A Safety Game Plan for Extracurricular Events

To ensure safety at extracurricular events, preplanning for emergencies is essential.

By Judy Brunner and Dennis Lewis

Staff members who oversee, direct, or coach extracurricular activities spend countless hours working and practicing with students not only to ensure a top-quality performance but also to ensure that the activities project a positive and polished image of the school. Whether the activity involves a drama teacher preparing for a theatrical production or a coach developing a game plan for an upcoming competition, everyone involved must understand that preplanning for the unexpected is a necessary part of the safety process.

When something goes awry at an extracurricular activity, a number of circumstances can negatively affect safety in an already unusual situation. Consequently, administrators should give due diligence to planning for security at extracurricular activities throughout the school year by considering the following recommendations.

A clear and structured chain of command for supervision should be in place. Indecision can be detrimental to successfully resolving or responding to an emergency situation; therefore, it is essential for all staff members who are working at an extracurricular activity to know who is assigned specific duties and where they can be located in case of an emergency.

Supervisory staff members should have adequate training and understand the expectations for making decisions. The principal or the assistant principal may not always be present at every after-school activity. In fact, it is not uncommon for teachers or other staff members to be in charge at low-profile or lightly attended evening events. Nevertheless, the public expects the administrative designee to be as qualified on and knowledgeable about safety-related issues as the principal or other administrators. Therefore, developing a handbook or check sheet for those in charge of an event can be a real asset, especially for staff members who only occasionally find themselves in an administrative role. It is particularly important for those staff members to understand that they have the authority to make decisions.

A pre-event meeting of assigned staff members should be held prior to the start of an activity. This does not need to be a long or formal meeting, but it should review the specific duties and responsibilities of staff members and explain where supervisory staff members will be located during the event. In addition, the discussion topics should include how to contact or locate those in charge, how to handle any potential or anticipated problems, and how to verify that safety and security devices or supplies are readily available and working properly. In an emergency, staff members will be under stress and will be more likely to remember important information if it has been recently discussed.

Evacuation routes and in-place sheltering locations should be identified, verified, and posted in clear view at all entrances and exits. When considering the location of sheltering areas, the anticipated size of the crowd should be considered. The maximum allowable occu-
safety should be posted at the entry to gymnasiums, auditoriums, or other locations where significant numbers of people attend school functions. When large crowds are expected, someone should be designated to monitor attendance to ensure that the maximum occupancy is not exceeded.

In-place sheltering and evacuation maps should be developed that are specific to the locations that are commonly used for extracurricular events. Normal school day sheltering and evacuation routes and maps usually reflect a student body that is spread throughout the building. This will not be the case at extracurricular activities; consequently, plans specific to those locations should be developed.

At big events or when the noise level may be a serious factor when communicating with the crowd, it is advisable to announce certain safety information before the event begins. For certain events, many schools already make announcements concerning tobacco usage, crowd conduct expectations, and so on. It is recommended that these announcements also contain information related to emergency exits and evacuation procedures. In addition, rules and conduct expectations should be posted at entryways to the events to remind everyone about what the school expects, tolerates, and does not allow.

Supervisory staff members, ushers, or others who are designated to assist or oversee an event should wear attire that is easily recognizable. As part of the general announcements made at the beginning of an event, the crowd should be given instructions as to how to locate school staff members should the need arise. Staff members who dress in apparel that displays school colors or in shirts designed with school colors or mascots may tend to blend in with patrons and fans and may not be readily identified. It is therefore recommended that supervisory staff members wear badges that identify them. Wearing identical colored blazer jackets or other similar attire can also make staff members easy to identify, especially at events with large crowds.

Staff members should be equipped with essential equipment and supplies, such as flashlights and cell phones. A small, powerful flashlight can be a valuable tool in the event of a power outage or if staff members need to go outside during the evening hours to address a problem. In addition, staff members should have a pocket-size notepad and pen. It is a good practice for at least the supervisory staff members to have cell phones. If two-way radios are used at the school, they should also be carried by as many of the staff as is practical. Schools that are in areas where severe weather can be a threat should keep a weather-alert radio should in a place where staff members will hear it if it is activated—perhaps a concession stand or a ticket booth. For outside events, lightning detectors are also recommended.

First aid supplies and crisis kit locations should be placed in the area where an event is being held. Although many athletic events will have a trainer or other similarly qualified person present, other extracurricular activities will not. Staff members should be aware of who among them has first aid training and where first aid supplies can be located. A crisis kit should always be placed in areas where large numbers of students or the public congregate. In addition to the standard supplies that crisis kits normally contain, a battery-powered megaphone is also suggested. This will be an invaluable tool if it is necessary to communicate to large numbers of people under adverse conditions.

Local law enforcement agencies should be kept informed when large crowds are anticipated at extracurricular activities and events. Most law enforcement agencies are more than willing to disseminate a schedule of the school’s events to the officer who covers that beat. Police departments like to be proactive and will want to know when large numbers are expected to attend an extracurricular activity. In addition to staff members who are to provide security, a police officer can make a pass through the event or the school parking lots to add to the overall security plan for the event.

And last, scenario-based training should be provided to members of the crisis management team and others who may be called upon to supervise extracurricular activities. Administrators should already be using tabletop exercises to train their school population about safety issues. Tabletop exercises are recommended by the U.S. Department of Education and are an excellent method for training staff members in emergency response procedures. Consequently, it is recommended that administrators occasionally select a tabletop exercise in which something is going awry at an extracurricular event. Forcing individuals to respond to the unusual circumstances of these events will allow for a better response when staff members and students are confronted with an emergency.