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LIFE ON A SCHOOL BOARD

Preparing for the unthinkable

Dan Schlafer

If you look up “organized” in Daniel Webster’s word book, you’ll find a picture of my dad right beside the definition. He meticulously managed every aspect of life, down to the most minute detail. If I had a dollar, every time I heard him say, “Prior preparation prevents poor performance, son,” we all could retire comfortably to Tahiti and never be heard from again.

I modeled his forward thinking during my 20 years as a high school football coach. Our staff spent countless

hours ensuring we had an answer for everything the opposition could throw at us. We crunched statistics, created down and distance tendency charts, and took pride in knowing what the opposition would do long before they did it. We sold our players on a single mantra—“We’re going to win it before we ever begin it”—and they bought into it.

The world we live in as school board members bears absolutely no resemblance to the world we experi-

enced as schoolchildren. The wholesome days of “Ozzie and Harriet” have given way to the reality of Ozzy Osbourne. Lost long ago was our innocence, and it’s not coming back anytime soon—if at all.

I can remember when I told myself that I’d want no part of a school building that needed an armed officer. Today, I’d want no part of one without a school resource officer present.

The major problem with today’s school life is that the urgent drives out the important every single day. Reading, writing, and math are no longer job one, supplanted by safety as our most important task. When parents send their children to school in the morning, they expect them home again in one piece, not in a box.

Columbine was our wake-up call. School boards have been forced to answer that phone.

Effective school boards insist that their districts have plans to prevent crisis situations from escalating, and contingency plans for situations that do. Do your schools have crisis response teams? Are you prepared to deal with the cards that are thrown on the table? How will you handle parents and the media when disaster strikes?

A litany of once unthinkable scenarios begs your undivided attention. These include, but are certainly not limited to, armed intruders, bus accidents, bomb threats, child abuse, criminal conduct on campus, custody and kidnapping issues, disturbances and demonstrations, drug and alcohol abuse, evacuation plans, fire drills, explosions, gas leaks, hostage situations, impending external disaster, the death of a student or employee, sexual issues, suicide, swine flu, tornados, trespassing, weapons, and zero tolerance offenses.

Sadder still is that this list is just the tip of the iceberg.

In Monroe County, Tenn., we have created and placed trained Crisis

Prevention Intervention (CPI) Teams in each of our schools. Based on nonviolent strategies aimed at de-escalating potentially volatile situations, the professional development funding dedicated to this program is the most important money I spend each year as the district's federal programs director.

In Cumberland County, where I serve on the board, we've hired a full-time school safety coordinator who has articulated the urgency of a county-wide, coordinated effort among all safety agencies. Our coordinator helps ensure everyone is on the same page and can positively respond at a moment's notice.

Both of my districts are taking to

heart what my father told me years ago. And while it may be impossible to prevent the unthinkable from happening, we know there are positive steps we can take.

Look at it this way: An unthinkable situation can control you or you can control it. It's your choice. If you fail to plan, you plan to fail. And failure isn't an option when the lives of others are at stake.

Dan Schlafer (dan@monroek12.org) is a member of the Cumberland County Board of Education and serves on the Tennessee School Boards Association's board of directors. He also is the federal programs director for Monroe County Schools.

READINGS AND REPORTS

From the achievement gap to social promotion policy

Achievement gap

www.cep-dc.org

Achievement gaps for minority and low-income students have narrowed in most cases since 2002, but in many cases, more than 20 points separate the scores of white and non-low-income students from those of African-American, Latino, and low-income students, according to a study by the Center for Education Policy. In general, the news was more positive for Latino and African-American subgroups and for students at the elementary school level. Fewer gaps narrowed for low-income and native-American subgroups and for students in high school.

Afterschool instruction

<http://ies.ed.gov>

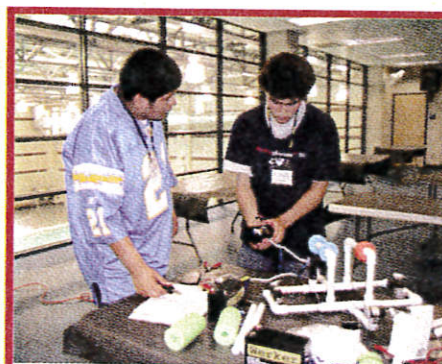
Structured afterschool academic instruction in reading and math for grades 2 through 5 produces limited

benefits for struggling students, according to a new report on behalf of the Institute of Education Sciences at the Department of Education. The study shows students made progress in math after one year, but a second year of structured instruction produced no additional benefits. No impact was made on reading scores. Both programs were staffed and supported as planned, but problems were found with implementation.

Afterschool programs

www.afterschoolalliance.org

America After 3PM, a new study conducted for the Afterschool Alliance, finds that more than a quarter of Pennsylvania's schoolchildren are on their own in the afternoons, and another 15 percent are in the care of their siblings. Participation in after-school programs remains low—just 9 percent—even though statewide demand



The leaders in Virginia's Prince William County Public Schools wanted to ignite student interest in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) courses. Their solution, the SEAPerch Program, won the district a 2009 Magna Award in the over 20,000 student enrollment category.

The district formed a partnership with several organizations that agreed to provide money and mentors to an enhanced robotics program at the high schools. The 10-week curriculum introduces students to technology usually reserved for college-level students.

Students build underwater robots and hold an annual competition at a local university. They must learn the underlying principles of engineering, robotics, physics, and trigonometry to be successful.

For more information, contact Sharon W. Henry, supervisor, Office of Community and Business Engagement, at henrysw@pwcs.edu. The district's website is at www.pwcs.edu.

For information on district best practices or how to nominate your school board and district for a Magna Award, visit www.asbj.com/magna.

Magna Best Practices: Design robots; add water