

Case Study 2: A Death at Your School

This case study is designed to help Leadership Academy participants develop or improve several critical leadership competencies:

1. Dealing effectively with board members
2. Dealing effectively with parents and family members of your students
3. Providing appropriate supervision for staff
4. Dealing with the news media
5. Developing and following an emergency plan

Role: You are the director of a urban, k-6 charter public school located in the downtown area of a racially diverse city. This is the first school that you have directed, though you have had leadership roles in other schools. You are eager to make this school widely known as a “school of excellence.” That means very high academic achievement, considerable community service by students, and a good deal of positive visibility in the community.

The school: This is a K-6 charter public school enrolling mostly students of color and mostly students from low-income families. The school was started by a group of families deeply frustrated with what they believe are low expectations and low achievement in several neighborhood district public schools. They also have partnered with a social service agency that has agreed to house a staff member in the school at no cost, to help strengthen families and work with students. It took more than 2 years from the first time the families met, until the school opened.

Situation:

It’s 3:30 PM, late in the first month of your school’s operation. You have just been notified by one of the staff people assigned to monitor students boarding the buses that a 9-year old-student at your school ran in front of a bus as it was leaving the school. Paramedics have been called. But the child appears to be dead. This tragic situation has happened at the end of the day. About half of the students already are on buses. About half are in the process of boarding buses. The staff member tells you that the situation right now next to the buses is somewhat chaotic with people weeping.

Your phone is “ringing off the hook.” Among others calling are:

- Two local TV stations
- Two local newspapers

- Some parents
- Some nearby business people
- Supervisor from the bus company, who left a message saying he is on his way to the school

There also are some distraught teachers and weeping students right outside the office, and next to the buses, according to the person who is tell you the situation. This is a deep tragedy and something that will be a strong test of your leadership skills.

Your four-year old school does not have a policy, procedures or a plan regarding emergencies of this sort. You have been incredibly busy just getting the school up and running in your community.

Please prepare several “to do” lists:

- a. A list of what you would do over the next hour
- b. What you would say to the family of the dead child, when would you say it, and how you would say it (it’s not clear whether the dead child’s family speaks English). While you have some staff and faculty who speak the child’s language, you personally do not speak it).
- c. A list of what you would do over the next four hours.
- d. A list of what you would do over the next 3 days
- e. A list of what you would do over the next month

As you prepare these “to do” lists, please consider, in addition to the above,

- a. What are you going to say and do with the faculty and students?
- b. What are you going to say and do with families in the school?
- c. What will you say and do with the board of the school in you direct a charter?
- d. What will you say and do with your supervisor, if you direct an alternative school?
- e. At what point will you involve the school’s attorney?
- f. What if any review of bus boarding procedures will you make?
- g. How are you going to communicate with your authorizer, if you are a charter?
- h. What if any counseling will you arrange? Who will provide the counseling, and how will you pay for it?

Now it’s several weeks later. Assuming that you still have your job,

- a. What are the 3 key lessons that you have learned from this experience?

- b. What if any changes in school policy or procedures do you want to create in the next 2-3 months?

Key Lessons to take from this Case Study

- This incident really happened.
- Among the first things a charter public school board needs to do is to develop a policy and set of procedures for dealing with emergencies.
- The charter public school board, should, before it opens, develop a policy and set of procedures for dealing with the news media.
- The charter school board should ask for the person designated to work with the news media to obtain training about how to do this effectively.
- Before the school opens, the charter school board should obtain insurance that covers emergencies such as this.
- The charter school should ask its insurance company to send a person to the school to help review policies and procedures, and make suggestions. For example, the insurance company may have a representative who can help make suggestions for safety in loading and unloading students on and off of buses.
- Periodically, the school should run an emergency drill to assess the quality of its response to situations such as this.