at the team meeting that afternoon.

The subsequent article the next morning, Wednesday, October 23, included the following passage about the meeting in Duncan's office and Weast's knowledge of events, referencing an unidentified source:

When the meeting broke up at 10:15 p.m., Duncan called Weast. "We told him what he needed to know in order to make an informed decision," the source said. "The relevant passage was made clear."

Weast confirmed that he was not given specifics. "Law enforcement are working very closely with us on the threat assessment, what we need to be cautious about," he said. "I don't get evidence shared with me" (Schulte, 2002b).

Clarke also knew about the letter, and he later recalled notifying Weast when he found out early on Monday, before the team meeting and the Duncan conference later that day. He said he called Weast and discovered that "he was already informed, had been informed" (Clarke, personal interview, 2007).

#### Richmond Decision

The meeting in Duncan's office on Monday night about schools was prompted, in part, by a decision among superintendents of school districts near Richmond, Virginia, to close schools on Monday after learning about the letter from local police on Sunday, October 20. The Richmond superintendents also kept the letter confidential. Their decision was part of a strategy initiated Sunday evening, according to one of the superintendents who described their actions in an article he wrote for *The School Administrator* (Roberson, 2004). They decided, according to his account, to provide another public rationale for closing schools, a decision that reversed an announcement made only hours before about opening schools on time:

Having been asked [by police] not to share with anyone, including our senior staffs and school boards, the evidence provided to us 45 minutes earlier, we announce[d] that *increasing community concern and anxiety* has prompted us to reconsider our decision earlier in the day [emphasis added] (Roberson, 2004).

Their strategy worked, initially. The next day, Monday, October 21, *The New York Times*, for example, referenced one of the superintendents saying the closure of schools in the Richmond area was “not based on any public specific threats, but on *‘the volume of concern’*” [emphasis added] (Gettleman, 2002).

However, by Tuesday morning, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* disclosed the existence of the letter, but not the contents, and linked it to the closure of Richmond area schools again that day as well (Fischer & Akin, 2002). The release of the letter by Police Chief Moose later on Tuesday was prompted, in part, by the article’s disclosures.

Other superintendents in the Washington area were reportedly not aware of the note prior to the public release, and some expressed little surprise or plans to change school operations as a result (Schulte, 2002b).

By the time the message was publicly disclosed on Tuesday, it had been followed by another warning in a telephone recording to police on Monday, as detailed years later in court records. The telephone message gave a similar statement: “Your children are not safe” (“John Muhammad v. Virginia,” 2005). Police did not disclose the telephone message, nor did anyone else at the time.

#### Another Shooting

The release of the letter also was prompted by another shooting early Tuesday morning, October 22, just before 6:00 a.m., in the Aspen Hill area of Montgomery

County, not far from the original incidents nearly three weeks earlier. The shooting killed a county transit bus driver.<sup>93</sup>

By the time the command team assembled at 7:30 a.m., the school district's bus fleet had been on the road for more than an hour. John Matthews, then assistant director of transportation, was called into the meeting to provide an assessment. He told the team that approximately 20% of the buses began moving by 6:20 a.m. and the number grew to about 80% some 20 minutes later (*Meeting notes October 22, ¶ 7:30*). Many of those buses, as well as cars bringing staff to work and students to school with their parents, landed in the middle of what was later described as “a massive dragnet over Montgomery County,” which included “checkpoints across the Washington region...trapping thousands of people in the most extensive and disruptive hunt yet for the sniper” (Layton & Shaver, 2002). The dragnet lasted for hours. An analysis of the impact area, similar to the analysis of the first shootings on October 3, later identified nearly 30% of the school district within five miles of the shooting site (Figure 5.6).

There were few options available. One was to close or delay opening all remaining schools, including those outside the effected areas. The other was to change the operations of only selected schools inside the effected areas. Both options meant an abrupt reversal in the middle of transporting children on buses, most of which did not

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<sup>93</sup> At 5:55 a.m., the driver was shot in the chest while standing at the door of his bus just across from a wood area, while waiting to begin his route (“John Muhammad v. Maryland,” 2007, p. 8).

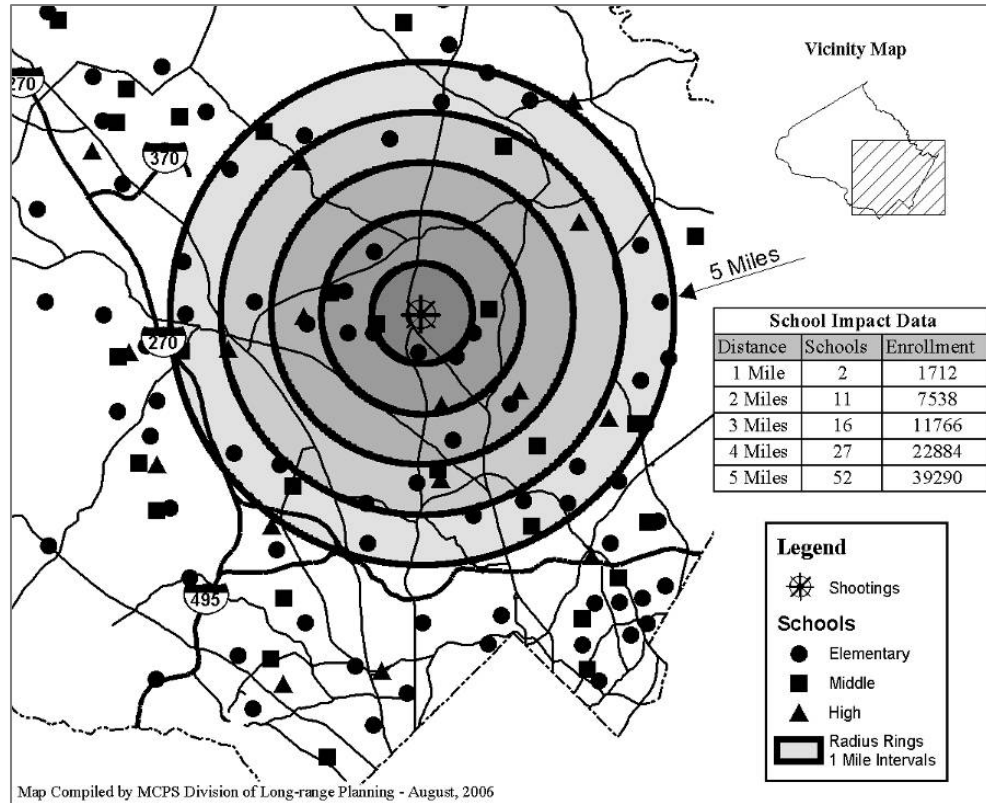


Figure 5.6 Impact Area of Shooting on October 22

Illustration prepared by the Division of Long-range Planning, Montgomery County Public Schools. Copyright 2006, Montgomery County Public Schools. Used with permission.

have emergency radios. Both options required special arrangements for children already at the schools or on their way. The situation, as described in a letter from Weast to a parent later, was similar to weather emergencies:

The fact is that if we had learned so late in the morning about an emergency weather condition, we probably would have brought the children to schools and then made certain that arrangements could be made to care for each child before they could leave the schools (Weast, 2002d).

Matthews recommended to the command team, as quoted in the notes, that “we should ride it out” and noted that “it is hard to close down specific schools” (*Meeting notes October 21, 2002* ¶ 7:30). Larry A. Bowers, the chief operating officer, described the problem as larger than simply buses caught in traffic. He said some children who

walk were likely already at the schools or on their way and, as quoted in the notes, “we’re going to have some schools where we cannot get staff in buildings” (*Meeting notes October 22, ¶ 7:30*).

Frieda K. Lacey, the superintendent’s chief of staff, and James A. Williams, the deputy superintendent, both lived in the general area of the shooting. They were among the staff caught in the traffic backups, and called into the meeting, saying they were heading instead to impacted schools nearby. Weast asked Edward A. Clarke, director of school safety and security, to contact police “and ask them to let some of people through to get to the schools so they can take care of the kids” (*Meeting notes October 22, ¶ 7:30*).

Eventually, any changes to school operations were deemed impractical. “We already have buses out there and we cannot go backwards,” Bowers said (*Meeting notes October 22, ¶ 7:30*). The team coalesced around proceeding as scheduled. Weast directed the announcement that schools were open saying, “...kids are at schools and we are keeping them there” (*Meeting notes October 22, ¶ 7:30*). In his letter to parents and staff later in the day, Weast defended the decision and cited “the importance of maintaining the operations of our schools...even under the most difficult of circumstances” (Weast, 2002k).

The decision announcement at 7:57 a.m. said the opening of schools was proceeding “...with obvious difficulties associated with the traffic congestion in the area of the ongoing police investigation” (Porter, 2002h). The announcement said the school district was providing transportation and assistance to schools. Police, though, were not at schools. Clarke, as quoted in the notes, told the team that officers normally assigned to



schools were “assigned to the checkpoints...” (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 7:30). That led to concerns about school safety, particularly if the assailant was still in the area.<sup>94</sup>

#### Fast-Paced Decisions

Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, recalled the decision that morning as “probably the fastest decision we had to make over the whole three-week period” (Kress, personal interview, 2007). In reality, it was not the fastest decision, but it was the most inclusive, involving Kress and other team members in a process that was previously limited to a few. It was pressure decision-making for 90 minutes in an environment in which no one knew what might happen next. Weast, as quoted in later comments to the team, said the shooting that morning “moved us from tension to fear,” (*Lessons learned*, 2002, p. 5).

Edward W. Shirley, the president of the Montgomery County Association of Supervisory and Administrative Personnel, later recalled that the tensions involved basic unknowns of whether the decision to keep schools open improved the safety of children and staff or placed them in greater danger. There was no way of knowing. He said the decision reflected a basic core value and confidence in the school district:

We came down to our belief—I know I supported the final decision, that it was the right decision—that we were going to provide a safer environment for the kids by continuing to try to open the schools that day (Shirley, personal interview, 2007).

Weast ordered all schools to implement a Code Blue at 8:21 a.m. In the meantime, staff began contacting schools in the impacted area to assess the number of

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<sup>94</sup> At that time, police had not linked the sniper to the shooting but were operating on that assumption and Edward A. Clarke, as quoted in the notes of the meeting, reported late in the morning that police were “still looking at all situations” (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 11:35).

students and employees present and any feedback about conditions (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 8:25). Just before 9:00 a.m., further restrictions were announced across the district, canceling afternoon kindergarten, field trips, and staff development programs, with morning kindergarten and pre-kindergarten students held at schools until the afternoon dismissal (Porter, 2002e).

By that time, central office staff from the instructional and staff development areas were contacting schools and offering assistance, and Robert B. Hellmuth, assistant director of school safety and security, told the team that high school security staff were diverted to elementary schools (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 8:50). At one point, the team received a report that police helped move a convoy of buses into a high school (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 9:15). Judith Madden, supervisor of guidance services, told the team that initial reports from some schools indicated a high level of stress and anxiety but that staff did not want help, just recognition for their efforts under the circumstances (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 9:40).

Kress reported that initial data on attendance indicated that one high school had only 40% of its students, one middle school had 26%, several clusters of schools were in the 30% to 35% range, and one elementary school had just 10 students. Bowers said the attendance data would increase as the buses finally got through but that low attendance may occur because “kids have left the bus stops and gone back home” (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 9:40 a.m.). The absenteeism also affected staff. Williams, in later comments to the team, said “in some schools the secretaries were in charge” because the administrators or other staff could not get there (*Lessons learned*, 2002, p. 5). Weast

noted in his letter that day some schools opened “with just a few staff initially and many with parent volunteers” until more staff arrived (Weast, 2002k).

Several times during the course of the morning, reference was made to the characteristics of schools caught in the dragnet. Many of them had high levels of student poverty and, consequently, high participation in subsidized breakfast and lunch programs, among other services. That characteristic was viewed as one of the primary motivations for not closing schools. “We open schools for a reason,” Weast told the team, as quoted in the meeting notes. “Some of the kids in the high target schools come because they need us” (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 9:40).

The events provided a lasting memory. Years later, in a speech to principals and the community on the operating budget, Weast recalled the actions of the cafeteria manager of Sligo Middle School that morning. The then 37-year veteran of the school district demonstrated her “commitment to children,” he said, when she abandoned her car and walked the remaining two miles to school “because ‘her’ students needed breakfast” (Weast, 2006, p. 5).

In his letter to parents and staff that day, Weast cited such “heroic efforts” by staff “to suppress their own anxieties and take care of our students” (Weast, 2002k).<sup>95</sup> These were qualities he most admired. He noted in the letter, for example, that while “absenteeism and late arrivals were high in certain schools,” every school opened and

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<sup>95</sup> In one incident, Strathmore Elementary School went into a Code Red after gunshots were heard behind the building, drawing police and two helicopters to the school, which was located near the shooting scene that morning (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 12:15). Staff later learned the shots originated from a military veteran’s funeral at a nearby cemetery (Schulte & Trejos, 2002a, p. ).

“today’s response by teachers and their colleagues displays the great dedication and commitment that so distinguish our schools” (Weast, 2002k).

#### Choice to Stay Open

When the command team regrouped for the late afternoon meeting on Tuesday, October 22, the discussion settled on feedback from staff. Judith Madden, the supervisor of guidance services, reported on another open-ended inquiry among guidance counselors in 13 schools in and around the area affected by the shooting. She said, as quoted in the notes, “teachers and school staff are in survival mode” (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 5:00). Donald H. Kress, the coordinating community superintendent, reported that stress was high among principals, particularly in the schools near the incident. He said, as quoted in the notes, there was much disagreement among the principals on whether schools should have opened that morning, “based on the feeling that we endangered staff and kids by putting them in the dragnet” (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 5:00).

Edward W. Shirley, the president of the Montgomery County Association of Administrative and Supervisory Personnel, told the team, as quoted in the notes, that some principals were “scared they are going to make a mistake and someone will get hurt” (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 5:00). Shirley later recalled that, when he said that, Weast turned to him and said: “How do you think I feel?” (Shirley, personal interview, 2007). Shirley recalled being struck by Weast’s revealing response. He said later, “And for him that’s almost like a sign of weakness, which he never says. That will stay with me. That was really profound when he said that to me” (Shirley, personal interview, 2007).

The job of managing the crisis was taking a toll on the team. “Everyone around the table was feeling the stress,” recalled Madden, and she said Weast took the brunt of

the strain: “It was very clear that he felt the strain...you can’t not be affected by the responsibility of 140,000 kids’ safety,” she said (Madden, personal interview, 2007).

The backlash over the decision to keep schools open included overtly personal criticism. The staff of Georgian Forest Elementary School, which was located near the shooting scene, for example, wrote a letter to Weast that was hand-signed by 51 people: “Last week you spoke to us at the Kennedy Cluster writing conference and told us how valuable our contribution is to our students’ lives. Yesterday, we did not feel valuable. We felt our lives and efforts were valued cheaply” (*Letter to Dr. Weast*, 2002, p. 1).

Weast remained stoic throughout. He ended the command team meeting Tuesday night reinforcing plans to continue with daily decisions, with the command team meeting three times a day, thanking everyone. “I appreciate all of you doing your job,” he said, as quoted in the notes, and emphasized the decision to stay open, urging team members to let people know “that we took this man’s threat seriously from day one” (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 5:00).

At the time, there was no discussion about the sniper’s message from the previous Saturday night, which was publicly revealed earlier in the afternoon. Not included in the police chief’s announcement, nor referenced at the team meeting, was a second note (in addition to the telephone threat on Monday), which was found at the scene of the shooting Tuesday morning. It was revealed later in court records (Figure 5.7).

#### ‘Time Out’ Option

The killing of a county transit bus operator brought the threat literally to the vehicle doors of the drivers and attendants of the district’s school buses. In the middle of

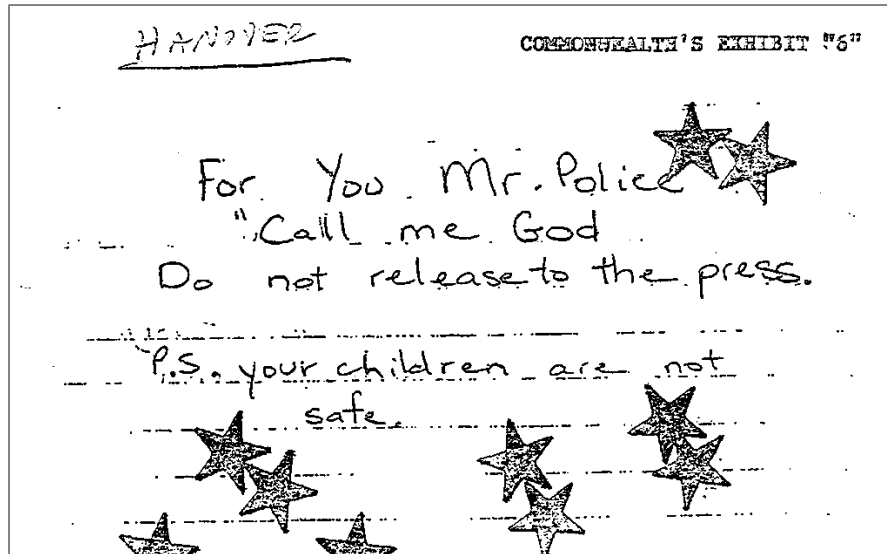


Figure 5.7 Excerpt from Second Note Threatening Children on October 22

From "Exhibit #6" (2006). In *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Lee Boyd Malvo Plea Agreement*, October 24, 2006. Retrieved October 11, 2007, at <http://www.spotsylvania.va.us>.

the frenzy Tuesday morning, Weast said it was important to recognize bus drivers and attendants "symbolically" in response to the "moral courage" asked of them (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 10:35). Hellmuth reported that county police were assisting on security arrangements for school buses, including security staff riding on the buses, and buses were being provided for students who typically walked home through an area that was still a crime scene (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 11:00). Later in the day, Tronzano reported that some drivers and attendants were receiving crisis assistance support (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 5:00).<sup>96</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Later disclosures revealed that the planned attacks included school buses, including one shooting that was called off "at the last minute" (Horwitz & Ruane, 2003, p. 162). Other planned attacks reportedly included bombings of school buses, schools, and hospitals (Londoño & Rich, 2006).

Early the next morning, Weast made a personal effort to rally the bus operators and attendants. Without them, the school district could not operate. All bus operators and attendants received a letter in their buses from Weast:

Please accept my sincere gratitude for the courage and dedication you are showing in the face of our continuing crisis situation... You are modeling a positive attitude that is reflected by our children and their parents... Your professionalism throughout this ordeal has set a new standard of work ethic of which we can all be proud (Weast, 2002s).

The superintendent also visited one of the transportation depots early Wednesday morning before buses departed for schools, talking with bus operators, attendants, mechanics and other staff. Matthew A. Tronzano, executive assistant to the chief operating officer, reported in the team meeting later that several drivers and attendants with routes in the area where the shooting took place called in saying they were “too afraid to work” and supervisors and others covered the routes (*Meeting notes October 23, 2002 ¶ 7:30*). At the same time, Tronzano reported that teacher attendance was up, with fewer than normal requests for substitutes (*Meeting notes October 23, 2002 ¶ 7:30*).

The command team discussed ways in which to bring more reassurance about safety to schools, including having uniformed firefighters and other safety personnel visit schools during the day. Weast said he had talked to people who attended the prayer vigil the night before and received positive feedback on the district’s management of the crisis. Nonetheless, he was open to the idea of a “time out” by closing the schools, as quoted in the notes, and deferred discussion until the end of the day (*Meeting notes October 23, 2002 ¶ 7:30*). Later in the day, the focus was on alternative sites for athletics.

The superintendent’s office was inundated with complaints about the non-disclosure of the sniper letter, on top of the decision to keep schools open on Tuesday.

The public release of the message had effects on the command team members, as well. Frieda K. Lacey, the superintendent's chief of staff, for example, later recalled how the news greatly upset her grandson who was living with her. She said the impact became apparent "when tears started rolling down his face" and she realized she had been distracted by the command team meetings and not available to console him (Lacey, personal interview, 2007).

At mid-day on Wednesday, Mark Simon, then president of the Montgomery Education Association, the union representing teachers, joined the team meeting. His presence marked the change in the way the crisis was being addressed internally. Simon was not part of the command functions of the school district, as determined by Weast.

In the meantime, the White House announced \$600,000 toward school security improvements and counseling services for schools, including funding for two-way radios for school buses, in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia (Lichtblau, 2002). Weast learned about the grants the day before from the state superintendent, (*Meeting notes October 22*, ¶ 4:20). Weast had advocated for weeks for emergency funding for radios and other security measures.

In his letter to parents and staff on Wednesday afternoon, Weast made an indirect reference to the sniper message. The reference came in his explanation about schools remaining open following the shooting the day before. First, he cited the advice of police and government leaders guiding him. "This is not an easy decision, but it reflects our determination to provide students with as much opportunity for continuity as possible," he said (Weast, 2002m). Then he made reference to the subject that had caused considerable criticism. "I am mindful that many parents, as well as staff, are anxious and



fearful about the continued threats being made about the safety of people, including children, in our community,” he said (Weast, 2002m).

It was his last public reference to the issue as events over the next 24 hours eclipsed any further concerns about school sniper message and who knew about it.

#### Caution after Arrests

The next morning, Thursday, October 24, the arrests of two suspects were announced. Schools remained under Code Blue, as the command team used caution pending confirmation that the two suspects were the sniper being sought by police. The team continued working on mental health issues and alternative sites for sports, but the tension and pressure to act were gone.

At mid-day, Weast urged the preparation of a gesture of appreciation for all employees, "symbolically...something tangible to identify MCPS" and suggested the wording "You made it through the crisis of October 2002" (*Meeting October 24, 2002 ¶ 11:30*). Four days later, the district published a brochure that included a note from Weast and advice on how to handle the mental health aspects of recovery after a crisis. Throughout the day, employees were advised to be patient and wait for news on whether the arrests had ended the crisis.

Later in the afternoon, Edward A. Clarke, director of school safety and security, informed the team that police units were told to "stand down," as quoted in the notes, but Weast directed the team to wait until the county took specific legal actions against the suspects before relaxing any other security measures at schools (*Meeting October 24, 2002 ¶ 5:00*). Three hours later, the district announced to all staff that the crisis was over, the Code Blue was lifted, and all operations returned to normal. The announcement

quoted Weast, in an expression reflecting probably universal sentiment: “All of us—everyone who works in our school system—are breathing a sigh of relief this evening” (Porter, 2002a).

The team met again the next morning and discussed general implications of the crisis concerning security, mental health, communications, and organizational variance. Weast directed the preparation of a final letter to parents. Plans were made to meet and debrief the following week (*Meeting notes, October 25, 2002*). The meeting was postponed for six weeks and held in mid-December 2002.

## Chapter 6: Discussion of the Portrait

### Overview

The study of crisis management and decision making by the leaders of the Montgomery County Public Schools during the sniper shootings of October 2002 resulted in a comprehensive description of a single case, bounded by time and place and the experiences of participants. The study revealed a rich depiction of their response in confronting the ugly reality of an unprecedented crisis. Their collective story, as described in the preceding narrative report, provides a basis for drawing conclusions and identifying implications in light of the literary and conceptual framework of the study and its methodology. Chapter 6 begins that process in the context of the research problem and the study's central question.

### Problem and Question

The purpose of the study was to understand school district crisis management within the context of a single case, as an illustration of issues facing district leaders in crisis situations. It was a unique endeavor, entering a literal void in the literature about crisis management and decision making in school districts. The void defined the problem, suggesting little academic and practical interest in (a) research-based crisis management and decision making, (b) improvement of such skills through training, and

(c) attainment of expertise in crisis management and decision making based on performance standards.

Within this context, the study took a highly complex event, identified what occurred and who was involved, and explained it within the traditions of qualitative research as a non-evaluative portrait of a single case. A framework of literature on crisis management and decision making became a guiding conceptual basis for the analysis. The identified case encompassed the 23-day sniper incident in October 2002 and prior events that informed the response by the leaders of the Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland. In addition to my role as a senior staff member of the school district and as a participant researcher in this study, the participants included 15 individuals: one superintendent, four senior staff, seven other district staff, a principals' union president, and two elected officials (the county executive and a County Council member). All but one (the county executive) served on the school district team involved in the school district's response.

The decisions they made formed the basis of the central question guiding the study: what can be learned from their experiences? Within this framework, the study probed the contextual and procedural aspects of what occurred, exploring and describing the decision characteristics, the strategies and processes, the purpose of the decisions, and the main participants.

#### Research Context

The absence of substantial literature on crisis management and decision making by leaders of school districts placed the context of the study well outside the confines of research in education leadership. The absence implies that such knowledge lacks utility

for superintendents and their administrative teams. Indeed, the research-basis for understanding organizational leadership during times of crisis exists largely elsewhere (Allison & Zalikow, 1999; Burns, 1978; Campbell, 1999; Grattan, 2004; Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997; March, 1988; Mintzberg, et al., 1976; Orasanu & Fischer, 2001; Wallace, 2003; Weick, 1995, 2001a; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, 2007), among others. Deep research exists among such fields, for example, as fire and rescue services (Weick, 2001b), the military (Gullatt & Long, 1996; Klein, 1993a), and corporations (Eisenhardt, 1989). Research extends across a variety of contexts: cognitive processes (Crozier & Ranyard, 1997), judgment and choice (Hertwig, et al., 2004; Kahneman, 2003); dynamic environments (Kerstholt & Raaijmakers, 1997); terrorist attacks (K. Sacco, et al., 2003); mass behavior (Gladwell, 2000); intelligence (Greenspan, 1997); and computer-based training (Snizek, et al., 2002), among others.

The application of such research seems largely to escape deep attention in education, except among mental health professionals (A. H. Fein, et al., 2008; Jimerson, et al., 2005; Knox & Roberts, 2005; Nickerson, et al., 2006; Poland, 1994; Reeves, et al., 2008). Vulnerable populations in schools during emergencies have extensive interest (Brock & Cowan, 2004; Greene, et al., 2004; Lindle, 2008; McGiboney & Fretwell, 2007; Vossekuil, et al., 2002; Wendell, 2002), among others. So does the effects on schools by the terrorist attacks in September 2001 (Brown & Bobrow, 2004; Hoven, et al., 2005) and the sniper attacks in 2002 (Westerman, et al., 2003).

The lack of fresh analysis and application of even existing crisis management and decision making research is more remarkable given the duty of care within the educational profession for the safety and wellbeing of children, as a fundamental

responsibility under law (Alexander & Alexander, 2005; Bounds, et al., 2006; Jimerson & Furlong, 2006).

This is not to say that education research has not focused on organization management and the functions of leadership. It has, extensively (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Dunn, 2004; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Senge, et al., 1999; Slater & Boyd, 1999, among others). However, the empty space that appears for the topic of crisis management and decision making, even as an identifiable subset within the larger focus on organizational leadership, is hard to ignore. For example, the most recent edition of Hoy and Miskel's (2008) textbook series on educational administration continues to overlook the topic as an identifiable subject, separate from the presentation of management and decision making models and theories.

The research void is more startling given not just the history of violence in educational settings but also the findings of investigative reports after those attacks. In the decade after the killings at Columbine High School, the issue of competence—not dedication or intelligence—in the management of a crisis were a central focus of inquiries into organizational preparation for, and responses to, acts of violence in schools and colleges campuses. Examples include the incident at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (*Report of the review panel*, 2007), and studies of school preparedness nationally (Ashby, 2007) and in specific states (Goldman, 2008; Kano, et al., 2007; *Safe and secure schools*, 2008). And this has occurred when the profession of educational leadership has substantively changed in an era of terrorism (Bauer, et al., 2008; Brickman, et al., 2004; R. A. Fein, et al., 2002), continued school violence (Dinkes, et al., 2009; Noonan & Vavra, 2007; Planty, et al., 2008), and requirements for school

safety and security preparations as a condition of federal funding (*NIMS implementation, 2008*).

#### Conceptual Change

When the study began in 2005, the initial concepts identified about crisis management and decision making were found to be too broadly defined to adequately frame and guide the conduct of the study. Much of the early thinking focused on the implications of intuition in crisis decision making, without clearly understanding a more nuanced view of intuition as a product of expertise, not simply native instinct. Over time, continued development of the study's research foundation revealed three important additions for a more relevant understanding of the topic within the scope of this study. One additional source was the work by Boin, et al., (2005), which described the leadership tasks for public officials in managing a crisis within a political environment. Another was the work by Hoy and Miskel (2005), and updated in 2008, regarding their model of schools as a social system and the model's application to school districts. And, third, was the work by Weick and Sutcliff (2001), and updated in 2007, on organizational environments in which personnel become mindful of their responsibilities and reliable in avoiding expected human errors and skillful in fixing them.

These additions led to a change in the conceptual framework for the study and my understanding of the case. The modification resulted in a unique integration of the concepts of critical leadership tasks and high reliability within the context of social systems of school districts. This led to an expansion of my understanding of the case as equally about crisis management as it is crisis decision making.

## Methodology

Portraiture, as a form of case study, provided the qualitative tradition from which the overall study was produced. This included the collection and analysis of data, verification tasks for quality, and production of a narrative report. Within this methodology special care was taken regarding my role as a participant researcher.

The voices of the 15 case participants (in addition to myself), through their recollections of the events of the case, became an integral part of the study. Each was interviewed, based on standard research practices, with the added dimension that the study was public by design and each participant was identified. Extensive data gathering was conducted in advance of the interviews, involving more than 700 records, largely archival documents of the school district, newspaper articles, press conference transcripts, and other artifacts from the case and subsequent sources of information. A nearly equal number of research memos were prepared reflecting the interpretation of records, data, and the ongoing conduct of the study. The data analysis was assisted through the use of relational-based research software to identify and categorize the large amount of information.

The processes of verification included triangulation of data from multiple sources and perspectives, weighting of evidence through constant comparative analysis, and checks on researcher effects through feedback from participants during and after their interviews and two critical friends with independent knowledge and experience in the subject.

Initial aspects of the study involved background information gathering and analysis to explore the full scope and context of the case. Major elements of the research



process, including the participant interviews, began in the late fall of 2007 following my retirement from the Montgomery County Public Schools as the chief of staff to the superintendent of schools. With the exception of subsequent contract work on behalf of the district on a limited basis, the substantive portions of the study and preparation of the narrative report were conducted after leaving the district's employment.

#### Early Corrections

Part of the challenge in being a participant researcher was thinking, at the outset, that everything was obvious because of personal experience with events in the study and that memories are clear because they are personally remembered. I had assumed certain elements of the case to be true and found they were not. I also made initial assumptions about events, based on my own recollections, only to find later that I remembered correctly but I knew only part of the story.

Assumptions were made about crisis management and decision making because of personal insights developed from years of experience and academic preparation. These proved faulty and required a reassessment of the case, realignment of research strategies, redoubling of efforts to document events comprehensively, and reexamination of ideas about what the case was really about.

One of the early assumptions was that the school district imposed the security restrictions of Code Blue and kept them in place for the entire crisis. This was how I remembered those days, but it was not true. A detailed and nuanced reconstruction of the events of the case clearly showed that a prohibition of outdoor activities was imposed for nearly the entire case, but not the Code Blue. That procedure was initiated for only about

a third of the days. The difference was important—it meant another series of decisions (on/off Code Blue) was part of the case.

Another early assumption linked the “decision making experiences” of the participants in the case with “protecting students from the sniper,” as stated in the research question. While true in the overall sense of the time and place of the case, the phrase did not reflect the nature of the decisions involving the participants. Their experiences had little to do with the sniper, per se; their decisions were related to issues much more finely tuned to the day-to-day necessities, which included the safety and welfare of students and continuation of services, among which included daily breakfast and lunch for thousands of students. In these decisions, the sniper was a contextual factor, not an objective or a purpose.

The initial participant sample was selected on the basis of the people who were originally identified as important in the case, and these individuals were largely those whose participation was evident to me at the outset. As noted earlier, initial impressions are often faulty. The reconstruction of events in the case, particularly toward the end of the event timeline, revealed the involvement of other participants, such as County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, in ways that I did not know about or originally understand. The emergence of Duncan’s participation and his relationship with Jerry D. Weast, the superintendent of schools, considerably changed my perspective about the case and the components I was exploring.

#### Limitations

The study involved a single case, bounded by an identified time, place, and set of participants. There can be no generalization beyond the case for any of its findings and

interpretations. It can be illustrative, but it can not be predictive or the basis for extrapolating any conclusions beyond the parameters of the case. The study is limited as well by a conceptual framework that established the analytical perspective in the conduct of the study, the approach of the researcher, and the observations and interpretations of the results and creation of the narrative report.

As a retrospective study, in which the events of the case occurred nearly eight years ago, the study is limited to the factual record available through archival records, historical documents, contemporaneous accounts in the media, and the recollections of the participants. Their recollections are limited by personal interpretations of thoughts and meanings affected by the passage of time, subsequent events, and current thinking. Participant memories are inescapably self-limiting, either through an inability to remember, an imprecision in what is remembered, or a choice regarding selective memory.

The participants themselves represent a further limitation, not just in the bounding of the case but also in the highly selective nature of the participant sample, in which the case focuses on the experiences of a comparatively small number of people in an otherwise large-scale crisis event. The public identification of these participants further limits the study by the participants' own self-awareness, concerns for privacy, or other personal issues.

As a qualitative inquiry, the study is limited by the subjectivity of the researcher who, as a participant in the case, is further limited by the potential personal bias and reflexivity from other participants as a result of involvement and familiarity. These limitations were addressed in the design and conduct of the study.

### Findings and Conclusions

This was a non-evaluative study. No attempt was made to measure the degree of success or failure or to characterize something as good or not. The study followed the constructs of non-evaluation analysis, as suggested by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), Hackmann (2002), and Pearson and Clair (1998). However, this did not exclude drawing conclusions from the aggregate findings, in light of the study's conceptual framework. Indeed, the findings provide a rich source of data from which useful insights were gained about school district crisis management and decision making where none others exist.

The findings in this study serve as illustrations, not absolutes, and provide an entry point for further exploration of the kinds of events and experiences described in the narrative report. The events and experiences were unique, in that they occurred only in this case, but they illustrate on a much broader scale insights in the literature about crisis management and decision making and related areas of study.

#### Contextual Setting

At the outset, it is important to note the context of the case and the events that confronted the school district leaders. Theirs was not an entirely unique experience. They dealt with well-documented effects of a typical crisis, characterized by uncertainty and fear in reactions and ambiguity in distinguishing real from unreal. However, in this case the effects were multiplied in a cumulative fashion by the seemingly unending *length* of the event. Over the course of more than three weeks, the shootings continued, along with the precautions taken against them, without an end in sight. Even before it

was half over, the crisis achieved notoriety as the longest of its kind ever to face a public school district (Bowler, 2002).

The effects were further intensified by the *unified reaction* among people to the crisis—the dread of being hunted, one of the most primal threats in the human experience, striking at the core of what Abraham Maslow described in 1970 as the powerful “human need” for personal safety and security (as cited in Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 137). People were shot and killed or wounded on such a random yet purposeful basis every few days that nowhere seemed safe, from the front sidewalk of a suburban middle school to the gas pump at a service station. A local newspaper even provided tips to avoid being shot, noting that “a moving target is more difficult to hit than one that is standing still” (“Tips,” 2002). Some school district leaders recognized the hunting characteristic of the attacks at an early point in the case, comprehending the capability of the assailant and the risks involved. The public reaction was from a different vantage point, reflecting the perspective of the prey, trying to stay alive.

In that sense, the effects of the crisis were increased by their *public* nature, in which the expert skills of a marksman with the weaponry and intent of a sniper were on graphic display. They were magnified many times over by the media-rich environment of the nation’s capital region and the involvement of federal law enforcement and the military. The impact of the attacks was so intense that five years later the second highest court in Maryland compared them to the sensation caused by “Jack the Ripper,” the name given to an unknown English serial killer from the late 1800s (“John Muhammad v. Maryland,” 2007).

The crisis was the most intense at its epicenter, which was Montgomery County, Maryland, where the killings began without warning on Thursday morning, October 3, 2002, and a group of school district leaders reacted.

#### Doomed Crisis Plan

The school district's new emergency plan for incident command was discarded before its first use, eight months after being implemented in January 2002. The plan was originally intended to rectify problems identified in previous crises. It gained impetus in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in which the school district did not have a written plan to guide leadership actions for a coherent districtwide response. In February 2002, a few weeks after its implementation, the superintendent of schools informed the Board of Education that the new plan established the basis for the district's "collective ability to respond" (Weast, 2002r, p. 1). In that report, the superintendent identified the chief operating officer as the incident commander, responsible for the district's response to an emergency. Six months later, in August 2002, the plan was put to a test, with a table-top drill designed as a clinical measure and the chief operating officer in charge, and the superintendent did not participate. When the real thing happened six weeks later, the plan remained on the proverbial shelf. Instead, the superintendent led the district's emergency response, and he was well within the authority of his office to do just that. His choice to lead is not the immediate question. Instead, the question is whether the plan, without him as the leader, ever had a chance of being formally operational in the first place?

In retrospect, the district's emergency plan was probably dead on arrival, at least in terms of the superintendent's management of a crisis. When the crisis ended, plans

were announced to amend the plan to reflect his involvement (*Lessons learned*, 2002, p. 1). Before the crisis, the superintendent had a known history of being personally involved in crisis management. Episodes involving the bus accident in May 2000 (Appendix F) and the school light fixtures in September 2000 (Appendix E) provide detailed examples of his use of positional authority in response to an emergency. His non-involvement in the table-top drill was a hint of how he viewed his role and the need to practice with others.

However, the key to understanding what happened to the short-lived emergency response plan is the superintendent's comment in a newspaper article several years later, on the fifth anniversary of the shootings. At that time, he described the people who were with him on the first day as his "kitchen cabinet" (Sedam & Ford, 2007). It was an expression that reflected his trust in a small group of aides, which included me. In that sense it was not unlike the modern interpretation of the term originally given to a group of informal advisors who acted as political and personal aides to President Andrew Jackson in the 1830s, although initially the term was used in a derogatory manner by his critics (Latner, 1978).

The superintendent's use of the informal term "kitchen cabinet" suggests why the formal plan was not used. The people advising him on the first day were not an informal group. They represented three of the four senior positions on the newly appointed incident command team—security, operations, and communications. (The other was liaison to external emergency management, which the superintendent conducted himself.) They had already gathered in response to the initial police warning, consistent with the new plan and prevailing practice. The superintendent remembered their involvement, not as the formal command team but as an informal group working at his behest. This is

consistent with the recollection of the Montgomery County Executive, who characterized those working with the superintendent during the crisis as his “little group” (Duncan, personal interview, 2008). The county executive’s primary source of information was the superintendent.

The superintendent’s use of the term, with its origins in presidential history, also suggests an analogy—whether intended or not—of the superintendent as a presidential-type authority figure. If so, such an analogy would include the description given to Jackson, in his political and personal use of his own informal group, as being determined “to direct his administration and to make himself the center of the decision-making process” (Latner, 1978, p. 388). The superintendent made a less direct but nonetheless parallel comparison of his own. In characterizing his choice to lead, he referenced the decisions of generals and similar leaders who improvised under changing circumstances and “led from the front” (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

As noted earlier, his decision to lead is not the central issue. The question, rephrased, is what about everyone else? By scrapping that portion of the plan, what does that say about the rest of the plan or planning in the first place? Or, as the supervisor of counseling asked, in recalling the aftermath of the bus accident and the confusion among her staff when established plans were overtaken suddenly at the hospital: “Who do you respond to, who do you take directions from—to make sure that there is a coherent response?” (Madden, personal interview, 2007).

Weick and Sutcliff (2007), in their work on principles of “high reliability,” provide some insights on why this issue is important. They identify “deference to expertise” and “commitment to resiliency” as two of the five key elements of reliability in the successful



management of organizations against threats from the unexpected (2007, pp. 9-17). They suggest that the ability of personnel to maintain a high level of mindfulness about their responsibilities in achieving organizational, rather than personal, objectives (in other words, their reliability) is dependent on both their expertise and the trust placed in them to use their expertise as a resource to solve problems as they occur. That trust is expressed in different ways. One expression includes the organizational supports and resources to maintain the resiliency of the personnel involved, in all manner and forms, such as training, assistance, respect, and consistency. The last two are the most relevant here. Disrespect breeds resentment. Inconsistency breeds mistrust. Resentment and mistrust undermine the choice to be mindful when it counts, especially in a crisis when the immediate challenges are uncertainty and ambiguity.

#### Principal Absence

The major effects of the crisis were on individual schools, particularly those near the initial shootings, yet the insights of active principals were not incorporated until near the end of the second week of the crisis—except indirectly, through sampling by various team members and conjecture filtered by previous experiences among the five team members who had been principals. The most recent principal was the coordinating community superintendent who had been a high school principal six years earlier. The least recent was the superintendent, who was a principal at the time of his first appointment as a superintendent 26 years earlier. The void was filled, in part, when the president of the Montgomery County Association of Administrative and Supervisory Personnel (the principals' union) was added to the team.

The absence of principals is noteworthy given the events that occurred regarding the collection of attendance daily data. In the beginning, the attendance data were important, not only as a customary strategy in managing a school district crisis but also as a common sense approach to ensuring everyone is accounted for. Even on a field trip, a teacher will count the number of kids getting off the bus and returning to it, as a way of ensuring no one's missing. And, the initial use reflected this concern, much in the way the superintendent described the data as "vital signs" (*Meeting notes October 9, ¶ 5:00*). But political use appears to have sullied the requests, based on a stinging letter written *after* the crisis by the principals' union president who noted that the only personal attention some principals "received from the central office during this period was a request for staff and student attendance" (Shirley, 2002).

Their attendance data was used, in part, as a vindication for the school district (as in, the decision to stay open, and the superintendent's leadership). I was a part of this, in my role as communications director and spokesperson, and I certainly contributed to the political use of the data. The demand strain on the principals and the lingering criticism well after the end of the collection of such data, however, underscore how far the gap became between the needs of the central office and the reaction of the principals in schools.

In reality, the data were not scrubbed to determine cause/effect correlations about whether students stayed home out of fear, etc. As long as the overall data were within a "normal" range, the absentees were largely ignored, at least at the district level. This occurred on the second day of the crisis and continued as long as the data were collected.

The superintendent's reaction to the criticism by principals, accepting it as to be expected, is important beyond the seemingly cavalier approach. In discussing the addition of the principals' union president to the team, and not the president of the teachers' union, the superintendent emphasized a recurring theme in his comments: "This was not a total collaborative effort, this was command and control..." (Weast, personal interview, 2007). That reaction clashes with the research findings of studies that illustrate the weak points of the incident command system as a national model given the diversity of communities and crisis types (Buck, et al., 2006, p. 2001).

Part of the gap that arose between principals and the superintendent may be related to the fundamental difference in the administration of schools and school districts. While they share some similar characteristics, they differ greatly. Schools are focused on the management of children. Districts are focused on the management of adults and the resources that support them. Rarely does a district leader come into contact with a student, except on a school visit, and then only temporarily and infrequently, if at all. A principal, on the other hand, is the true example of *in loco parentis*, working directly with parents and their children on a daily basis, possibly instead of parents, providing food, shelter, and attention, in addition to instruction, for three-quarters of any given year.

On the other hand, the decision making styles consistent with leadership in a crisis do not exactly match the collaborative and inclusive, group-based methods taught as the typical model of decision making in the management of schools. Management during a crisis, at least at the beginning, is the polar opposite. It is not dictatorial, but the suggestion is close.

The management of districtwide crises invariably affects the unique operations of schools as administered by principals. Their understanding of operational implications of district decisions may equal or exceed comparative insights at the district level and their relationships with other principals provide an informal channel for communications. Their perspectives and insights should be a fundamental part of the district leadership team.

#### Decision Style

The school district's approach to crisis management reflected the superintendent's management style: results-oriented, position-based, highly centralized, and personally controlled. The new emergency response plan, which figuratively placed someone else in charge, represented the superintendent's perspective on managing a crisis: centralized authority controlling personnel and resources. In this case, it was the superintendent who ultimately exercised command and control. As such, the outcome of the crisis, in so far, as the schools were affected, represents largely the leadership of the superintendent and his management and decision making over the course of the events of the case.

Decision-making was not collaborative, nor intended to be, and this was plainly obvious from the start. There were no allusions otherwise, and even the title of decision-making position in the new emergency response plan (incident commander), while not necessarily used by the superintendent—he was the superintendent, after all—the term epitomized the essence of crisis management, from the perspective of the incident command model. The superintendent acted largely as his own counsel in the beginning, and he modified this style over time, but he never abandoned the role of the final arbiter of what was to be decided and accomplished.

In a sense, the unified authority structure of an incident command system reflected the basic decision strategies of the superintendent—both have an audience of one, and no one else; and all of the decisions are political, from the perspective that regardless of their organizational or institutional role, a crisis creates contextual conditions and circumstances that require loyalty only to the incident at hand and the completion of the mission. This requires political judgment in weighing options that are centered on the perspective of the decision maker, not necessarily the organization.

This is not to suggest there were not opportunities for team input, discussion, and collaboration. Clearly, there were, and the narrative report describes in detail examples where such episodes occurred. But these elements came at times of the superintendent's own choosing; they were not the norm. Discussions were sometimes participatory and efforts were made for occasional inclusiveness, but this was not remembered as the everyday pattern by those who participated. Meetings were performance-based, not necessarily reflective, and time was a commodity not lightly wasted or ignored. The meetings provided opportunities to demonstrate expertise and knowledge about current events, which became a form of currency to be traded for recognition and inclusion.

The study illustrated aspects of research that suggest crisis decision making ultimately relies on the skills of the decision maker, based on personal experience, training, expertise, and intuition (Eisenhardt, 1989; Klein, 1997, 2003; Rosenthal, et al., 2001; Weick, 2001b). This was evident in the actions of the superintendent, who often relied on his own personal frames of reference and points of view to interpret events and act upon them. At the same time, the study identified aspects of the opposite corollaries from the research—that individuals without such skills do not, or can not, act decisively.

The study identified instances in which others relied on (or acquiesced to) the superintendent to make decisions.

The relatively unique position of the superintendent, in terms of expertise and experience, occurred following the school district's process of crisis management planning and implementation in which there was little crisis management training. Participants who were otherwise senior leaders of the school district felt unprepared as a result.

#### Political Extremes

The political nature of the decisions made during the course of the school district's response to the crisis swung from two extremes, beginning with a fight over the independent administration of the school district and ending with subordination of the school district to the needs of the county and police. The first part was evident in two episodes on the first day of the crisis, Thursday, October 3, one in the morning and the other at mid-day. Shortly after the Code Blue decision was made and announced, there was a verbal tussle with county officials over the operation of schools. The tussle ended with the superintendent announcing that he had been assured by county officials that *he* had authority over schools, unless there was a state of emergency (*Meeting notes October 3, 2002*). He later recalled: "*We're* going to be the ones making the decision to open and close the schools" [emphasis added] (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

The second episode was a short while later, resulting in the police chief being publicly corrected on television by his own spokesperson and the superintendent withholding the announcement of the decision to dismiss schools until the last possible moment—more than 90 minutes *after* the decision was made. In reality, the police chief

was correct when he announced at about 11:19 a.m. that schools were to be dismissed on time and noted: “We’ve been in constant contact with Dr. Weast and his staff” (“Montgomery police,” 2002). That contact, as reconstructed later, had already resulted in the initiation of planning by school district staff and police officials for the deployment of officers and security staff to schools to handle the expected onslaught of traffic from worried parents. Being correct, however, was not the problem for the police chief. Preempting the superintendent’s announcement of *his* decision was a problem, and the resolution involved concessions regarding the number of police deployed to schools and a *mea culpa*, of sorts, by a police spokeswoman who later announced: “. . .in terms of the schools, Chief Moose has been in consultation with Superintendent Weast. They will be announcing how the schools will be released shortly” (“Maryland authorities,” 2002b).

At the heart of both episodes were power issues. The first one was rooted in perceptions of appropriate dominion over the school district. The second one reflected a demonstration of authority by withholding it. Neither one was necessary, in light of what happened later. More than likely, the second one occurred *because* of the first one. The first one was tantamount to insider baseball discussions and had little effect on the work of others from the school district, except possibly as a distraction. The second one, however, delayed the sharing of important operational information with members of the team, including me, and delayed communications to principals until just a few minutes before a promised deadline, a little more than an hour before the first dismissals of schools were to begin.

Both episodes reflect what Hoy and Miskel (2008) describe as “power” relationships within “social system model” of school organizations—one legitimate and

the other illegitimate (pp. 28-29). The first episode was more related to the structural aspects of authority and positional power of one agency versus another, reflecting a legitimate area of concern and legal interpretation of agency authority in a crisis. The second one was more related to informal “political” aspects of authority and power relationships, which Hoy and Miskel (2008) suggest are “frequently illegitimate,” in the sense that they reflect “behavior usually designed to benefit the individual or group at the expense of the organization” (p. 29).

In contrast to these episodes of power-driven stances, the eventual swing in the opposite direction and the subordination of the school district under the preferences of the county and police occurred not long after the tussles on the first day. There were a multitude of examples in which the decisions of the county government and police took precedence over the school district, and rightly so. These included the release of information about school operations, the avoidance of referring to schools as safe, and the continuation of restrictions on outside activities, among others. It also included situations in which the county executive and police chief appear to have had free reign on their activities involving schools. This does not mean they acted without input or agreement by the superintendent. Indeed, the superintendent was closely involved with them. But he was alone in this collaboration and schools were caught blind by the repercussions.

The first such incident happened on the morning of the second day, Friday, October 4, when police officers from multiple federal, state, and local departments and agencies were assigned to stand guard at schools for the arrival of students. Principals were not told of this in advance, nor were letters sent home to parents to explain why the



police were there and what should be expected the following week. Principals were left on their own to explain things. In fact, within a few hours of schools opening up under police protection, the district changed course completely and principals were told that outside activities were to resume that afternoon.

The second incident happened on the following Monday morning, October 7, a few hours before the student shooting. During a televised press conference and interview, the county executive announced that parents who did not want their children to participate in outdoor recess could request an indoor accommodation, and he identified the superintendent as having originated the idea. The student shooting later that morning ended any need for the accommodations, but principals again were not informed of the public offer in advance and would have had to address the issue on their own.

The culmination of the subordination was starkly evident two weeks later, at the beginning of the last week of the crisis and after the second to the last shooting. At that time, the superintendent kept police information confidential while making decisions about school operations. He was informed by the county executive of a letter found at the site of a shooting, the note that contained a generalized threat against students. The school safety and security director also found out about the letter.

The existence of the letter and its contents were withheld from the team, on the basis that it constituted confidential investigative evidence. However, at the same time, the superintendent encouraged a team member to share a story about an elected official who warned a private school on the basis of the note. And, while the team did not know, elected officials from around the region were briefed, prior to the letter being released publicly the next day. During this time, the superintendent and the county executive

reached an agreement, as did the other elected officials, that no change in school operations was necessary. A different scenario occurred with a group of superintendents in Virginia, but they also kept the note confidential.

The entire episode underscored the dilemma of crisis management and the control of information, particularly police evidentiary information that school district leaders may know but cannot act upon. It reflects the tradeoffs that political leaders make as part of a balance of responsibilities and opportunities. In the end, these are political calculations. The literature on crisis management suggests that crises often provide leaders with an “opportunity to innovate” (Mintzberg, et al., 1976, p. 251). Often the idea of innovation suggests some larger organizational or strategic change (McCarthy, 2003; Papadakis, et al., 1999) or an event that prompts support for a policy solution (Burns, 1978; Kingdon, 1995) or a reform initiative (Brock, et al., 2002).

In this instance, the opportunity identified by the superintendent was access to information, stature, and authority held by the county executive. The superintendent sought the behind-the-scenes status by subordinating his role and the role of the school district. In return, he gained both political rewards of insider status and subordinate rewards of membership and participation. Both emerged as a motivational factor unanticipated at the outset of the study. It suggests that school district leadership during a community-based crisis is highly political, involving personal choices about external alliances, exclusive of perceptions of internal loyalties.

At the same time, members of the superintendent’s team sought the attention and exclusivity their membership presented, working within the heady atmosphere of crisis management and the often concurrent adrenaline rush. I was not immune to those same

feelings. Indeed, the benefits of insider status apply to the conduct of this study, in which my role as a participant researcher is based on my experiences as a senior member of superintendent's team and a witness to or participant in the events of this case.

#### Two-Phase Crisis

The swing in political perspective is similar to a change in the pattern of crisis management and decision making that occurred over time. Initially, the school district planned for and implemented crisis management strategies that emphasized a short-term approach, based on responses to present (or past), not future, threats. When the student was shot, the pattern changed, and more effort was given to long-term crisis management.

In a sense, there was not one crisis, but two. The first involved the initial shootings, which were seen as having limited lasting influence on school district operations. Indeed, the team did not meet on the second day, there was no letter home to parents, and schools resumed outdoor activities for the weekend. The second involved the shooting of a student, and that changed everything. After the student shooting, the functions of the team changed, the focus on mental health grew, and the expansion of the superintendent's communications with parents was underscored by a letter-a-day schedule and extensive related communications. At the same time, the decisions by the superintendent changed, became more conservative and reluctant to move too fast in any direction other than an incremental approach in response to the events of the day. The major reason for this was the obvious uncertainty about the crisis' duration and what might happen next. This was very different than the first phase, and it underscores the need to recognize crises as more complex than they initially appear. All crises need to be

managed as long-term threats until they are not—especially in terms of the emotional well being (resiliency) of students and staff.

The extensive mental health and communications occurred because threats to student and staff resiliency grew over time as a combination of the cumulative effects of the shootings and the disruption to typical instructional and physical activities in schools. Both the mental health initiatives and the superintendent's letters were reflections of an aggressive communications effort. They underscored the point that leadership in a crisis requires substantial personal communications, including symbolic gestures, to shape perceptions of the crisis and its resolution, provide a way for others to understand for themselves, and mark the path back to normalcy.

#### Targeted Objectives

The study identified crisis management decisions that focused on a group of primary objectives, which also evolved over time. The overriding objective was safety and security of students and staff. Safety and security stood out against a backdrop of two other objectives: keeping schools open and functioning, and maintaining parent and employee support and cooperation. These latter objectives were the focus of two major initiatives, provision of mental health services through an array of delivery processes and direct communications with parents and staff by the superintendent via his letters.

The emphasis and resources placed on mental health represented real concern for the emotional well being of students and staff, a recognition that grew over time from initial apprehension about the stability of principals to personal empathy for the cumulative fear that became increasingly obvious. A similar emphasis was evident in communications with parents and the public, especially in the superintendent's letters. The letters

mirrored the transition in mental health from clinical observations of seemingly detached epistles to highly personal insights about impact of fatigue and stress. Both initiatives brought considerable attention to the school district and its staff and the superintendent, serving to enhance both the district's efforts and to achieve public recognition otherwise blocked by an ongoing police investigation and government agenda that took center stage.

#### Mental Health

The school district's management of the crisis by including mental health professionals on the leadership team and initiating a districtwide effort to address the mental health implications of the crisis adds a unique element to the research in this area (A. H. Fein, et al., 2008; Jimerson, et al., 2005; Knox & Roberts, 2005; Nickerson, et al., 2006; Poland, 1994; Reeves, et al., 2008).

The study's identification of interpretive survey data about the impact of the crisis on students and school-based staff also provide additional insights for the research on this topic (Brock & Cowan, 2004; Greene, et al., 2004; Lindle, 2008; McGiboney & Fretwell, 2007; Vossekui, et al., 2002; Wendell, 2002)

A significant dimension of the leadership of school districts during times of crisis is the management of a large group of people to the effects of the crisis, whatever it may be and entail. Psychology, counseling, and other professions within the mental health field have a variety of insights, expertise, and established protocols for addressing the very human and cognitive elements of crisis behavior. Crisis teams should include mental health professionals at the leadership level, as equally important as

communications and operations, as now designated on typical incident command team models.

### Implications

The study of crisis management and decision making by school district leaders in Montgomery County during the sniper shootings of October 2002 provided a rare opportunity to look behind the scenes and describe the often complex activities involved in managing a large school district. The study was designed as a non-evaluative exploration of a specific case of crisis management and decision making.

Nonetheless, just as conclusions can be drawn from the study, so too can implications. Both reflect interpretations of the study's findings and the relationship of these findings to literature on crisis management and decision making. They are drawn from the perspective of the author, who participated in the events of the case and who researched them under accepted standards and methodologies of qualitative research.

The portrait comprises a narrative view of a single case, in which a highly unusual set of circumstances propelled a group of school district leaders into roles previously unimagined. The circumstances may change from crisis to crisis, but the essential truth of the portrait is that crisis management and decision making are difficult to accomplish and accomplish well. To the extent that the Montgomery County Public Schools rode through the sniper crisis relatively unscathed is a credit to its leadership. To the extent that such luck might happen again is to engage in a risk calculation no school district should have to make. The following are implications of the portrait for practice, policy, and research.

## Practice

School district leaders and leaders of schools should have the knowledge and understanding necessary to manage a crisis, make decisions under crisis circumstances, and improve their performance through practice sessions, similar to learning any other skill (such as teaching). It is not sufficient to rely on past practices that were developed through experience. The reality of managing educational organizations at a time of unknown but inescapable risks of terrorism and violence make such skills necessary and essentially fundamental to quality management under any circumstances.

The study provides the first known exploration and description of an event-to-event case of school district crisis management and crisis decision making. As such, the study brings attention to a long-ignored area within the dynamics of educational leadership. It was an unusual case to begin with, given that events occurred over an extended period of time and that management strategies and decision making changed as a result. The study illustrated the application of the “critical tasks,” as identified by Boin, et al. (2005), regarding the dynamics of political leadership by public officials during a crisis. While not specifically identified with school leadership, the work by Boin, et al., addressed other similar functions within government leadership to warrant an analogous comparison.

Chief among the identified tasks is “making sense of the crisis” and “meaning making for others” (Boin, et al., 2005, p. 10), and these are related to elements of group leadership (Bolman & Deal, 1997), social trust (Smylie & Hart, 1999), and crisis communications (Ulmer, et al., 2007). The study identified extensive efforts to understand the dynamics of the crisis and its implications, through informal sources of

information to regular reports of student and employee absenteeism. The study also identified the two major initiatives that reflected overt decisions to interpret and give meaning to what was happening—the mental health strategies and the superintendent’s communications. Both sought to shape the understanding of the crisis, and the steps being taken to address its effects, from the school district’s perspective.

These were also political acts, in the sense that they were designed to influence group opinion and support, specifically the support of employees and parents and government authorities. The research of Boin, et al. (2005) describes this as the absolute necessity in the public management of a crisis. Others, such as Hoy and Miskel (2008) and Bolman and Deal (1997) characterize such acts less than approvingly.

Boin, et al. (2005) also note that among the main tasks of public leadership in a crisis is “making crisis decisions and taking action” (p. 10). There was no shortage of either in this case, and these decisions and actions became part of the context of the crisis and the perception of the crisis; they were not separate and apart of what was occurring. This is the effect of actions on reality and perception that Weick (2001) termed “enacted sensemaking” (p. 224), in which actions taken to address a crisis change the crisis and a person’s sense of what is occurring. In the study, for example, there were shootings on the first day that created the perception of a threat, possibly against children playing outdoors at schools. In order to protect the children, a Code Blue was ordered and implemented. That decision and action changed the context of the crisis, and probably its interpretation by others, by moving part of the focus of the shootings from police at the scenes to children at schools. On the one hand, the decision was seen as prudent and responsible; on the other, it probably accelerated the parent rush on schools.



Managing a large organization during a crisis is difficult. The act of making a decision under crisis conditions is exceedingly difficult. The entire process is fraught with complications. Corporations, fire fighting and rescue services, the military, and highly volatile industries, among a host of others, expect such occasions and plan ahead. They train whoever is involved to know what to do and when and how and with whom and for what purpose. Qualification for educational leadership positions does not require expertise in decision making, much less crisis decision making. Understanding the *normal* dynamics of crisis behavior is not part of the curriculum. It should be, on the off chance that the person administering a school might someday need to know to the lessons learned at Columbine.

#### Policy

Licensure in the preparation of school district leaders and leaders of schools should include requirements for attaining a standardized level of competency in crisis management and crisis decision making skills, including an understanding of their unique differences based on the special characteristics of crises and human behavior during a crisis. Leadership preparation programs at colleges and universities should be expected to include such requirements, regardless of licensure standards, as part of the typical curriculum for a graduate degree in school administration and related disciplines.

#### Research

A better understanding of the dynamics of crisis management and decision making in educational settings is important to the development of qualified school district leaders and leaders of schools. The absence of research on this topic in the education literature should not be an indication that this research is unimportant. On the contrary,

the extensive literature available in fields other than education—including widely referenced research in field of organizational management, decision making, and human behavior—indicate the substantial interest and importance and the strong foundation from which to initiate a new field of inquiry.

The study also identified an implication for research focused on the implementation of crisis-type decisions, in which the reliability of others to perform their tasks and uphold their responsibilities in highly volatile and unusual situations results from training and preparation and an environment that encourages mindfulness about the larger implications of dangerous work (Weick, 2004; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, 2007; Weick, et al., 2008). Hoy and Miskel (2008) applied that research to the context of schools (non-crisis, however).

The participants on the command team were expected to know their responsibilities and do their jobs, and there was great reliance on them to do just that. But the lack of training in the broader context of crisis management—and the superintendent's hold on authority and command within a tight performance-based context—changed their basis to act. It was a completely different environment and, therefore, previous levels of comfort and confidence (and possibly courage), based on professional expertise and experience, were changed. They had to be relearned, as participants noted about the process improving over time. There was time for improvement precisely because the crisis lasted for so long. Otherwise, the lack of preparedness would have been much more obvious.

The work and responsibilities of a participant researcher, particularly one whose participation in the case of crisis management and decision making involving highly

complex situations in often volatile environments, are more challenging than one might think from relevant literature. The challenge, as suggested earlier in this chapter, is that participation in an event is not the same as knowing it, or even understanding it. The risk is the assumption of knowing everything. The reality is more akin to a quote by the former secretary of defense, Donald H. Rumsfeld, in 2002: "...there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know" (*Pieces of intelligence*, 2005, p. 2).

The study enabled the creation of a unique narrative portrait, based on a comprehensive reconstruction of the case elements from extensive archival documentation and the thoughtful and revealing recollections of the participants. It serves as an example of portraiture as a form of case study, building on the work of (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Hackmann, 2002; R. R. Hoffman, 1992; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Implications from the study about performance reliability are also related to the research on sensemaking in crises and other intense time-sensitive situations. In this research, the demonstration of expertise through intuition and improvisation is reliant on pre-knowledge about the path ahead, gained by training and experience (Crozier & Ranyard, 1997; Grattan, 2004; Klein, 2003; Simon, 1978b; Weick, 1995, 2001a). The concept of mindfulness is derived from this, as well (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, 2007).

The participants in the case constructed their understanding of what was happening largely based on their prior experiences (not necessarily training for everyone) and from recognizing cues in organizational activities and the behavior of others. The superintendent, on the first day, for example, noticed quizzical looks from staff as he initiated various actions in the deputy superintendent's office. He later recalled their

reactions as a lack of support, which it may well have been. It is also just as likely that, based on the sensemaking literature, they simply did not yet understand what he was doing. A misunderstanding of that magnitude may very well have undermined crucial relationships and perceptions of trust at just the wrong time.

Another example of the complexity of sensemaking in a crisis was the early understanding of the shootings from the perspective of hunting by several participants. They understood a dynamic that affected their perceptions of risk. Their interpretations, based on personal experiences, were not immediately understood by, and may have been completely foreign to, other members of team. The lack of understanding by the latter, reflected as uncertainty, could have easily been misinterpreted as a lack of support, further undermining relationships and perceptions within the team.

### Social Systems

The work by Hoy and Miskel (2008) in developing a conceptual model of social systems for schools provided a way of understanding the events in a school district. On a limited basis, the study identified the crisis decisions and actions on the first day of the crisis and the day the student was shot as largely oriented toward the structural system of rules and bureaucratic expectations, not culture and individual interpretations and needs. Although the study did not address this, the expectation is that later development of the mental health and communications initiatives would have enlarged the association of the crisis decisions to the other components of the identified social system.

### Reflections

Years ago, for an assignment in a course in phenomenology, I was asked to describe a lived experience associated with the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

It was my first course in the research methodology and I was uncomfortable, too new to the resumption of graduate studies, let alone the idea of pursuing a doctorate. Even the nomenclature was odd and, initially, somewhat off-putting. In that first class, in which I was maybe the only male, I made some wisecrack about epistemology reminding me of a surgical procedure to aid childbirth. The professor was not amused, and rightfully so, but the episode reflects where I began my introduction to education research. I completed the assignment with a narrative portrait that described driving along Wisconsin Avenue, in Washington, D.C., returning to the school district's headquarters from a television station, watching people walking along the sidewalks unaware of the attacks being described through the live radio reports in my car. It was surreal, other worldly, and multi-dimensional. I heard a live report from a journalist as he tried to explain a massive explosion from somewhere in the Pentagon just a few miles away, while reporting from there about the attacks in New York. On the sidewalks, the people knew nothing. Their reality was elsewhere.

My assignment introduced me to the notion of sensemaking, a subject I would return to time and again in the course of my studies on leadership, organizations, society, effective schools, and so on. Perceptions of reality became a defining aspect of my emerging academic point of view, not only affecting my studies but also my professional work in educational administration. As the communications director for the school district, which eventually became the site of this study, the interest in sensemaking (and its corollary of meaning making) was a natural fit. At the time of the sniper incident, I had no idea it would become the subject of my dissertation study. I was, frankly, interested in establishing a credential in other areas of education, such as teacher attitudes

toward race and student achievement, a topic that blended nicely with the interests of the school district. One professor disabused me of that idea with the simple but frank question, “What do you know about teaching?” He was right, of course. I was a non-teacher educator, with no school experience aside from infrequent visits. My entire professional career in education was at the center of central administration, as an aide to five superintendents in two school districts and a college president. My area of research was right under my nose, but initially it was too close to recognize.

When the idea of the current study arose in conversations with my advisor, a missing piece was quickly identified. The absence of research and instruction in crisis management and decision making for educational leaders became a topic inserted into other course work and independent readings, leading to the formation of the central problem identified in this study. From there, the jump was made to this case and the unique opportunity it presented for exploring an experience not unlike the one described in my early research class.

There is a difference, of course, in writing an essay about a personal experience and undertaking a doctoral study on the lived experiences of 15 other individuals in a case in which I was also a participant. My reflections on that are noted elsewhere in this report, in Chapter 3 on methodology and earlier in this chapter. Noted throughout the study, too, are references to my role and participation in various aspects of the case. In most instances, this was done to acknowledge participation in or responsibility for something that occurred in the course of events. My own voice in the case was often muted, except for the multitude of documents that carry my name as author and those that do not. I was very much aware that as a participant researcher, especially one whose role

was that of a communicator, the study risked devolving into a semi-autobiographical mess. I strived for a third party perspective.

One of the missing pieces is substantial recounting of my own recollections, although the narrative choices in the presentation of the case flow from a perspective that reflects my point of view. It can be argued that my perspective is strongly presented, flowing throughout, with or without explicit acknowledgement. This is, of course, the chief characteristic of qualitative research, and subjectivity is a natural by-product of the methodology. Nonetheless, I tried my best to stay in the background wherever possible.

I did not think, as a matter of methodological strategy or construct, that it was necessary to add, in the narrative report of certain events, for example, that I was scared and deeply anxious as the sniper events unfolded. Even now, it is hard to acknowledge the emotionalism just below the surface as I spoke live on television the first day, on a phone at a secretary's desk next to the conference room where the superintendent and staff were meeting, and said children were safe. I did that multiple times, each time hearing the excitement and worry in the voice of the television news anchor and catching myself from going over the edge.

Everyone I have ever spoken to about this study has their own sniper experience, whether they lived vicariously through events while glued to the television or actually met one of the assailants on a sidewalk near home when he got out of his car and asked for money. We share stories about walking in a zigzag line to avoid being a target or buying gas and groceries at seemingly far away places. We talk about the worries as

parents of children who walked to school or scurried from parking lots to front doors that were quickly shut and locked.

My role in the events of the case required me to step outside of myself and be someone else at the time the events occurred. I could not be the guy who cries at greeting card commercials. There was no room for emotionality when others were depending on clear-headed thinking and doing. There was enough of that to go around. But there were moments when writing the superintendent's letters when I was speaking for myself and to myself, urging people to stop and think about the needs of children. One part of a letter brought me to tears while writing it:

These are times that require courage, not bravery and heroics, but just the emotional strength to do what is right in the face of worry and fear... find encouragement in the beauty of life's unexpected gifts, and be prepared for the stress of the unknown (Weast, 2002j).

I also had to be in the head of the superintendent, which was no easy task under any circumstances. The job of a spokesperson or a ghost writer is to dwell in the reality of the person being represented. For each of the superintendents I have worked for, the challenge was finding a way to articulate their ideas so that it sounds like them and would be them if they wrote it themselves. Sometimes this fails miserably. One former superintendent accused me nicely of trying to make him sound "Kennedyesque," with too much rhetorical flourish; another wanted exactly that when it was obviously, if not painfully, apparent that it was not the right match.

A good portion of the process involves a deep understanding of the job at hand, of educational administration and leadership, of instruction and accountability, of budgets and resource allocations, of how schools work (if only academically), of politics and legislative matters, of relationships with school boards, PTAs, and community groups—



in short, the stuff superintendents know about. Substance matters. My initial professional and academic experiences and preparation were in journalism and political science, but a master's degree in education leadership, policy, and planning provided a substantial grounding in the work of superintendents. It meant understanding their job in a way that was helpful to them, as a confidential aide and advisor. It also provided substantial informal power to affect policy and procedures through words.

I learned through this case, however, that proximity does not always mean access, and insights do not always mean a clear field of vision. There are always hidden things, some purposeful and some just the result of different realities and others, as noted earlier from the former secretary of defense, that remain hidden due to the limits of our own knowledge and understanding—the “unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know” (*Pieces of intelligence*, 2005, p. 2).

## Appendix A: Montgomery County

The sheer size and complexity of the district's enrollment presented immense administrative and academic challenges. Over the previous two decades the district underwent an enrollment transformation. From an enrollment with negligible racial and ethnic diversity in the 1970's, the district became the most diverse in the state. By 2002, it enrolled nearly half of all Asian American and Hispanic students statewide. Asian American, Hispanic, and African American children accounted for the majority (53%) of the district's enrollment (*Maryland's report card*, 2003). There was also a greater diversity of languages, with the school district reporting in the fall of 2002 that more than 10,600 students were enrolled in programs for students with limited English proficiency—nearly half of all such students in the state (*Annual report*, 2002, pp. 7, 26).

The transformation also included increased poverty and a high reliance on schools by children for breakfast and lunch, as well as shelter and clothing in many cases. The district reported that one in five students received free and reduced-price meals, totaling more than 29,800 children. There were more students receiving meal assistance in Montgomery County, the school district reported, “than the total individual enrollments in 16 of the state's 24 school districts” (*Annual report*, 2002, p. 7).

Much of the demographic changes occurred in an identifiable core area, characterized in red on school district maps for 60 “highly impacted” schools needing intense academic interventions (Mapp, Thomas, & Clayton, 2007, p. 374). The area

stretched through the center of the county, westward from the border with Washington, D.C., through an urban corridor straddling municipalities from Takoma Park to Germantown. The district reported in 2002 that the area had less than half the county's elementary schools but enrolled 81% of all students in federal meal programs, 71% of all English language learners, 79% of all Hispanic students, 72% of all African American students, 48% of all Asian American students, and 29% of all white students (*Annual report*, 2002, p. 7).

#### Three Schools for Every Community

Every community had at least three schools (elementary, middle, and high), situated along main roadways, or nestled within tree-lined neighborhoods. The schools ranged in size from just over 240 students in the smallest elementary in the county's western countryside to nearly 3,200 students in the largest high school in the county's most densely populated community (*Official report*, 2002, pp. 3, 6). Each school was led by a principal, supervised by one of six community superintendents in an organizational structure that ultimately lead to the superintendent (Figure A.1).

The superintendent reported to an eight-member Board of Education and served as secretary/treasurer. The elected board operated as a semi-autonomous agency of the state, with some legislative, executive, and judicial functions, including adjudicating appeals of

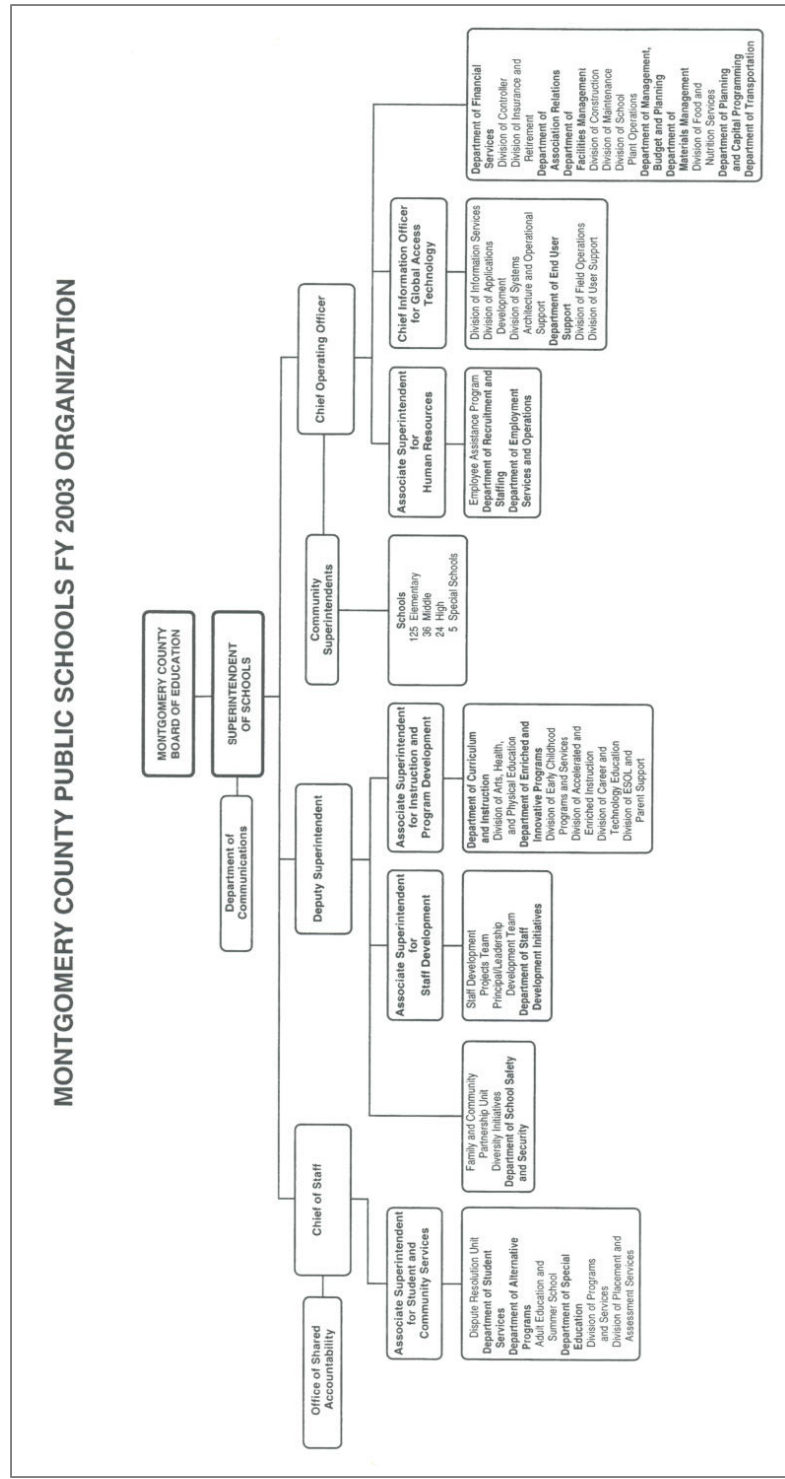


Figure A.1 Administrative Organization in October 2002

From *Principals Handbook 2002-2003* (2002, July). [Notebook]. Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools, p. 36. Used with permission.

the superintendent's decisions (Bounds, et al., 2006, pp. 1-11).<sup>97</sup> The superintendent had some independent authority and discretionary powers under state law and oversaw the executive functions of the school district ("Education article," 2006, pp. 170,185). The executive functions included personnel management. The district was one of the county's largest employers.

More than 20,400 people worked for the school district on a full- or part-time basis in the school year beginning July 2002, and more than half of them were teachers, according to district personnel data. The typical teacher was female, 44 years old, with a master's degree or equivalent and just over 13 years experience, mostly in the county. The typical administrator was female, 51 years old, with at least a master's degree or equivalent and slightly more than two decades of total experience in education, with nearly 16 years in the county. More than half of the administrators were relatively new to field, receiving their first position within the previous five years. Women comprised the vast majority of all employees—nearly 80% of all teachers, two-thirds of all supporting services staff, and six of every 10 administrators (*Statistical profile*, 2008).

In the fall of 2002, the school district had an annual operating budget of \$1.4 billion, but financial problems caused by projected shortfalls in revenue quickly set the stage for restrictions on spending. A budget freeze was announced by Larry A. Bowers, the chief operating officer, in a memorandum on October 1, 2002, to executive staff. It was the superintendent's decision "to impose restrictions," he wrote, and they were "effective immediately and until further notice" (Bowers, 2002b, p. 1).

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<sup>97</sup> The school board included seven adults, two elected at large and five elected from districts to staggered four-year terms on a non-partisan basis, and a student member, elected to a one-year term by middle and high school students. The superintendent was appointed to a four-year term.

The restrictions covered nearly all discretionary spending and hiring (for the second consecutive year), except for key school-based positions, including safety and security. Funding for school security was protected in the same way as teachers and school administrations. Bowers recalled student safety as one part of a very basic dual responsibility for the school district. “We’re an educational organization, we’re concerned about student success—but...if [students] don’t feel safe, if we can’t keep them safe in the building, then we’re not going to be able to do our job,” he said (Bowers, personal interview, 2007).

The school district received most of its funding from the county government, which maintained some financial oversight. The agencies of the county government were under the legislative authority of a nine-member elected County Council. The county agencies and departments, including the police, operated under the administrative authority of an elected county executive (*Montgomery County*, 1999, p. 19). In addition to the county police, there were several municipal police units, a regional park police, and state police on patrol.

#### A ‘Child Born Every 40 Minutes’

By 2002, the county had nearly 900,000 residents, and it was growing quickly. There were 13,149 children born to county residents the previous year. The school district reported the number of births as “an all-time high” and the equivalent of “one child born every 40 minutes” (*Annual report*, 2002, p. 7). County planning data indicated that 25% of the population was under the age of 18, with approximately 56,000 children under 5 years old. The county had the second highest population density per square mile of any jurisdiction in the state, except Baltimore City. The county was on its way to

becoming the nation's 39<sup>th</sup> fastest growing jurisdiction and the 45<sup>th</sup> most populous the following year (*Population data*, 2008).

County residents reflected one of the most educated and prosperous populations in America in 2002. National census data indicated that 56% of adults over the age of 25 held a bachelors degree or higher, the second highest rate in the United States, and 30% had a graduate or professional degree. Nearly 75% of residents over the age of 16 were employed, and the majority worked in management, professional occupations, and related areas, particularly in the science and technical fields. Government workers, at all levels, accounted for one-fifth of the entire workforce. The median family income of \$96,256 annually at the time was nearly twice the national median and the third highest among counties in the United States (*Data profiles*, 2008).

## Appendix B: Lessons from September 11

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, were unlike anything ever experienced by anyone among the leadership team of the Montgomery County Public Schools. Jerry D. Weast, the superintendent of schools, told a conference group two years later that the attacks “hit us like a shock wave...we really were not prepared” (*22 days of crisis*, 2003). There was no districtwide plan to manage what occurred, including fear and anxiety among students, parents, and staff. In the absence of a plan, without clear lines of responsibility and authority, there was initial confusion. Some senior staff members were seen milling around the main offices not knowing what to do.

Weast took command of the school district’s response, assembling an ad hoc group of staff to assist him with operations, transportation, security, counseling, communications, and other issues. Problems multiplied as the day progressed. The close proximity of the attack on the Pentagon in nearby Virginia made the events seem more immediate and threatening. Telecommunications were disrupted making it difficult to communicate with schools and offices. Rumors of all kinds were wild and scary. Parents descended on schools in a frantic attempt to retrieve their children. Police were called to quell near panic at some schools. “It was a zoo,” recalled Robert B. Hellmuth, then assistant director of the school safety and security department (Hellmuth, personal interview, 2007).



Schools closed early that day and remained closed the next. By evening, Weast informed the Board of Education about a range of school district activities under way to address fear and anxiety, communicate with students, parents and staff, prepare for the reopening of schools, and coordinate with county and regional emergency management authorities (Weast, 2001b). The attacks affected the community in highly personal ways. Weast directed staff, as part of a larger counseling effort, to quantify the impact of the attacks by determining the relationships of victims to students and employees. A report later to the Board of Education at a public meeting indicated that at least 113 students and staff lost relatives, another 43 had friends who were dead, including a former teacher, and 13 had had multiple family members and friends listed as dead or missing (*MCPS impact*, 2001).

On the night of the attacks, Weast told the school board that he held particular praise for the completion of one set of responsibilities. “Bus operators,” he wrote, “demonstrated the highest level of professionalism in the timely transportation of students to their homes” (Weast, 2001b, p. 2). Navigating the roadways in the midst of the aftershocks of the attacks was anything but a routine assignment. Their actions illustrated what the initial response lacked at the districtwide level.

#### New Plan Built on ‘What Worked’

In the wake of the district’s response, Weast directed Larry A. Bowers, the school district’s chief operating officer, and James A. Williams, the district’s deputy superintendent, to oversee development of a new plan. Their task, as reported to the Board of Education, was to ensure the school district “will be better prepared to deal with future emergency/crisis situations” (Weast, 2002r, p. 1). Bowers recalled there were insights gained from the experiences after the terrorist attacks that he thought were

helpful in formulating the new plan. “We really had the opportunity to organize ourselves and determine the things that worked and what didn’t work—who needed to be around the table and the types of gaps that we might have,” he said (Bowers, personal interview, 2007). The plan’s development involved two work groups, one to develop the response plan itself and another to organize supplemental efforts, including crisis response materials and emergency communications.<sup>98</sup>

The effort also coincided with emergency planning outside the school district. In mid-October, Bowers informed the district’s senior staff of an initiative launched by Douglas M. Duncan, the county executive, to increase the county government’s “capacity to respond to major incidents, improve communication, and increase the security of county employees and facilities” (Bowers, 2001). Duncan, in forwarding the proposals to the County Council president, said in a letter that the initiatives reflected their responsibilities for public safety and well-being: “...citizens look to their local governments to provide leadership on pre-emergency preparedness as well as on highly effective first response when crises occur” (Duncan, 2002, p. 1).

At the same time, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) also renewed earlier efforts to improve crisis management planning across the state. In mid-January, five months after the terrorist attacks, Nancy Grasmick, state superintendent of schools, informed all school district superintendents that crisis management plans were necessary for each school district and school. She said the need for “a comprehensive plan” was in response to “an ever-increasing number of crisis situations” and the need to

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<sup>98</sup> *Note:* As the school district’s director of communications, I was involved with both workgroups and primarily the group that developed the response plan.

both “create and maintain safe and orderly learning environments” (Grasmick, 2002a). Schools were already required under Maryland law to have a Safe Schools Action Plan that dealt “with bullying, harassment, and discrimination prevention,” recalled Chuck Buckler of MSDE (personal communication, 2009).

Montgomery County, among other school districts, assisted the state’s planning effort. After the state superintendent’s announcement, Edward A. Clarke, the district’s school safety and security director, informed four other staff members that they were selected to participate in a state training session on the development of the school district’s “comprehensive safe schools action plan” (Clarke, 2002a). Two months later, Clarke and another staff member were appointed by the state superintendent to a workgroup to develop the planning guide for all Maryland schools. Their task, as described in a memorandum from the state superintendent, was to develop a “comprehensive plan that will help reduce confusion, improve communications, and make better use of available resources” (Grasmick, 2002b). This plan was published as a guide in 2003 (see reference in Chapter 2) and took more than a year to develop.

#### Plan Unfolded Amid Anthrax Attacks

Clarke had been working on aspects of new school security measures since his transition from the police department the summer of 2000. Circumstances changed quickly after September 11, 2001. They changed again in October. Six weeks after the terrorist attacks, he forwarded new emergency materials to principals as a result of a

threat of anthrax contaminations.<sup>99</sup> The materials included procedures on potential “biological agent threats” and a federal advisory on “how to recognize a suspicious package” (Clarke, 2001a, p. 1). The contamination threat and disrupted mail continued for weeks. Clarke later sent principals updated guidelines for handling envelopes and packages at school, accompanied by a box of latex gloves. The principals were told that, while the “probability of potential exposure” was low, the gloves and guidelines were offered as “precautionary measures” (Clarke, 2001b). The new procedures underscored the evolving unpredictability of preparing for emergencies that were unknown only a few months earlier and very different from anything experienced earlier.

New security requirements also replaced certain voluntary safety measures. Principals were informed by Clarke on October 25, 2001, for example, to begin practicing the Code Red and Code Blue security drills with students and staff, with a minimum of two drills during the school year. The codes represented different levels of response to perceived threats, with Code Red as the more serious of the two, but both were considered largely ineffective if they were not practiced. “It is imperative,” principals were told, “that all MCPS staff and students have a clear understanding of the basic elements of emergency/crisis preparedness” (Clarke, 2001a, p. 2). Within days, schools began practicing the security drills. Then principal Kevin Maxwell, for example, later informed parents of Walter Johnson High School that students and staff conducted their “first Code Blue/Code Red drill” on October 29, 2001, with assistance of police and school security staff who assisted “us in fine tuning our procedures” (K. M. Maxwell,

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<sup>99</sup> In the previous few weeks, contaminations from anthrax-coated letters addressed to journalists and elected officials in New York and Washington, D.C., resulted in deaths and sickness, closed postal facilities, and fueled fears of additional terrorism (Gugliotta, 2001).

2001, p. 1). The quick response suggested that security measures were well under way in some schools before Clarke's directive.

### Powerful Relationships Established

Douglas M. Duncan, then county executive, recalled that Weast, the superintendent, often collaborated with him and kept him informed about problems and issues. "Any major thing, in Jerry's mind, that happened in the school[s], he would call me right away, alert me, [and] we'd have a discussion about it," he said (Duncan, personal interview, 2008). Duncan said such interactions were part of an ongoing relationship that grew over time and enabled a high level of trust:

We could take each other at face value and not try to figure out—are they playing games or what's the real motivation here, whatever. It was just—here's what we need to do, here's what's happening, and let's go do it, which was very helpful to me (Duncan, personal interview, 2008).

Duncan made his own mark politically as an assertive, action-oriented leader during a highly publicized incident during his first week on the job in December 1994. He was described in a newspaper article as having "dispatched firefighters to snuff out" a noxious dump fire of tires and debris that had festered for months and annoyed nearby residents (Marimow, 2006). Duncan recalled a similar willingness by Weast to solve problems quickly. Duncan said, for example, that Weast was particularly helpful in efforts to manage the large-scale community issues following the terrorist attacks in September 2001. "There was immediate communication back and forth...[and] that really is critical that we handle the situation like that, when...you're not just responding to an incident but you are trying to keep a community calm" (Duncan, personal interview, 2008).

### Adaptations Made for Regional Security

In the months leading up to the beginning of the 2002-2003 school year, when the school district was planning the table-top drill of its new plan, much had changed in the environment of school security. The Maryland State Department of Education, for example, required all local districts to prepare and submit crisis management plans. In June 2002, Weast submitted the school district's new plan, the development of which coincided with the state's new requirements. He also included a copy of the revised action plan for safe schools, which included "strategies and actions designed to enhance a positive school environment" (Weast, 2002b). Three months later, he submitted long-required "assurances" that emergency preparedness procedures were in place for "utility related emergencies" at schools (Weast, 2002e).

When schools reopened in August 2002, school district officials were working with counterparts in the county government on regional contingency plans for acts of terrorism. The district was to receive upgraded communications equipment, as part of an improvement among all county agencies. Other improved emergency response capabilities for the county government were under way, including a new centralized crisis command center, increased supplies of medicines, improvements to emergency traffic management, and increased hazardous materials training (Ly, 2002).

Principals received an array of security information. The new handbook for principals, for example, grew from an already large binder to a massive array of 484 pages—20% of which referenced new or continuing safety and security measures. One document was the "Checklist of School Management Items" that identified seven security-related items among the top 12 reminders for the opening of school (*Principals*

*handbook*, 2002, p. 7). Another was the “Key Points to Remember...” that outlined the steps to be taken for suspected firearms, evacuations, hazardous spills, bomb threats, tracing telephone calls, and using staff to visually "sweep/scan" for "suspicious items" (*Principals handbook*, 2002, pp. 241-242).

The security preparations extended to private and parochial schools. Clarke and his department joined police officers, fire and rescue personnel, and others in evening programs that highlighted measures already in place by the school district. One private school later lauded the joint training as “invaluable” (*Building peace*, 2003). In addition to basic security precautions, all schools in the county were seen as potential centers for mass emergency healthcare, relocation sites, shelters, and hubs for community intervention in the event of large-scale attacks. Hospitals were preparing for countywide emergency medical responses involving mass casualties, sickness, and infection. Health experts, emergency medical personnel, police officers, and firefighters were practicing joint responses to bioterrorism among other threats (Levine, 2002).

The Board of Education earlier endorsed a federal grant proposal to place police officers in schools. The county government planned to assign them as “educational facilities officers” (*Minutes, April 22, 2002*). The initiative represented an abrupt reversal for the school board, which had previously opposed the placement of school resource officers. The change opened the door for police to enter schools on a regular basis, even to have scheduled office hours, not just as the usual instructors in drug and alcohol programs but as participants in school security measures and the protection of children. Earlier efforts to place officers in schools failed over concerns about police interaction with minority students. Those concerns receded in the wake of the terrorist attacks.

## Appendix C: Impact of Columbine in Montgomery

Columbine established the possibility of a similar attack in Montgomery County, Maryland, notwithstanding the lack of such incidents locally. For some, the potential was all that mattered. Edward W. Shirley, who was then a high school principal (and later a member of the school district's incident command team during the sniper incident), recalled that Columbine established the basis of school vulnerability:

There was no reason to suspect that what I was seeing at Columbine couldn't happen at my school, and I think a lot of us at that point started to take school security a lot more seriously than we ever had (Shirley, personal interview, 2007).

In Montgomery County, the Columbine incident prompted then superintendent of schools Paul L. Vance to order a review of the school district's safety and security procedures, staffing, and resources by the National Alliance of Safe Schools. The organization submitted a report to the Board of Education on July 13, 1999. One of the recommendations was described as "imperative" and it called for "every school [to] have a revised Emergency Management Plan that addresses a variety of emergency/crisis situations" (*Safety and security*, 1999, p. 31).

The recommendation implied that there was little accountability among schools for having or maintaining updated plans. The follow-up to the report's recommendations was left to Vance's replacement, Jerry D. Weast, who assumed office later that summer. On September 2, 1999, Weast provided the Board of Education with an update on steps taken.



The reported actions included a suggestion of broader thinking about crisis management capabilities at the district level: “Current efforts have concentrated on a comprehensive, systemwide security plan” (Weast, 1999, p. 1).

The Columbine incident also fostered changes in collaboration with police on school assault strategies. In Montgomery County, Douglas M. Duncan, who was then county executive, recalled that the incident prompted county police to change procedures “in terms of how they would respond to a school crisis” (Duncan, personal interview, 2008). One of the changes was tested three months after the Columbine incident when police and school officials staged an exercise of coordinated responses to multiple schools in early July 1999, as police practiced new rescue and pursuit tactics with blueprints of school buildings and revised operational procedures. Officers had directions to enter schools quickly with simulated lethal authority. A newspaper article describing the exercise said officers first on the scene had the leeway to “act immediately in a crisis rather than wait for special tactics officers” (Wilgoren, 1999).

The new Code Red procedures advised students and staff to “stay in classroom or get to a classroom as quickly as possible” (*Emergency flip cards*, 1999, p. 3). The measure was intended to secure students in classrooms away from an intruder. It also removed innocent bystanders from obscuring lines of sight and potential gunfire when police entered schools rapidly. One of the items in the new emergency kits was a brightly colored vest to be worn by the person managing a school crisis, typically the principal, to assist in quickly identifying the person in charge. The inclusion of the vest coincided with another new measure—the Code Red and Code Blue strategies (Figure C.1). The new measures, particularly the Code Red, were designed, in collaboration with

CODE RED/CODE BLUE PROCEDURES	
Activated by principal or administrator in charge ONLY	
<b>CODE RED</b>	<b>CODE BLUE</b>
Indicates there is an emergency that requires that all areas of the building be secured (lockdown). Staff should remain in place with students. Bells are turned off.	An emergency that requires that all students be under supervision and accounted for
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Stay in classroom or get to classroom as quickly as possible, and take roll</li> <li>● Teachers lock classrooms; building services lock exterior doors</li> <li>● Establish fire watch (ignore fire alarms)</li> <li>● Await further instructions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● On-Site Emergency Team (OSET) reports to predesignated area</li> <li>● Bells are turned off</li> <li>● Each teacher gets students in classroom and takes roll</li> </ul>
Further instructions may come over the PA system or from an individual at the door who will slide his/her photo identification under the door	Await further instructions from administrator or other members of emergency team
CODE RED/CODE BLUE PROCEDURES	

Figure C.1 Instructions on Original Safety Measures

Excerpt from *Emergency flip cards* (1999). Department of School Safety and Security. Copyright 1999, Montgomery County Public Schools. Used with permission.

police, to protect students and staff from real or potential intruders. New police strategies accompanied the security measures and, in part, underscored the need for the principals' vests. I was later quoted in a newspaper article saying: "Everyone had to know their roles and responsibilities in case of a crisis, especially if it required tactical response by the police" (Bowler, 2002). At the time, as I recalled later, the thought left unsaid was the prospect of a principal being shot by an incoming officer—hence, the need for the vests.

## Appendix D: Incident Command System

In January 2002, when the initial draft of the new emergency response plan for the school district was distributed, its main feature was a new Incident Command System (ICS). The ICS was a hierarchal leadership structure intended to guide school district efforts in “identifying and coordinating organizational responsibilities in response to an emergency or crisis” (*Emergency plan, 2002, pp. A-1*). Principals were required to implement a similar feature in their schools, in order to streamline emergency management among schools and the central office. The ICS was an organizational management perspective typically associated with the military and law enforcement. It was a novel concept for the school district.

The district’s version was an adaptation that aligned existing management positions with typical ICS components and incorporated new elements that reflected the district’s organization (Figure D.1). It was intended be aligned with “the leadership structure” of local police, fire and rescue, and other agencies responsible for managing large-scale emergency responses in Montgomery County (*Emergency plan, 2002, pp. A-1*). Jerry D. Weast, superintendent of schools, viewed the inter-agency leadership alignment as one of the key features. He informed the Board of Education that it was designed to create “a seamless integration” with these external agencies in the event of an emergency (Weast, 2002t, p. 1). The new system symbolized a change. It provided official nomenclature and responsibilities for

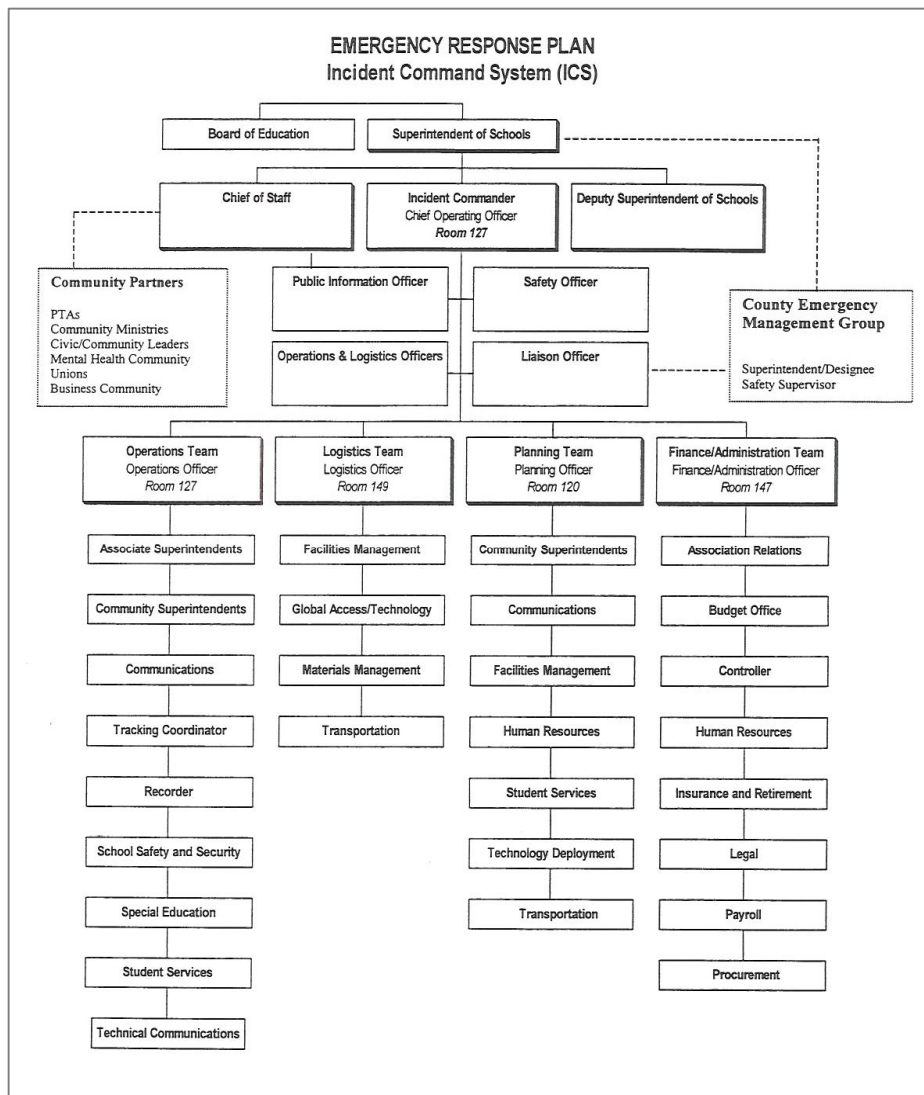


Figure D.1 Incident Command Team Organization

Reprinted from *Emergency Response Plan* (2002), p. A-2. Copyright 2002, Montgomery County Public Schools. Used with permission.

school officials in a realm otherwise dominated by non-educators. It conveyed legitimacy, as well as an actual role, for emergency management that was lacking at a bus accident two years earlier.

The new plan's primary decision-making authority in an emergency rested with the person designated as the incident commander, reporting directly to the superintendent. The incident commander had primary responsibility for "systemwide leadership, oversight, and decision-making," a position of relative supreme authority in managing an emergency in the school district, with only the superintendent able to "override a decision made by the incident commander" (*Emergency plan*, 2002, p. A-1). This concept of highly centralized crisis management was emphasized at the local school level, as well. Principals were informed that "every incident, emergency, or crisis requires that one person be designated as the incident commander who has overall managerial responsibility and decision making authority for responding to the emergency/crisis" (*Approval form*, 2002, p. 1). For individual schools, the incident commander was typically the principal. For the school district's plan, from the outset of its development and initial implementation, the person identified as the incident commander was Bowers, the chief operating officer.

There was no detailed guidebook for how to be an incident commander. The list of responsibilities in the districtwide plan included such items as "assembles the emergency response team" (*Emergency plan*, 2002, p. B-3). It was more of a generalized list of things to do, not a description of specialized responses to pre-identified events (such as another terrorist attack). The plan relied on content expertise and skills of the command team participants assisting the commander. But, their responsibilities were broadly defined, as well. Strategic decisions were listed as a responsibility of the incident commander. However, the details of decision making were left to the incident commander's discretion.

## Appendix E: Positional Authority

Jerry D. Weast left little question about who was in command when he became superintendent of schools in Montgomery County in the summer of 1999. He brought a reputation for being energetic, charismatic, decisive, and controversial in managing difficult and challenging situations. One newspaper, *The Washington Post*, introduced him as a leader in the mold of “Gen. Patton” (Schulte & Argetsinger, 1999), in reference to the famed World War II commander. Another, *The Washington Times*, characterized him as “an innovator who was not afraid to shake up the school system and fire incompetent teachers” (Ferrechio, 1999). Weast quickly lived up to the descriptions.

Shortly after the beginning of school, for example, Weast fired the information technology officer over the failed implementation of a new software program intended to streamline student records. The decision was a stunning event. A newspaper article described it as Weast’s first major decision as the county’s superintendent and said his actions were viewed by some, including members of the Board of Education, as setting an example of the temperament and direction of the new administration. It was a perspective, the article noted, that Weast disputed: “I’m not trying to send any messages. I’m just trying to get service to children” (Schulte, 1999).

The decision set the tone for how Weast’s administration was viewed within the school district. “By the time he walked in and nailed [the technology officer], it was clear to everybody in the schools there was a new sheriff in town,” recalled Edward W.

Shirley, who was then a high school principal and later became the president of the principals union, the Montgomery County Association of Administrative and Supervisory Personnel (Shirley, personal interview, 2007).

‘A Mandate for Reform’

Weast often told his staff that he valued hard work, productivity, and, most of all, commitment, and expected the same from others, particularly members of his leadership team. He recalled later that commitment, in the form of dedication to a common mission, was often difficult to achieve, particularly for a superintendent in a new school district. “It takes such a long time to build capacity to get the level of commitment where the team becomes of one mind,” he said (Weast, personal interview, 2007). He jump-started the process in Montgomery County by igniting a long-simmering academic crisis about educational inequities by race, ethnicity, family income, and geography. The problems were decades old and lingered through multiple, frustrating attempted remedies. A later study by researchers from Harvard University, which focused on the school district’s initiatives concerning race and the achievement gap, described the Board of Education’s support for the new superintendent as “a mandate for reform” (Mapp, et al., 2007, p. 374). Weast made the most of the opportunity. He and his senior staff highlighted the problems relentlessly, dusting off old reports, bringing in new data and fresh insights, and convening community meetings, forums, and task groups. The efforts were designed “to build a sense of urgency in the community” (Mapp, et al., 2007, p. 374). The community urgency was intended to breathe life into the school district and provide political backbone for far-reaching academic and organizational change.

Weast presented the initiatives under a title that mimicked a rallying cry, “Our Call to Action,” and in the opening letter of the document, he raised a rhetorical saber and revealed the scope of the campaign: “Our intention is to empower the entire educational community...and to amass our collective will...” (*Our call*, 1999, p. 3). He successfully gained repeated approval for the reforms and massive, long-term funding. A book by a Columbia University researcher later chronicled the school district’s early child components of the reforms and characterized Weast’s actions as those of “an impertinent new superintendent” who advocated for change “by rubbing the noses of residents in the egregious situation they had chosen to overlook” (Maeroff, 2006, p. 7).

#### Centralized Decision Making

The strategy holding the implementation of the reforms together emphasized centralized control and decision making. A later analysis of the reforms by another group of Harvard University researchers said Weast established “a powerful lead role” for the central office and used that leverage to achieve the organizational changes in districtwide curriculum, training, assessments, data collection, and supervision (Childress, Elmore, & Grossman, 2006, p. 64). Weast often told his staff that the management of different schools required degrees of differentiated supervision depending on performance—with tight supervision and guidance initially, until performance achieved a level in which the reins could be loosened and less guidance provided. Weast later recalled that he viewed the balance of tight and loose supervision as essentially “a contingency model” of leadership in which supervisory actions can be shifted “depending on your management situation” (Weast, personal interview, 2007). Weast said his view was based on an expectation of collaboration with subordinates, but he acknowledged that less



collaboration also was an option in certain situations involving challenging organizational and behavioral changes. “Sometimes you may have to use more coercive power to get it started...to get the ball rolling,” he said (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

The district’s version of tight and loose supervision was illustrated in a document distributed to principals in February 2000, three months after the announcement of the new reforms (Figure E-1). The illustration depicted two extremes of managerial oversight based on performance, with suggestions of punishment and reward. The document also featured an unusual demonstration of solidarity by all eight members of Weast’s executive staff. Their signatures were printed after a 317-word statement on the importance of accountability for student performance. In the statement, they said: “We will be accountable not only for the past but also for the future” (*Our call*, 2000, p. 2). The statement presented a view of managerial responsibility as proactive, with the suggestion of nipping problems in the bud. Shortly after the document’s release, an extraordinary preemptive move was taken to transfer a principal of a low-performing elementary school just prior to spring break. A newspaper article said there were more such moves after an expected analysis of school data and performance and quoted an unnamed senior staff member describing the principal’s transfer as “the tip of the iceberg” (Schulte, 2000).

#### Aggressive Intervention

Aggressive intervention was an important tool for Weast not only to manage a problem but also to avert one. In September 2000, four months after the bus accident, for example, he called an unusual evening press conference in the dimly lit ruins of a burned-out classroom of a middle school. He invited county fire officials and held aloft for the

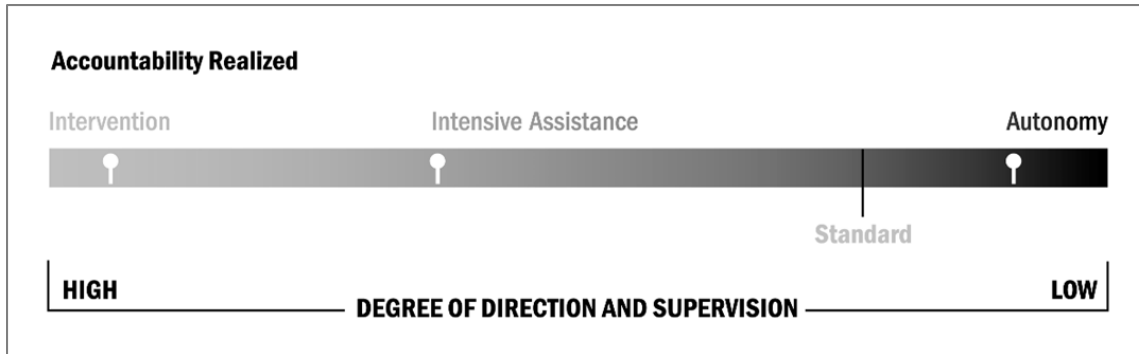


Figure E.1 Suggestions of Punishment and Reward

Illustration from *Our call to action: Building a system of shared accountability* (2000), p. 19. Copyright 2000, Montgomery County Public Schools. Reprinted with permission.

gathered news media the charred remains of a ceiling light ballast. The subsequent announcement by the school district said the “aging ceiling light fixture in a classroom” was the likely cause of the fire and called for fire safety checks of all schools with similar fixtures (*Fire safety*, 2000).

The government reaction was quick. Within four days, a newspaper article described the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission announcing “an investigation into dangers posed by old lighting fixtures like one suspected of causing a fire at a school in Montgomery County” and the Maryland Department of Education alerting school districts across the state “about the fixtures” (“Product safety,” 2000).

The incident demonstrated Weast’s use of the news media to facilitate an agenda. Weast recalled that just being in the position of wielding public influence was sometimes sufficient enough to avoid larger problems:

There tends to be better bureaucratic response...and people then are more open to communication, because they know that they have to communicate...or you’re going to say something. Because, one, you’re going to have more access to the press and, if you’re unafraid you’re going to tarnish yourself, you’re going to say what needs to be said (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

Weast was typically not shy around his staff. He quickly became one of the more prominent public figures in Montgomery County. In his first year, for example, there were more than twice as many press announcements issued by the school district that named him in some way, compared to the year before under the previous superintendent.<sup>100</sup> His references by name in the region's two daily newspapers were second only to the county executive and twice as often as the president of the County Council.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> References were compiled from the public announcements database of the Montgomery County Public Schools for the school years 1998-1999 and 1999-2000, accessed September 1, 2008, at [www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org).

<sup>101</sup> References were compiled from articles in *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times* from July 1, 1999, through June 30, 2000, in the LexisNexis Academic database, accessed September 1, 2008.

## Appendix F: Bus Accident

On May 19, 2000, a horrific accident on Muncaster Mill Road in Rockville, Maryland, killed an elementary school bus driver and critically injured several students. Dozens of the young students huddled in the open garage of a nearby house when the superintendent of schools, Jerry D. Weast, arrived on the accident scene with James A. Williams, then deputy superintendent, and Edward A. Clarke, the new director of school safety and security.

Williams recalled there was little question about whether to accompany Weast. “The rule was, whenever there is a crisis, James, stop what you’re doing, find me, let’s get in the car and go,” he said (Williams, personal interview, 2007). It was an expectation that others who also worked closely with Weast understood well. Donald H. Kress, then the coordinating community superintendent, recalled that Weast was “pretty open in saying, if there’s something going on in a school, I’m going, I’m going to the site” (Kress, personal interview, 2007).

The bus accident occurred nine months after Weast’s appointment and he had little relationship with the county police officials at the accident scene. Clarke had just retired as a police captain and knew everyone there. He obtained the necessary access inside the police-secured area, where the students in the garage were located, and this led to an unprecedented involvement of a school superintendent at a county police accident scene. Williams recalled the interaction as less than harmonious:

There were certain things that we wanted to do, because there were children, that the police didn't want us to do, and there was friction. And, knowing Jerry West's style, we just took over—because we focused on the children. The police focused on the incident (Williams, personal interview, 2007).

Clarke experienced the friction, too. He recalled the negative feedback directed at Weast for being inside the restricted area and involving himself unilaterally in the care of the students and communication with their families, which the police considered their purview. Clarke said “certain high-level police officials felt that maybe the superintendent had over-stepped his boundary” (Clarke, personal interview, 2007). The dispute lingered over perceived areas of responsibility. Robert B. Hellmuth, then assistant director of school safety and security and also a retired police officer, recalled arguing the point long afterwards with his former colleagues. “I said look, if it involves kids, if it involves our staff, [Weast] needs to be there,” he said (Hellmuth, personal interview, 2007).

Weast's actions quickly came to define the expectation for the school district's response to emergencies—quick, onsite, and responsive. In recalling the bus accident, Weast dismissed the complaint the police might have had about his expectations and intentions:

Whether they understood it or not, or whether I was in the way or not, I frankly didn't care. Because somebody [from the school district] who has...at their fingertips, a large and vast army of human beings, and access to communications, must be there to protect our interest, period (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

Weast said that responding to the scene of a school district emergency was an essential part of his job. It was also essential for others representing the school district, especially when immediate safety and welfare issues were involved, such as building fires, workplace accidents, and traffic deaths. As superintendent, he viewed such

situations as an opportunity to exercise great authority on behalf of students and staff and their parents, siblings, and families. It was an aspect of crisis management that focused on the crisis aftermath. Weast suggested it was less about emergency response and more about victim advocacy.

The bus accident was instructive for Clarke. He said the event illustrated “the difference in the two cultures, between public safety and public education,” in terms of roles, responsibilities, and expectations in an emergency (Clarke, personal interview, 2007). He said it provided a basis for insights into the political dynamics of the superintendency and the issues facing school officials in responding to a crisis.

The bus accident involved many more people than just police and the school officials at the accident scene. The extensive resources of the school district were activated by news of the accident, including transportation, counseling, safety and security, and communications. Each group swung into its own response on the basis of initial directions and later updates. The results included some amount of disorganization, confusion, and miscommunication. Different people were sometimes trying to manage the same aspects of the response. The lack of consistent coordination frustrated Larry A. Bowers, the school district’s chief operating officer, who remained at the central office to manage activities there. For him, the problems were heightened by the many people who were well-intentioned but largely unsupervised or independent and who took matters into their own hands. There was also the anguish over an employee’s death and the student injuries. He said it was difficult to accomplish even the simplest of things.

Just trying to find out...who was actually on the bus that day—I remember it was a great challenge. We had several people doing it, we had several lists, and we’re trying to get them to the hospital to make sure we knew where all the kids were (Bowers, personal interview, 2007).

## Appendix G: Montgomery School Security

In October 1999, the Montgomery County school district revised its administrative regulation on emergency and disaster preparedness. The change was the first revision of the regulation in 18 years, as noted in the document's "administrative history" (*EKA-RA*, 1999, p. 3). The revision came six months after Columbine and included a core definition of an emergency that was noteworthy for what it omitted:

Emergencies and/or disasters can result from fire, gas leak, power failure, boiler explosion, toxic fumes from within; or such an emergency could be the result of a train or truck accident. Natural disasters likely to occur in certain areas include such things as floods, storms, or blizzards (*EKA-RA*, 1999, p. 2).

The definition did not mention shootings or other life-threatening crimes at a school. The tabletop drill for central office emergency response nearly three years later was similarly focused on natural disasters.

The revised regulation placed the responsibility on crisis planning largely at the local level. It defined the purpose of emergency and disaster preparedness as providing "for the safety of all persons" at school district buildings and facilities "through the development and maintenance of the comprehensive local crisis plans" (*EKA-RA*, 1999, p. 1). There was no mention of districtwide crisis planning or the management of emergencies at the central office level. Instead, the regulation referred to "local crisis plans" being "part of" the overall emergency plans of the county government (*EKA-RA*, 1999, p. 2).

Other efforts to prepare for a crisis at the district level occurred elsewhere within the district. For example, a report later described actions taken to develop a uniform “mental health crisis response” plan for school emergencies within the school district, in coordination with county agencies and professional associations (*Community crisis*, 2004). The plan served as the basis for the later deployment of school district staff and volunteer professionals after the terrorist attacks in 2001. It remained in place a year later when the sniper attacks began.

One of the initiatives highlighted by Jerry D. Weast, superintendent of schools, in September 1999 was the provision of a spiral-bound series of “flip cards” that detailed crisis responses “during the critical first moments of an emergency situation” (Weast, 1999, p. 1). The first card described new emergency kits being provided to schools with materials to aid in local emergency management. The kits were to be kept handy and were to include a “battery-operated radio, flashlights, first aid kit, blood borne pathogen kit, megaphones,” and a “roll of yellow caution tape,” among other items (*Emergency flip cards*, 1999, p. 2).

#### District Relied on Schools

The management of serious incidents remained largely a local matter, a reflection of the far-flung size of the school district and the comparatively independent day-to-day management of schools. In the update to the *Principals Handbook* provided to principals in the summer of 2002, all regulations having to do with various safety and security matters at schools (such as arrests, bomb threats, weapons, etc.) conferred the initial decision on the principal. The matter rose to the central office in only the most serious of circumstances. For example, the principal was responsible “for determining the



appropriate course of action” regarding how to respond to a serious incident, “including requests for outside (non-school) assistance in accordance with the comprehensive local crisis plans” (*Reporting*, 2000, p. 253). If a weapon was found on school property, the principal was responsible for using “discretion in confiscating” the item from a student, depending on the student’s age, circumstances, “and the potential for resulting danger” (*Weapons*, 2000, p. 257). Principals were responsible for safeguarding students near bus loading zones and “enforcing safe traffic regulations on school property” (*Transportation*, 1998, pp. 8-9).

Regulatory references to central office involvement in serious incidents were episodic and splintered depending on the type of incident. For bomb threats, for example, principals were required to initiate local safety measures with police and fire officials and to “inform...as soon as it is practical” one of four executive staff offices, depending on whether the incident happened in “regular schools...special education schools...alternative programs...[or] all other sites” (*Bomb threats*, 2000, pp. 248-249).

Crisis management decisions by principals largely occurred out of public view. Principals had the discretion to disclose details of a serious incident to parents and the public, based on whether there was a safety issue or “the likelihood of community concern” (*Reporting*, 2000, p. 254). In 2002, the district did not publicly report data on the occurrence of serious incidents in schools, including crimes.<sup>102</sup> However, disciplinary decisions were disclosed. Student suspension data were reported statewide by the Maryland State Department of Education. The state report noted that, while such

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<sup>102</sup> Serious incidents in 2002 potentially spanned more than 30 categories, including criminal acts from arson to weapons, based on procedures later initiated for reporting such data (“School safety,” 2008).

data were imprecise and limited, “suspensions can be indicators of the most serious student misbehavior in the school” (*Suspensions*, 2002, p. 1). The report included the number of students suspended and the number and type of suspensions, providing the relative scale and scope of the local incidents and the decisions that accompanied them.

For Montgomery County, the state reported 5,577 students suspended at least once during the 2001-2002 school year, representing just over 4% of the student enrollment, the lowest in the state. Most (88%) were middle and high school students. This meant, on average, that about 85 students per secondary school were suspended during the year—or about one every other school day. There were 7,934 suspensions overall. The higher number for suspensions indicated that nearly 30% were for repeat offenders. Nearly half of the suspensions (46%) resulted from physical and verbal attacks against teachers, staff, and students, as well as fighting and extortion. Little more than 3% were for weapons, including one suspension involving a firearm (*Suspensions*, 2002, pp. 3-11).

#### Weather Plan Guide

The district had a well-worn plan for managing the most common districtwide emergencies—snow storms, icy roads, and other hazardous weather conditions. Each fall, just prior to the onset of winter, an updated version of the “Management Plan for Inclement Weather” was distributed. The plan was a highly detailed document of more than 40 pages. It included a flow chart that illustrated the steps in the “inclement weather assessment process” leading to a decision by the superintendent (*Management plan*, 2001, pp. 32-34). The final steps in the decision process essentially involved West conferring with Larry A. Bowers, the chief operating officer (Figure F.1). For an early

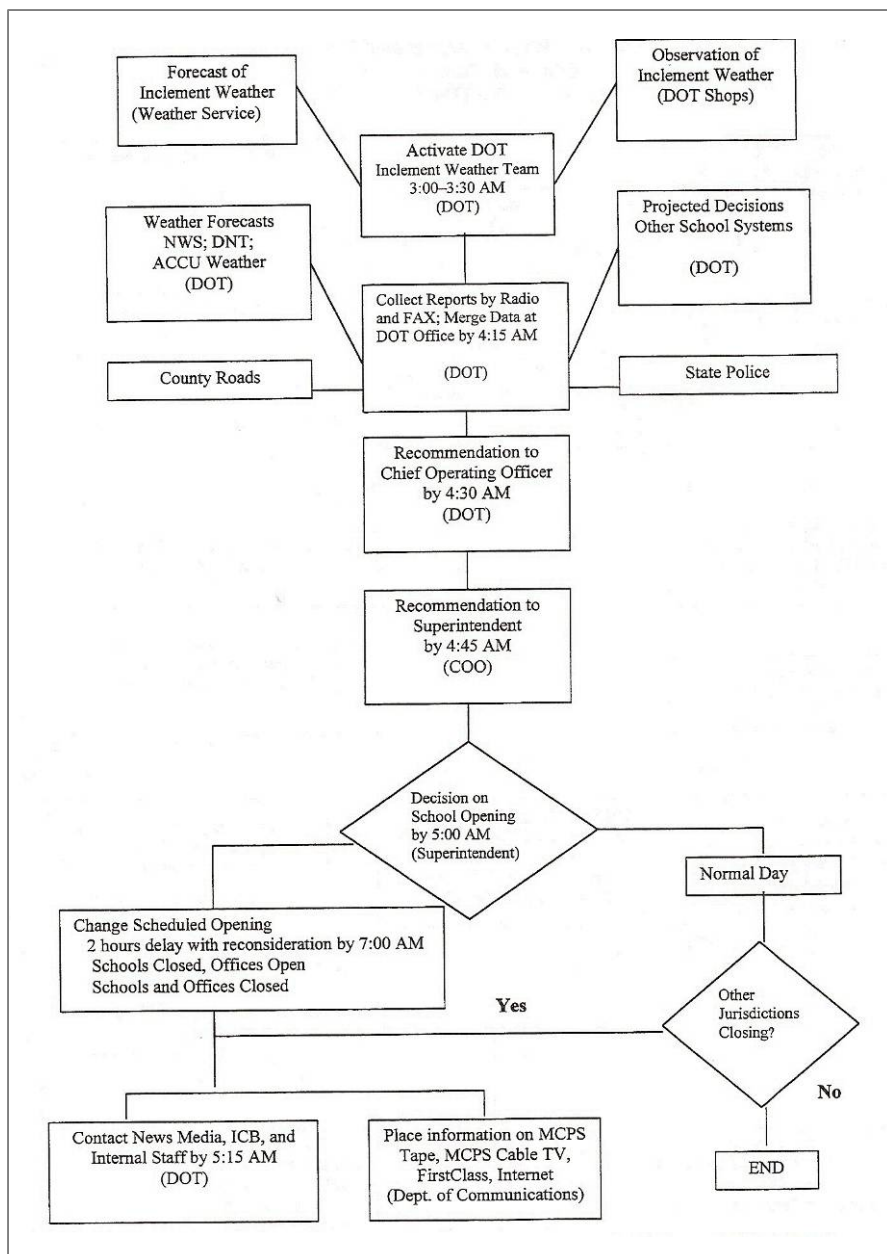


Figure F.1 Decision Sequence for Weather Emergencies

From *Management plan for inclement weather and other emergencies* (2001, November), p. 32. Copyright 2001 Montgomery County Public Schools. Reprinted with permission.

morning decision, for example, the plan’s timeline specified a “recommendation to the superintendent by 4:45 a.m.” by the chief operating officer and a decision fifteen minutes later by the superintendent (*Management plan*, 2001, p. 32). In a sense, this was also the

essence of the new plan. It had a prescribed process, the specific staff identified, and the fidelity to a final decision by the superintendent. The weather emergencies plan was the incident command system without the glamour.

In the school district, emergency decisions for transportation were a proxy for decisions affecting schools, such as closures, delayed openings, and early dismissals. The decisions were made for “all schools” at one time and were “based on the most severe condition within the county” (*Management plan*, 2001, p. 5). This occurred regardless of weather conditions elsewhere and depended largely on road conditions and vehicle safety. It was, as described later, “a uniform procedure” designed to enable the school district to “respond quickly to emergency weather conditions and protect the safety and well being of students and staff” (*About weather*, 2007).

Daily school operations were defined by bus schedules at three critical junctures—morning arrivals, afternoon dismissals, and the mid-day comings and goings of pre-school and kindergarten students in half-day programs. The bus schedules were a function of economics, designed to maximize the use of the fewest number of buses transporting the largest number of students.<sup>103</sup> The schedules involved highly calibrated bus routes in an operational ballet of more than 1,100 vehicles. The fleet was described by the school district as 11th largest in the nation, transporting an average of 95,000 students each day (*Annual report*, 2002, p. 26). The operation included bus drivers, aides, and mechanics at five depots around the county. More money was budgeted for

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<sup>103</sup> The school start times in Montgomery were reportedly set in 1993, when the district sought to save money by opening schools earlier and using fewer buses to transport more children (Kaufman, 2001).

transportation (\$58 million) than textbooks (\$42 million) or building maintenance (\$24 million) in Fiscal Year 2002 (*Citizens budget*, 2002, p. 26).

In the fall of 2001, the weather emergency plan was untouched by improvements sought for overall crisis management. Weast sent a copy of the plan to the Board of Education in November in preparation for the upcoming winter season. He told the board: “I have reviewed the plan with my staff, and I am confident that everyone is prepared to meet whatever challenges we encounter” (Weast, 2001a).

## Appendix H: Mental Health and Volunteers

The issues of volunteers and mental health were linked to the same basic problem facing the school district—keeping the schools open meant helping people cope with a new set of issues and problems. There was an inherent limit in the resources of the school district, even with volunteer assistance from community mental health professionals, to address potential emotional issues facing tens of thousands of students, parents, and staff. Jerry D. Weast, superintendent of schools, later acknowledged that his understanding of the dynamics of the problem evolved, as it did for others, as the crisis continued and worsened. He recalled that the district “had to escalate the level of care and comprehensiveness of the program, based on the intensity and the length or duration” of the crisis (Weast, personal interview, 2007).

The district’s response, as drawn from the archival record and interviews with participants, was focused on four basic methods of providing support for students, staff, and parents and, by extension, the public. These methods involved four inter-connected strategies based on two delivery methods—people and media (Figure H.1). All four strategies were based on providing information that people could use to help themselves or console others. “Information was almost our only weapon,” recalled Judith Madden, then supervisor of guidance services (Madden, personal interview, 2007).

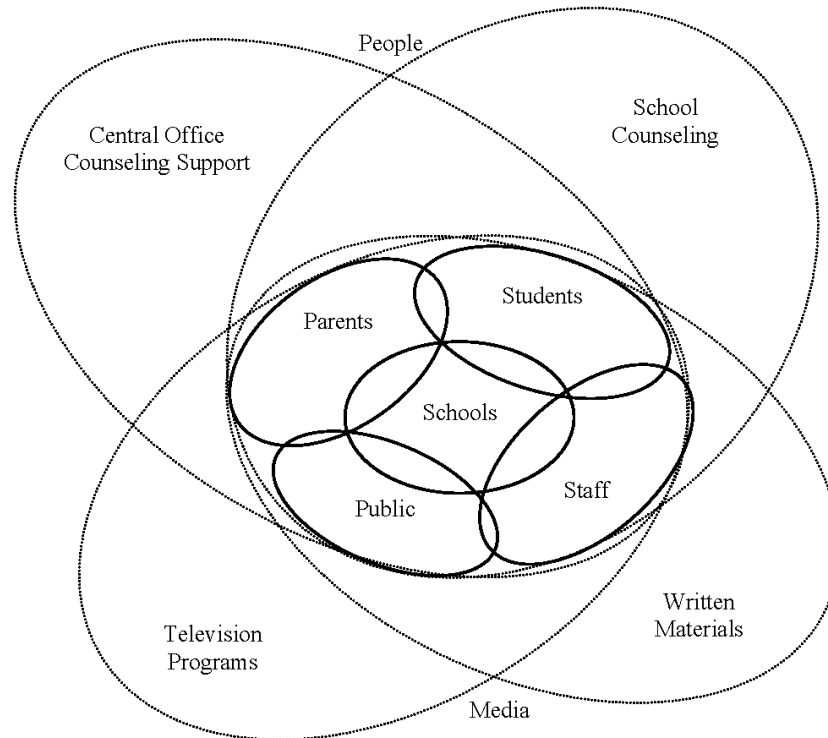


Figure H.1 Conceptual Configuration of Mental Health Strategies

Part of the response built on the experiences of a year earlier, after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The bulk of the response dealt with an entirely new kind of problem—one involving despair because of the length of the crisis and continued attacks and anxiety because of the randomness of the shootings. Mathew Kamins, then supervisor of psychological services, recalled the themes boiled down to two ideas as counter-suggestions for people to cling to—hope and resiliency. He credits Weast for initiating the work that led to the development of the initial mental health guides. “I remember him saying, almost to day one...you need to write something about random acts of violence, and you need to take into consideration exposure to repeated stress” (Kamins, personal interview, 2007). After the student shooting, Weast asked the mental health staff to research the literature on anticipated mental health needs for long-term

crises, in case different strategies were needed for “the next four or five days” (*Meeting notes October 9*, ¶ 5:00).

Nearly two weeks into the crisis, Weast told parents and staff in a letter on October 15 that the continued “effort to address mental health issues—emotional, intellectual, physical, and behavior reactions to stress—has emerged as a major priority for the school system” (Weast, 2002h). A school district media announcement, three days prior to the letter, described the initiatives as necessary “to stabilize and maintain school system instructional programs at a time when stress and distractions are disrupting the expected processes of teaching and learning” (*Ongoing mental health*, 2002).

Weast also framed the school district’s response, in comments before the Board of Education on October 15, as “an educational issue” for the school district in terms being able “to reach out and communicate...to establish those relationships where they may have been frayed or didn’t exist” with employees and parents (“Dialogue,” 2002). He said that, while he wanted the crisis to end, the emergency presented opportunities for organizational improvements.

This is an opportunity to hone our professional skills. This is an opportunity to show our staff how much we care about them. How much we are concerned for them. It’s an opportunity to show our parents that they’re part of the equation... We are seizing upon those opportunities in this particular crisis situation for us to become a better organization (“Dialogue,” 2002).

The school district’s efforts drew praise from the outset, including offers of collaboration, and notoriety for the school district. The National Education Association (NEA) informed staff that it was considering a national award for the school system’s work (Leong, 2002). Other groups offered assistance, including KidsPeace, a national center “for kids overcoming crisis,” which provided free materials to be shared with



parents and staff (Dries, 2002). CNN highlighted the efforts in its online reporting of the day's events and posted a link to the district's website (Oglesby, 2002). The day after the student shooting, the *NBC Dateline* program concluded its report on the sniper incident by sharing "some good advice" from the district's suggestions for parents ("7 days," 2002).<sup>104</sup>

Materials were sent to Prince George's County to assist that district's efforts after the student shooting. Kamins became the district's expert for news media inquiries about the effect of fear on parents and students. In an appearance on MSNBC, for example, he tried to place the parent reactions in context and said, "...it's almost impossible for parents to overreact in this kind of situation" ("Lester Holt," 2002). The media demand became so heavy that Madden also became a spokesperson on mental health. She provided detailed tips for addressing stress and anxiety in interviews on CNN, including one headlined "Interview with Judy Madden" ("Interview," 2002).

### Services Mobilized

Major efforts regarding mental health were mobilized in the days following the student shooting. On October 11, Lacey updated the command team regarding the status of the ongoing mobilization of mental health personnel and resources, noting that staff recruited 82 licensed mental health professionals, in addition to 186 other volunteers through the Montgomery County Mental Health Association, to be available to assist

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<sup>104</sup> The county government released its own "Tips for Coping for Tragic Shootings" in a press statement on its website, in which Duncan urged residents to seek assistance if necessary from a crisis hotline staffed with mental health counselors ("Montgomery County offers," 2002). At the same time, the county also engaged in community-based mental health services, including personal assistance. In one instance, county staff drove people from a clinic to the nearest Metro rail station because "they were afraid to wait at [the] bus stop" (Romer, 2002, p. 4).

schools as needed. These were in addition to 60 psychologists and other staff, who Kamins reported also were ready (*Meeting notes October 11*, ¶ 5:00).

The mobilization created 12 fact sheets and brief guides on various mental health issues already in schools and on the website by that Friday, with another four on the way that focused on stress and anxiety issues. The effort involved support from the school district's multimedia efforts led by Alvez, the superintendent's director of special projects, which included the launch of a new website and new television programs that were being frequently replayed every day. The efforts included a live call-in program, "Coping with Stress: Answers to Your Questions," featuring school district staff and others with mental health expertise answering questions from a studio audience and telephone calls (*Meeting notes October 11*, ¶ 5:00). These efforts, such as the website, essentially offered the information and resources as a form of self-help. There was little other alternative.

Members of the Board of Education praised the efforts during a discussion about the school district's response on October 15. Patricia O'Neill, for example, said she felt "proud" knowing that materials prepared by the school district were being used by others, including the news media, as a resource ("Dialogue," 2002): She said it was an unprecedented effort and "a prime source of relief for families and children and obviously staff" ("Dialogue," 2002).

The student services team developed plans for responding to an incident at schools. The detailed "crisis response" plan described the steps and procedures for deploying staff and outside mental health support during an "isolated incident" outside of

a school, a school-based incident, and a “systemwide or regional incident” in conjunction with the Incident Command Team structure (*Crisis response*, 2002, p. ). The team also developed an outline of immediate and ongoing “tasks” for student services personnel and volunteers to follow in order to ensure timely mental health support (*Tasks ensuring*, 2002).

## Appendix I: Letters from the Superintendent

The letters from the superintendent to parents and staff, which eventually numbered 14 by the end of the crisis, were formalized as a daily plan two days after the student was shot. Prior to that, the letters were prepared as if each letter might be the last. Principals were told that, with the new plan, the superintendent intended “to maintain daily communication with parents and staff...for as long as the current crisis continues” (Porter, 2002i). The first letter carried the label “Update #4” in anticipation of a continuing series, given that another shooting occurred the night before.<sup>105</sup>

Superintendent Jerry D. Weast told the team he wanted the letters to focus on a central topic that would convey the day’s most important information (*Meeting notes October 9, ¶ 7:30*).<sup>106</sup> Most of the letters over the course of the crisis dealt with security and mental health issues, providing advice and guidance (Figure I.1). The distribution included more than 150,000 copies each time, with printing and distribution handled independently by each school and office, plus distribution through the district’s website.

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<sup>105</sup> On Wednesday night, October 9, a man was shot in the head while pumping gas at 8:10 p.m. in Manassas, Virginia (“John Muhammad v. Maryland,” 2007, p. 13). The attack was later linked to the other shootings, bringing the total to seven dead and two wounded.

<sup>106</sup> *Note:* I prepared the initial drafts of the letters, based on direction and guidance from the superintendent and input from others who reviewed initial drafts and made suggestions. The preparation involved translating the letters (into Spanish initially and later other languages) and sending it by e-mail in time for local school staff to copy and distribute before dismissal. It was a deadline-driven process.

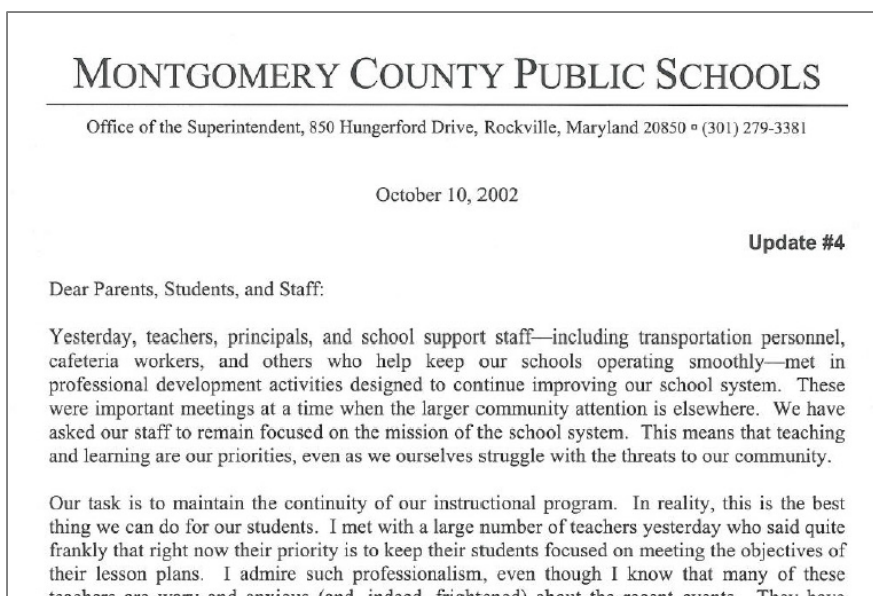


Figure I.1: Excerpt of One of the Superintendent’s 14 Letters

From “Letter from the Superintendent” (2002, October 10). *Sniper crisis: Superintendent’s crisis management communications*. Week 1 [Notebook]. Rockville, MD: Copyright 2002 by Montgomery County Public Schools. Used with permission.

The tone and substance of the letters were affected by the days’ events. The second letter of the new plan, for example, came the day of another shooting.<sup>107</sup> The letter reflected the lessons from the mental health materials to create a simple message: “These are times that require courage, not bravery and heroics, but just the emotional strength to do what is right in the face of worry and fear...” (Weast, 2002j). The letter urged staff and parents to take appropriate precautions against stress and anxiety, and offered self-help strategies that built comments Weast had made earlier to the command staff that same day:

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<sup>107</sup> At 9:28 a.m. on Friday, October 11, a man was shot and killed while standing next to his car at a gas station in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, 70 miles south of Rockville (“John Muhammad v. Maryland,” 2007, pp. 14-15). It was the tenth shooting, with eight people dead and two wounded.

I ask my staff to do the same things I expect of myself—get plenty of rest each night, stay close to family and friends, find encouragement in the beauty of life’s unexpected gifts, and be prepared for the stress of the unknown (Weast, 2002j).

That letter drew favorable responses. A parent wrote to Weast saying, “I am seldom touched by the usual rhetoric that comes from your office...[but this letter] makes me feel better” (Smith, 2002). An elementary principal intern sent an e-mail thanking him saying, “...as an administrator but especially as a parent...I take solace in the beautifully crafted words” (Johnson-Riley, 2002). That evening, a report on a news segment of National Public Radio quoted from the letter to address the concerns of people who “say they’re on the edge and are clinging to comfort where they can find it” (“Feelings of residents,” 2002).

A teacher later wrote in her daily journal, which was subsequently excerpted as a newspaper article, “The superintendent’s letter (always on yellow paper) coming at the end of every day now. I look for it, I wait for it. I’m not the only one. I start to think of these days as ‘waiting for the yellow sheet.’” (Ochs, 2002). There were anecdotal reports of parents and staff expressing appreciation. Clarke, for example, reported to the team that at a PTA meeting on school security, parents said they liked being kept informed (*Meeting notes October 16*, ¶ 7:30). Lacey later recalled hearing about the letters from her sister who was on the board of a college in Massachusetts. She said one of other board members had grandchildren in Montgomery County and told Lacey’s sister, in response to a question, that the situation was “really scary” but she felt better because “her family knew every day” about the school district’s efforts (Lacey, personal interview, 2007). Reginald Felton, president of the Board of Education, also praised the letters during a discussion on the school district’s response to the crisis. They were

important, he said, because “there are so many parents who do not necessarily have access [to other media sources], and they need to know” (“Dialogue,” 2002).

Not everyone was as positive. An elementary school parent, for example, called the superintendent’s office, complaining that the “daily updates are a waste of trees” (Sloan, 2002b). An elementary school secretary responsible for duplicating and distributing the letters sent an e-mail to the Weast’s office, saying the “daily letters might be adding to everyone’s stress and that possibly less frequent communications might be more helpful” (Sloan, 2002a). Shirley, the principals’ union president and who later became a superintendent himself, recalled the letters as the “daily epistles” (Shirley, personal interview, 2007). He said they were not well received:

I guess he thought—this is really important that the flocks know that I care about them. And at the school offices, it’s just pissing people off, when they had to print them every day. I don’t think the schools looked forward to the epistles nearly as nearly as much as [Weast] thought they needed to have them. There was a pretty big gap (Shirley interview, 2007).

Alvez, director of special projects in the superintendent’s office, also assisted in preparing the letters. She recalled hearing both positive and negative feedback, both as a parent and as a staff member. She supported the letters as a form of message redundancy in order to reach as many people as often as possible in a large organization. “I’d rather err on the side of over communicating than under communicating, especially in a situation like this,” she said (Alvez, personal interview, 2007). There was no effort by the school district to evaluate the letters beyond the anecdotal feedback.

All of the letters were released to the public and news media, and they were quoted as a source of information and statements from the superintendent. Excerpts appeared in various media, including *The Boston Globe*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The*

*New York Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*, along with references on National Public Radio. *NBC4*, the local network affiliate, posted an entire letter online following the student shooting ("Afternoon activities," 2002). An article in *The Baltimore Sun* characterized the correspondence as an example of new crisis management techniques for school districts, in which frequent communication was important for parents and staff over an extended period of time (Bowler, 2002). A television program on school safety later described the letters as an attempt "to try and keep parents and students calm" ("Safety lesson," 2003).<sup>108</sup>

Duncan, who acknowledged reading some but not all of the letters, said the correspondence was important in the overall management of the crisis:

I liked the idea that he was sending letters out on a regular basis...reassuring the parents, keeping the message, we're going to get through this, we're going to stay in school, we're going to keep teaching your children and we're going to keep them safe. I thought that was very, very helpful, I really do. It was that constant advice, that constant touch he had, with his constituency that was extraordinarily helpful (Duncan, personal interview, 2008).

Weast also used letters in targeting specific groups of employees to convey appreciation for their work and highlighted specific job functions that were helpful in managing the crisis. In a massive distribution two days after the student shooting, Weast sent letters to all school secretaries and office personnel, building service workers, and student services staff, including school psychologists, pupil personnel workers, and guidance counselors. Cafeteria and transportation staff received a second round of letters, following the ones sent the week before after the initial shootings. The recipients

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<sup>108</sup> Weast was not alone in sending letters. A study of the police investigation noted that "many superintendents communicated directly with students and parents" throughout the crisis (G. R. Murphy & Wexler, 2004, p. 108). The study cited a letter from a Virginia school superintendent as an example. None were known to have sent letters home on a daily basis.



in transportation alone numbered more than a thousand. Each letter was tailored specifically to the employee group. School secretaries were told, for example, they were “truly on the front line” during emergencies and the school district appreciated the “calm and understanding manner in which you have responded to questions and concerns from parents” (Weast, 2002o). Building service workers were told: “The security of your school building is your daily responsibility” (Weast, 2002a).

## Appendix J: Tables

Table J.1 Distribution of Crisis Actions and Crisis Decisions, October 3

Conceptual Framework Components	Number of crisis actions	Percentage of crisis actions	Number of crisis decisions	Percentage of crisis decisions
Total	70		32	
Critical Leadership Tasks				
• Making crisis decisions, taking action	70	100%	32	100%
• Making sense of the crisis	36	51%	11	32%
• Meaning making for others	25	36%	12	38%
• Terminating the crisis	1	1%	1	3%
• Learning from the crisis	0	0	0	0
Principals of High Reliability				
• Deference to Expertise	21	30%	15	47%
• Sensitivity to Operations	58	83%	26	81%
• Preoccupation with Failure	16	23%	10	31%
• Reluctance to Simplify Interpretations	21	30%	12	38%
• Commitment to Resilience	12	17%	5	16%
Social Systems				
• Structural System	56	80%	27	84%
• Political System	12	17%	8	25%
• Individual System	10	14%	4	13%
• Cultural System	6	9%	4	13%
• Teaching and Learning	0	0	0	0
• External Crisis Environment	32	46%	13	41%
• Feedback	10	14%	2	6%
Crisis Management Targets				
• Students and staff safety	38	54%	18	56%
• Schools open for teaching and learning	2	3%	2	6%
• Students and staff attendance	0	0	0	0
• Mental health support	15	21%	5	16%
• Staff implements district decisions	18	26%	10	31%
• Parents and public support	16	23%	6	19%
• Agencies support	9	13%	5	16%
• District operations continue	4	6%	4	13%

Data compiled from coding analysis of identified crisis activities and crisis decisions of school district leaders, Montgomery County Public Schools, October 3, 2002, and associated conceptual framework components. Data overlap. Percentages rounded. Crisis actions include crisis decisions..

Conceptual framework components adapted from “critical tasks” by Boin, et al. (2005); “social systems model” by Hoy & Miskel (2008); and “high reliability” principles by Weick & Sutcliffe (2001).

Table J.2 Distribution of Crisis Actions and Crisis Decisions, October 7

Conceptual Framework Components	Number of crisis actions	Percentage of crisis actions	Number of crisis decisions	Percentage of crisis decisions
Total	73		33	
Critical Leadership Tasks				
• Making crisis decisions, taking action	73	100%	33	100%
• Making sense of the crisis	23	32%	8	24%
• Meaning making for others	44	60%	18	55%
• Terminating the crisis	0	0	0	0
• Learning from the crisis	0	0	0	0
Principals of High Reliability				
• Deference to Expertise	25	34%	12	36%
• Sensitivity to Operations	45	62%	20	61%
• Preoccupation with Failure	19	26%	13	39%
• Reluctance to Simplify Interpretations	14	19%	9	27%
• Commitment to Resilience	15	21%	6	18%
Social Systems				
• Structural System	48	66%	23	70%
• Political System	5	7%	3	9%
• Individual System	9	12%	3	9%
• Cultural System	9	12%	6	18%
• Teaching and Learning	1	1%	0	0
• External Crisis Environment	45	62%	17	52%
• Feedback	12	16%	5	15%
Crisis Management Targets				
• Students and staff safety	33	45%	13	39%
• Schools open for teaching and learning	3	4%	1	3%
• Students and staff attendance	2	5%	2	6%
• Mental health support	15	21%	6	18%
• Staff implements district decisions	22	30%	12	36%
• Parents and public support	16	22%	9	27%
• Agencies support	14	19%	6	18%
• District operations continue	0	0	0	0

Data compiled from coding analysis of identified crisis activities and crisis decisions of school district leaders, Montgomery County Public Schools, October 7, 2002, and associated conceptual framework components. Data overlap. Percentages rounded. Crisis actions include crisis decisions.

Conceptual framework components adapted from “critical tasks” by Boin, et al. (2005); “social systems model” by Hoy & Miskel (2008); and “high reliability” principles by Weick & Sutcliffe (2001).

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