Schools in a Crisis: Where to Put the Students?

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ABSTRACT

Catastrophes can occur at any place and for any reason. Within the past years an extraordinarily high number of catastrophic events have happened to public schools. From a high number of tornados to excessive flooding and unseasonable weather, the country has experienced a considerable number of very difficult environmental disasters that have adversely affected schools. These are never pleasant occurrences and it is the duty of education officials to ameliorate the subsequent devastation. Such was the case in a school system in Virginia where the roof of the gymnasium collapsed during a snowstorm in the middle of the school year. At the beginning of the spring semester, the high school students were without a place to continue their schooling. The planning efforts of the school authorities were strained for several reasons. Questions regarding the continued use of the high school building for the remainder of the year and where to put the student body for the rest of the year if the building was unusable were of utmost concern. The concerns and maneuvering of the various players in this drama are discussed in this article. In spite of the fact that this was a catastrophe to the various groups within and outside the school system, plans were made and executed so that all students were housed for the semester. The planning activities for the following year are set forth as well as the manner in which the school division staff conducted the effort and interacted with the community and governing body. The lessons that can be learned from the planning effort of this school staff are carefully analyzed and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Planning in the public schools is normally a routine process dealing with budgets, numbers of students, size of the faculty, transportation, and even buildings. But sometimes events occur that place the school authorities in a situation where extraordinary planning measures must take place. Such situations are often caused by external natural forces of some sort that place the personnel of the schools in a vulnerable and unfavorable position due to the training and expertise that educators normally receive and possess.

The data for this manuscript were gathered through an examination of the Montgomery County School Board Minutes dated for the period of time of the collapse and subsequent planning sessions. Further information from local newspaper articles written by reporters who were on the scene and interviewed actual participants was used to help document the stream of events. Related research on the relationship between school conditions and student performance was identified and incorporated into the manuscript to be reflected against the action of the participants. These sources of information were used to present the story of a disaster and how the local school authorities tried to plan for the recovery from the event. Further, lessons from the actions and consequences of the actions are presented.

The following is a description of a disaster to a certain community and the planning responses certain individuals in authority employed to address that happening. As such, the only theoretical background for such an event is what happened and how did those individual respond. Undoubtedly there can be no prescription of how persons in authority

should respond to a crisis or disaster, because each incident is unique. It is possible to theorize that when a disaster occurs, individuals in authority will use certain effective planning devices and strategies to ameliorate the situation. The planning activities to address disasters are to a large measure the same type of planning activities used in normal circumstances, but with a much shorter time frame and perhaps with much less data available at the time needed. The need for action often makes the planning process fragmented and rushed. What seems to be a plausible answer can sometimes circumvent rational planning activities and proceed to implementation before better thought can occur. It is not possible to weigh the actions of persons in authority responding to a disaster against any set of preferred or normalized actions, but the consequences of the planning activities can be measured as to their effectiveness in ameliorating a disaster.

The quality of the planning strategies used in a disaster can always be in question by those individuals not involved and perhaps from a distance, because the results of the planning activities are quite visible to the public in general. When a crisis or disaster of any sort occurs the question becomes: did the individuals in authority utilize successful planning strategies to address a disaster? Did those in authority employ effective data utilization to formulate successful plans? Were the results of the planning strategies effective and by what measure? What can be learned for the planning activities of those who were responsible for addressing the disaster?

It is entirely possible to learn from the experiences of others even when the activities result in negative consequences. The theory of learning from the experiences of others is very relevant to the expressions of Dewey (Dewey, 1938). Dewey proposed that individuals learn from experience, by experiencing the event or activity itself. The learning is more relevant to the individual when this happens. It is self-evident that individuals in authority involved in recovering from a disaster will learn what actions and plans are effective and what are not effective. Likewise, the experiences of other individuals are instructive of how we may act in certain circumstances. It is with this caveat that the following experiences and events are presented so that the reader may learn from the actions of individuals experiencing the event. It is not necessary to experience a crisis or disaster in order to learn how to react to it.

CATASTROPHE STRIKES

In the late winter of 2009 in a town in southwestern Virginia the heavy snow accumulation on the roof of the gym in the local high school building resulted in the collapse of the roof causing considerable damage. Luckily the girls' basketball team that was practicing in the gym at the time heard the rumble of the roof, saw the cracks in the wall appearing, and were able to exit the building safely. Fortunately, no one was hurt in the collapse of the roof. February 13, 2009 was not a good day for the local school division, even though the students were on a winter break from school (Mallory & Polantz, 2010). A new Superintendent of Schools was employed earlier in the school year and was not expected to assume the office until March 1, 2009. This, of course, added to the awkward situation because the interim superintendent had to make some quick decisions regarding the appropriate investigations to be made and where the high school students would be housed the week following the winter break. At the same time the incoming superintendent had to be kept apprised of the situation and presumably agreed with the solutions offered.

INVESTIGATIONS CONDUCTED

Immediately after the collapse, investigations were started to determine not only the cause of the collapse, but also the feasibility of using the remainder of the high school building for the rest of the second semester. Decisions had to be made within a week so that the high school students could be housed in some location. The damage to the gym roof caused some apprehension on the part of the school authorities regarding the usability of the rest of the high school building for the student body. Based upon initial investigations, the school authorities determined that it would not be safe to return to the building for the rest of the school year.

INITIAL HOUSING PLAN

In order to house the Benton High School student body in some location for the remainder of the school year, the school administration ordered the students in the Benton Middle School building in town (which was only seven years old) to be placed on short sessions with the middle school students going to classes from early morning until 1:00PM (Montgomery County School Board Minutes, February 17, 2010). The high school students then used the middle school building from 1:30PM to 7:15PM that evening. Lunch for the high school students was available at 2:30PM and snacks later in the day, which meant that most students went more than five hours between meals.

Naturally the traffic problems at the middle school building increased tremendously. As is usual with most high school student bodies, there were a good number of students at this high school who drove their own vehicles to school. This increase in private vehicular traffic, along with the buses bringing in the high school students to school and the middle school buses loading the students to take them home, and the few middle school parents who picked up their children created a monumental vehicular movement problem for all concerned. Additional police, at increased costs to the local government, were required to control the traffic because the middle school building was located on a major four-lane street.

CONTINUED INVESTIGATIONS

Needless to say, the extended discussions of what would happen to the students were foremost in the mind of parents and educators in the community during the spring and summer of 2009. Newspaper reports of the situation added to the conflicting impressions of the average reader, in spite of the fact the news personnel were making every effort to report on the planning process within the school division staff. The big question was whether or not the high school building could be salvaged. Many community individuals and groups started asking for a new high school to be built. In addition, there were several studies completed reporting on the suitability of the damaged high school building to house the high school student body (Mallory & Polantz, 2010). The completion of these reports delayed the school staff in making definitive plans for housing the students in the fall school term, until it seemed that the inevitable solution was that the high school students could not return to the building in the fall of 2009. These investigations amounted to over half a million dollars of school board funds (Montgomery County School Board Minutes, June, 15, 2009).

THE PLAN

As spring slipped into summer the school administration and school board determined that the high school building definitely could not be used for the coming school year. A plan had to be devised to place the high school student body numbering some 1,100 individuals in suitable facilities. At the June 15, 2009 work session of the school board,

the superintendent suggested five options that could be implemented for the coming year. The following alternatives were suggested:

1. Use the Benton Middle School building to house grades 9-12,
2. Use the Benton Middle School building to house the Benton High School students and use the Old Chester Middle School in a neighboring town to house grades 6-8,
3. Use the Benton Middle School to house grades 8-12 and locate grades 6 and 7 at the old Chester Middle School building and run as one school,
4. Use the Benton Middle School building to house grades 8-12 or 9-12, establish the old Chester Middle School as the site for CMS and BMS students on a split schedule operating as separate schools, or
5. Use the Benton Middle School to house grades 9-12, establish the new Chester Middle School in a neighboring town as a location for grades 6-8 students, and for Benton students and Chester students on a unified schedule with 1,705 students. (Montgomery County School Board, June 15, 2009, p 7).

As can be seen, not all of the alternatives were educationally sound, and every option assumed that the high school students would be housed in the new middle school building. The quality of these options left much to be desired because it would mean that in every case, students would be placed in inappropriate buildings or be merged into another middle school student body. Nevertheless, the five options were seriously discussed and the school board decided that they should be presented to the community.

The new superintendent of schools was now in office, and she and her staff were responsible for identifying the five housing alternatives. According to one school board member, there were several plans suggested by the superintendent and some by the school board. One such plan was to move the displaced Benton Middle School students into an operating middle school in a neighboring town. Another plan discussed was to move the high school student body into the operating high school building in a neighboring town on an alternating day schedule. For instance, one student body would attend school on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule, and the displaced high school student body would attend school on the alternative dates. Although such plans were highly questionable educationally, the plans were actually discussed as viable possibilities.

The option of double sessions for two high school student bodies on a five period day in one high school building was not apparently suggested as an option. Such an alternative would have placed both student bodies in facilities designed for high school use. The five options, although educationally and socially questionable, would not have placed any student bodies in facilities designed for their level of education. The alternative of double sessioning one high school building with two student bodies, which was not discussed as a viable option, might have caused the least disruption as far as student movement was concerned. The alternative would have also allowed all students to be in facilities designed for the type of educational program in which they were enrolled. This housing alternative would undoubtedly have been more economical than what was implemented. The school board alternatives were presented to the two communities on June 21 and June 22 as viable alternatives for housing the students.

Finally on the July 6, 2009, meeting, six weeks before the beginning of the school term, the superintendent presented a plan for placement of the Benton High School and

the Benton Middle School student bodies, along with the movement of the alternative education programs in the old Chester Middle School building. The plan called for the Benton High School students to be housed in the Benton Middle School building and the middle school students in the old Chester Middle School building. The school board approved the plan on July 15, 2009 (Montgomery County School Board Minutes, July 15, 2009). The last-minute decision was at least met with relief on the part of the high school students and parents, and with considerable dismay on the part of middle school students and parents. Nevertheless, these parents and students accepted the finality of the decision and realized there was no recourse.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE PLAN

The Benton Middle School building, which was only seven years old, was originally designed and constructed to house 1,200 middle school students; yet two portable classroom units were placed on the campus of the Blacksburg Middle School to accommodate the high school student body of 1,100 pupils. Obviously, there were no chemistry, physics, or technology laboratories in the middle school building. Additionally, the library was sized for a middle school student population, rather than for a high school population. The physical education facilities were designed for middle school students and not for a high school program that included an interscholastic athletic program. Additionally, there was no auditorium or large area for student assemblies.

The displaced Benton Middle School students in turn would be housed in a vacant older middle school building located ten miles away in an adjacent town. The old Chester Middle School was built some time during the 1950s, making some of the buildings over 60 years old. The school building was a modified campus-style structure, having had additions to the original building completed over time according to need. Because of the age of the buildings, several of the necessities for a good learning environment were lacking. The buildings did not have modern thermal control and the lighting, even though improved, was marginal. The school campus was in the middle of a small town, but bounded by two major thoroughfares with constant automobile traffic. Acoustical control was lacking in the buildings. The old buildings could not accommodate the nearly 900 middle school students; as a result several portable classrooms were purchased and placed on the site. In addition, the school authorities had to expend $1.5 million in improvements to the school building to make it suitable for use (Montgomery County School Board Minutes, July 15, 2009).

Previous to this catastrophic happening, the old middle school building housed several programs for students in alternative education settings. These programs and students had to be moved from the old Chester Middle School to buildings that were in even worse conditions than what they had been in before, at least according to one teacher in the program (Hartenstein, 2010). Of course, students in alternative education programs are usually very vulnerable, and such changes can easily disrupt their efforts to learn. Nevertheless, these students were moved from less-than-desirable facilities in the first place to what some thought were even less desirable facilities. Needless to say, the move, in and of itself, plus the different facilities had an influence upon the students in all of these programs.

As a result of all this cascade of moves of students to different facilities, three different student bodies or groups of students were uprooted and placed in facilities that were either not designed for them, or were facilities that had been abandoned because of age and their unsuitability for a modern educational program. The end result was that high school students were attending school in a building designed for middle school students. The middle school students were in an old building that was abandoned because

the facility was not suitable for a modern educational program. The students in the alternative education programs were moved into older buildings not suited for their type of educational program.

COMMUNITY ATTITUDES

Naturally these moves of the three student bodies engendered some negative attitudes on the part of students, teachers, and parents. There were some letters to the editors from parents and students in the local newspaper indicating dissatisfaction with the housing arrangements. (Sunday Forum, 2010). The middle school teachers had some resentment against the high school teachers because they were usurping their space by being in the Benton Middle School building. This happened even though the high school teachers and administration had nothing to do with the decisions. A teacher in one of the alternative education programs who had to move from the old middle school building to make way for the Benton Middle School students stated that she and her students were placed in even worse facilities than before because of the move (C. Hartenstein, 2010). The results of the three student bodies being moved to different locations did not improve the climate or morale of the teaching staffs of the three student bodies, let alone the students and parents.

TRAFFIC PROBLEMS

The traffic problems that the initial move of the high school students in with the middle school students created was not alleviated in any manner by the latter solution. In fact, the traffic problem was exacerbated by the necessity of transporting the middle school students to a facility in a different town. Buses bringing high school students to the middle school building, plus buses bringing middle school students to the same facility, and the parent and high school student drivers all converge on the middle school site morning and afternoon. At the present time, the middle school students are picked up by bus in their neighborhood (as was done before the drastic move), and taken to the middle school building where they are re-loaded into buses to be taken 10 miles away to the old middle school building in a neighboring town. Students ride the buses for almost one hour each way morning and afternoon. This is much more than what most educators believe is the maximum time limit.

FINAL DECISION

The latest decision by both the school board and the board of supervisors was to build a new high school in Benton and another building to replace the old Ashburn High School and renovate the old Ashburn high school building. The Ashburn High School Building replacement had been in the capital improvement program of the school division for quite some time prior to this date. At the present estimates, the projects will cost in the neighborhood of $132 million in 2009 dollars (Mallory & Polantz, 2010). By the time these projects can be bid for construction, the cost will naturally increase putting a greater tax burden of at least a 17% increase on the citizens of the county.

LESSONS ABOUT PLANNING

What lessons in planning can be learned for a situation like this? The collapse of a school roof is not the only catastrophe to be endured. During the year of this event there were more than 300 severe tornados plus severe and damaging flooding in the United States, and a devastating earthquake in Japan. Not many school authorities are placed in such painful and exhausting situations where the natural elements ruin the physical structures that have been created and, perhaps in some cases, reveal shortsightedness on

the part of school personnel and those who design and construct schools. Yet there are lessons to be learned by observing the misfortunes of other entities.

Expediency Rules Planning

The first thing that can be learned is that expediency overrules normal planning efforts. Expediency, however, does not have to rule out feasible and effective alternatives such as it did in this situation. Viable housing alternatives could be identified if sound thinking is employed. The timeframe for decisions in crisis planning is compressed exceedingly. Decisions must be made in minutes, not days. The time for gathering data is shortened considerably. These situations, of course, are ripe for errors. Emergency situations provide a platform for decision making that does not always have the best possibilities available to school authorities. Obviously, the ideal planning situation is not at hand when a school building collapses during the school year and students have no immediate place to be housed. Emergency decisions must be made absent a reasoned approach. Time is not a friend to the educator or planner in such a situation. Nevertheless, sound- planning efforts can be made in such situations if a rational approach can be taken.

Planning Supervision

Results of several investigations of the high school building reported mistakes were made in the original construction of the building resulting in the unsuitability of the building for further use. Obviously, such mistakes were the result of the lack of sufficient supervision of the construction phase of the building. Supervision of construction that permits such mistakes is not in the best interests of the school board. This is what happened in the Benton situation.

Another prerequisite of planning is that school personnel must provide competent and severe supervision of all design and construction projects. School personnel must be expert enough to read design plans and technical specifications. If the school staff does not have that expertise (and small school divisions usually do not), then outside neutral expertise must be employed (Tanner & Lackey, 2006; Earthman, 2009). This must be a stringent requirement of every school board of its own employees. Some design professionals suggest the use of commissioning to insure the integrity of design plans and construction methods, but this method does not provide the complete supervision need on a construction project to eliminate as many construction errors as possible (Earthman & Lemasters, 2004). Regardless, oversight of the design professionals and construction companies by school division personnel is mandatory.

Educationally Sound Alternatives Needed

The prerequisite of all sound planning is the identification of sound alternatives. Regardless of the time frame, rational and feasible options or alternatives to the situation is a must for the school staff to identify. This effort should not be abrogated in emergency situations such as was the case in Montgomery County. The superintendent and staff did not identify educationally sound alternatives to house students. From the Board minutes, the alternatives identified and presented to the school board had one overarching idea of having the Benton High School students go to the Benton Middle School building. That was the first option and all of the other options identified dealt with the housing of the middle school students in various locations. This type of alternative identification is not sound planning, nor is it reasonable. Good planning is when all possible alternatives and their consequences and costs are identified and evaluated. The superintendent and her staff obviously did not deal with the consequences or costs of the various alternatives,

and could not have evaluated the alternatives closely enough because there was always a major given which was that the Benton High School students would occupy the Benton Middle School building. This is the antithesis of good planning. Even in an emergency, good planning demands all alternatives be placed on the table for discussion and evaluation.

Student Wellbeing

One of the most important lessons to be learned from this terrible situation is that good research should guide the educator in making educational decisions on the wellbeing of students and teachers. There is sufficient good research on the relationship between the condition of school buildings and student and teacher health and productivity to provide guidance in making decisions regarding placement of students and teachers (Cash, 1993; Earthman et al, 1995; Hines, 1996; Lanham, 1999; Crook, 2006; Bullock, 2007). The research is plentiful and credible in suggesting that students be placed in the best possible physical environment for the best possible performance. On the contrary, research also indicates that by placing students in a building that should be assessed as being in unsatisfactory condition will result in student academic performance that is less than if they were in a satisfactory building. Yet, this apparently did not deter the school authorities from placing the middle school students in a building that was at least 60 years old and did not have the necessary components for adequacy (Earthman, 2002). There were some options available that would have prevented placing students in such buildings.

The same could be said for the high school students only with a different twist. It is quite sensible to acknowledge that high school students need proper kinds of facilities and equipment to succeed in a modern high school educational program. Obviously, a middle school building does not have the kinds of facilities and equipment to adequately support a modern high school educational program. In the situation above, teachers and students will have to make do with facilities and equipment designed for a different kind of educational program. To say otherwise, is to say that students can be adequately educated in any kind of an environment. Again, research is quite explicit in stating that for students to succeed in a modern educational program and for teachers to have the means for expert teaching, proper facilities and equipment are needed (Bailey, 2009; Lemasters, 1997). Because of this, options that would place students and teachers in the best possible locations should have been explored. The availability of vacant space should not be the basis of decisions regarding the placement of students and teachers, especially if the vacant building is over 60 years old. Researchers have found that the age of the school building does influence student performance (Phillips, 1997; Plumley, 1998; Bowers & Burkette, 1988). Older school buildings are not capable of accommodating a modern educational program and do not typically have the right components such as proper thermal control, good lighting and acoustical control to facilitate effective student learning and teacher performance.

The safety and health factors must be foremost in the considerations of placement of students and teachers (Earthman, 2002). This includes the fact that such older buildings present a real fire hazard to the users of the building. A reasoned and stable approach to all possible options need to be explored in a rational manner for the best possible solution, especially in an environment of not having the best solution available. Again research can provide the best basis for decision-making for all educators.

Community Involvement

The normal planning process that includes the community has a good research basis that should be used by school personnel. Research in communication and community processes can guide the educator in properly including the community and stakeholders in the decision-making process. Research also suggests that the community and other stakeholders do not make decisions, they simply advise the professionals as to their own wishes. The school personnel should never give the community a list of possible suggestions to decide between them. The community does not have the background information to make such decisions in the first place, and to entice the community into believing the school authorities will let the community decide is a risky and dangerous practice. Best practices indicate that the school authorities examine the situation and possible alternatives. Based upon the information they have and their knowledge of how students learn best, they should develop a defensible plan to present to the community. Then discussions of alternatives considered but rejected can take place followed by a presentation of what the school authorities believe is the best solution. Only in this manner can the community be intelligently brought along in the process and understand the constraints of the situation.

Political Considerations

Too often school authorities are pressured into the decision-making process resulting in decisions that may or may not be in the best interests of the students. This could well have been the case in the Benton High School roof collapse and subsequent placement of students. Political pressure from outside the school organization can influence decision making as can the inevitable fear by educators themselves that they will be criticized by outside interests for decisions they make. When these interests have a political nature, there is even more pressure on the school authorities and professionals regarding the quality of their decisions. Having a politician looking over the shoulder of every move by educators is often times intimidating and, unfortunately, educators are capable of yielding to such intimidation. In the case of the Montgomery County there are four distinct communities and these communities have feelings about and for the local school buildings. Further, these communities want their fair share of the resources of the county as they perceive them.

Although there did not appear to be any direct political pressure upon the school authorities and school board in making decisions, nevertheless the indecision and wavering back and forth by the school board and administration seemed to indicate some sort of concern for outside pressure either by the community or the Board of Supervisors. In this situation the Board of Supervisors of the county does have the funding responsibility for the local school board and there could have been some thought of the possible financial consequences of the school board decisions. Undoubtedly there was community pressure to keep the Benton High School students in the town, thus forcing the school board to move the Benton Middle School students to the neighboring town in spite of the fact that the reverse might have caused less disruption to both student bodies. Transparency is the only means educators have for militating against such pressures. That plus keeping the community informed of what is happening in the decision-making process helps to diffuse pressure, but does not entirely eliminate it. Knowledge of these facts should be in the forefront of educators while planning for solutions to such extreme situations.

SUMMARY

Catastrophes can happen in every location. Most of the time the individuals and organizations involved in the happening have not expected the occurrence nor have necessarily planned for it to happen. Planning in a crisis must begin immediately and be done in a compressed time frame. Most importantly, educationally sound solutions or alternatives must be developed by the school staff as quickly as possible. Outside or political influence should be minimized so that the school staff is not put into a situation where solutions or alternatives that are not educationally sound are put into consideration. Although it is very difficult for educators to resist political influence, it is their responsibility to remember that what is best for children must prevail as it is their responsibility. Transparency of information is the only method of resisting political influence that might not be in the best interest of students. As always, the wellbeing of the students and staff should be foremost in the planning efforts of the school authorities.

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