

2023

Fidelity In Which School Districts are Prepared To Implement Their Reunification Plan In The Event of Tragedy Or Emergency

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ABSTRACT

FIDELITY IN WHICH SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE PREPARED TO IMPLEMENT THEIR REUNIFICATION PLAN IN THE EVENT OF TRAGEDY OR EMERGENCY

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Northern Illinois University, 2023
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This dissertation examines the fidelity in which school districts are prepared to implement their reunification plan in the event of a tragedy or emergency. School emergencies continue to occur, and safety plans need to be developed and administered to support and protect students and staff. This dissertation is organized into two separate papers. Paper 1 is a review of literature specific to community and school emergencies and emergency operations plans for a variety of school organizations. Paper 2 is an empirical study that explored the extent to which schools in a DuPage County, a large collar county in Northern Illinois, were prepared to implement their reunification plans. Qualitative interviews were conducted with representatives from nine school districts to determine how prepared school districts were to implement their reunification plan in the event of an emergency situation. It was determined that school districts in DuPage County are prepared at very different levels. Some are well prepared and have practiced and/or have implemented their plans. While others are not fully prepared to implement a reunification plan successfully. This research is important because there can be a lot of harm caused to all stakeholders in the event of reunification, and if an event or emergency is foreseeable, then school districts need to be prepared to address the situation.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
DE KALB, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2023

FIDELITY IN WHICH SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE PREPARED TO IMPLEMENT THEIR
REUNIFICATION PLAN IN THE EVENT OF TRAGEDY OR EMERGENCY

BY

MARK E. ORSZULA, JR.
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, EDUCATIONAL
PSYCHOLOGY, AND FOUNDATIONS

Doctoral Director:
Kelly Summers

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Kelly Summers for providing guidance and support throughout the entire process of researching and writing this dissertation. Also, thank you to Dr. Benjamin Creed and Dr. Dan Oest for participation on my dissertation committee. The group's feedback and support throughout this process has been invaluable.

I would like to thank my wife Maria for all of her support throughout the process of completing ALL of my education. She has always been supportive and my biggest cheerleader. I hope I am setting a positive example for my children (Mark III, Gina, and Joseph John) to continue to pursue their dreams even when others do not believe in them. I have a very large family and extended family, and I thank everyone for all of their support and guidance throughout my entire life.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to the man who first introduced me to school reunification:
John Baird. He took me under his wing and helped me tremendously in a very short time period.
He is greatly missed, but his impact on others will last for years to come.

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PREFACE

School safety is a topic all parents/guardians are interested in and concerned about when they send their children to school. Schools' primary goal is to educate all students, but they are secondarily concerned about maintaining the safety of all students and staff. Schools employ social workers and psychologists to support students social-emotionally and academically, but even with these supports, school tragedies can sometimes occur and students need to be relocated off-site during the school day. Also, weather emergencies and school building issues can require schools to relocate students. To that end, the focus of my dissertation was to research the types of incidents that can cause schools to reunify students with parents/guardians at an external location, to identify whether several local districts have a reunification plan, and to identify whether districts and schools are prepared to implement those plans with fidelity. There is little research examining practices related to reunification, so it is the intention of my dissertation to examine how prepared schools are to support staff and students in this process.

Structure of the Dissertation

There is a wealth of research examining shootings and safety plans for organizations and schools, yet there is a dearth of information on a specific aspect of safety plans known as off-site reunification, or more simply in school nomenclature: reunification. This dissertation looks not only at common safety planning considerations but also the available research about

reunification and explore that specific topic more thoroughly through an empirical study. My dissertation was guided by the following questions:

1. What type of incidents need to occur for a school to implement a reunification plan?

This question will be answered through a review of literature in Paper 1.

2. What types of reunification plans are included in Emergency Operation Plans for school districts? This question will be answered through a review of literature in Paper 1.

3. What does a typical reunification plan within a school district consist of? This research will be answered in Paper 2.

4. Are school districts prepared to implement their reunification plans with fidelity? This research will be answered in Paper 2.

5. How are students, staff, and parents/guardians prepared with prior knowledge of the plan, and what is their role in reunification? This research will be answered in Paper 2.

This dissertation is presented in two papers with both exploring different parts of the reunification process. Part three will consist of a PowerPoint presentation of the research findings.

Paper 1 is a literature review of the current research on shootings and emergency action plans for a variety of organizations. It provides recommendations from a variety of professional organizations on how to handle safety concerns. The literature review identifies a lack of research and focus on the reunification process. A few organizations focus on reunification, but there is not any peer reviewed information.

Paper 2 synthesizes the research on school emergencies and reunification. It shares how data were gathered and the types of organizations that were studied. The specific research questions were reviewed and data collected were assessed and filtered to share the preparedness of school districts to implement their reunification plans.

Problem Statement

There are a variety of uncontrollable variables in school settings. Many schools face school emergencies unprepared. Districts have started to develop reunification plans with limited training and little practice time. When a situation occurs, school districts need to be prepared to implement a plan that keeps all stakeholders safe and ensures students are reunified with their parents/guardians with limited social-emotional impact.

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine to what extent schools are prepared to implement their reunification plans. There are a variety of reasons a reunification plan can be implemented, and research needs to be conducted to determine if school districts are prepared. The physical and mental safety of all stakeholders in the academic setting need to be supported, and a properly planned and executed reunification plan can help reduce some of the lasting effects of an incident at a school.

Significance

School safety is a constant concern for communities and parents. Yet there is limited evidence about reunification. “Literature does not reflect how students are kept safe during an emergency event. Existing studies contain little, if any, discussion of safety actions, evacuation protocol, student supervision, or family reunification requirements” (Shah et al., 2020, p 3). This

study examined the extent to which school districts have a reunification plan in place and are prepared to implement it with fidelity. Many schools are prepared for emergencies and the subsequent reunification on paper but struggle with the implementation because of the limited practice time and the infrequency of emergencies.

Intended Audience

The intended audience for this paper is all school districts in Illinois and throughout the country. More specifically, I am speaking directly to the person(s) in charge of reunification at schools and districts, which could include superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, and/or principals. There is no rhyme or reason why a tragic event or school emergency may happen, but all districts need to be prepared. There are limited opportunities to practice a reunification plan, so districts typically only have one opportunity to do it correctly. This dissertation can help school districts plan for possible reunification situations.

Positionality of Researcher

I have worked in education for 16 years. My first eight years I was a classroom teacher and my last eight years I have been an administrator at the building level. As an administrator, I have worked as an Assistant Principal of Instruction, Associate Principal of Instruction, Athletic Director at the high school setting, and I am currently a principal at the middle school level. The middle school is in the western suburbs of Chicago and has an enrollment of around 400 students with 40 staff members.

Until the last few years, I had very little knowledge about reunification. I thought about school safety both as a teacher and administrator because of the attention it is given on news

channels and conversations with my family. However, I had not spent time thinking about reunification until I was recommended to be part of a safety committee at a former district. During this time, I learned about reunification and found that my former district was further ahead than other school districts. I feel that all school districts need to be prepared at any time to implement a reunification process and must develop a plan that meets the needs of their students, staff, and community.

PAPER 1

Introduction

A variety of uncontrollable variables occur in the school setting on a daily basis. Some are minor and can include students being tardy, interactions between students and staff, and truancies. Some are major issues such as fights, bus accidents, and, in rare cases, school shootings. Schools tend to have plans in place for minor school-based issues such as how to handle a fight, truancy, and poor staff-student interactions. However, schools must also be prepared for rare, yet major crises that impact the campus. “It’s a cliché in sports and the military to point out that people don’t rise to the occasion. No, they fall to the level of their training” (Daily Stoic, 2022). According to Stephens and Arnette (1994), there are two types of schools: those that have faced a crisis and those that are about to face a crisis. Schools must be prepared and ready, lest they fall to the level of their training when a crisis occurs.

An active shooter who targets a school may be immediately what comes to mind when one thinks of a school crisis, and to be sure, an active shooter situation is indeed a school crisis. However, a school safety plan is not limited to school violence and typically includes multiple scenarios relevant to the community. The protocols in place during a crisis are often rehearsed and practiced. Fire drills, natural disaster drills, and more recently active shooter drills are all practiced at least one time – sometimes multiple times – per year. Although staff may never feel totally prepared to deal with one of these events, at least they have practice should one occur. However, balancing the need to practice and any sort of harm the experiences can cause against

the need to be prepared ought to shape the planning and practicing. “Realize that a live active shooter exercise may be very emotional for participants and could be triggering for people who have experienced violence in the past or have served in combat or law enforcement settings” (American National Red Cross, 2017, p. 6). Schools must take care and consider the physical and emotional needs of those in the school when planning and determining to what depth they will practice drills.

Less discussed and practiced are plans for reunifying students with their families after a crisis has occurred. Based on personal experience, at least in the northern Illinois region, districts have started to develop reunification plans for major incidents; however, they have provided limited training for staff and have spent less time practicing the drills. When an emergency occurs, school districts need to be prepared to implement a plan to keep all stakeholders safe and ensure students are reunified with their parents/guardians with limited social-emotional impact.

Four Pillars

School reunification can be a complicated and tedious process, but when administered correctly it can support students, staff, and parents/guardians. There are a variety of models related to Emergency Operations Plans, but limited research specifically on reunification. Through conducting the research presented further in this paper the author has identified four pillars of a successful reunification plan. The four pillars are: operational roles and duties, transportation, communication plan, and materials, supplies, and signage. These four pillars combined ensure a reunification plan has the necessary components and information to be implemented affectively while supporting the needs of staff, students, and parent/guardians.

School Emergencies

School emergencies can occur at any time and without cause or reason. An emergency can be described as

a crisis event is an event that has potential to affect a population and is perceived to be unpredictable (happens suddenly and without warning), uncontrollable (creates feelings of helplessness or powerlessness), and extremely negative (may cause physical or emotional distress. (Brock et al., 2016, p. 4)

Also, “a crisis can be defined as an intolerable situation, unstable condition, or sudden change that disrupts the normal operation of an individual, group, organization, or community, and demands immediate attention and resolution” (North Carolina State, 1998). A number of different incidents can occur with many outcomes in a school setting. The incidents can be similar, but the outcomes and how they are handled can be very different (Aspiranti, 2020). Schools can be affected by any of the following possible situations: loss of electricity, water stoppage, failure of the HVAC system, violence outside of the school but in the nearby community, a bus accident, a HAZMAT situation, fires, bomb threats, severe weather, and active shooter situations.

Each crisis requires a unique response, and how schools address the situation can differ at each individual school even within the same district. The local community and context also factor heavily into school crises. Schools near power plants need to be prepared differently than schools near airports. Plans need to be developed to address the variety of situations that can occur in the school setting. School safety is a major concern for educators, parents, and policymakers, but little information is available in terms of the best course of action (Weiler et al., 2021). Crisis plans need to be flexible so staff, students, and the community are not overwhelmed with a plethora of different safety plan scenarios.

Emergency Plans

In the event an incident occurs, it is important that organizations have emergency plans into place. Research has found that many schools and districts have safety committees with parent representation in one form or another (Kano et al., 2007). Parents have valuable input that can provide different viewpoints on safety committees.

In the event of a tragedy, it is important to know that “cops own the crime. Fire owns the flames. Schools own the kids. Paramedics own the patient” (I Love U Guys Foundation, 2018, p. 11). Everyone has a specific role that needs to be executed to protect all. Schools must take care of the students and staff. They must take care of students’ social-emotional needs and reunification with parents. Plans must describe specific responsibilities for all individuals and provide a framework of responsibilities. Most plans are not public knowledge and are not on school websites. A couple of schools that share their plans are listed below with details of them.

School Emergency Plans

Many organizations have started to implement plans to help prevent and handle catastrophic situations. The plans have multiple layers and facets involving a variety of individuals. Schools need to develop a crisis management plan that includes prevention, intervention, and post-intervention (Aspiranti et al., 2011). The crisis plans must be individualized to all possibilities in the geographic region or be adaptable to handle a variety of situations. Often threats occur outside of the school grounds but close to the school. A school crisis plan should include protocols on how to handle an emergency situation that occurs in the

community – both on and off school grounds (Aspiranti et al., 2011). These plans need to be thorough but easily adjustable to the situations that occur.

School emergency committees must include parents and a clear communication network. Parents must be included in the planning process because of the valuable input they are able to provide about the school community. The schools represent the community and must protect the children. “Having identified inclusion of parents and students in the planning process as one of the weaknesses of the first round of planning, principals are encouraged to hold meetings with them as well as with law enforcement and community leaders to discuss safe school plans” (Youth Violence, 2002).

For 20 years, the Center has studied these tragedies, and the following report, titled *Protecting Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence*, supports past Secret Service research findings that indicate targeted school violence is preventable....while communities can advance many school safety measures on their own, our experience tells us that keeping schools safe requires a team effort and the combined resources of the federal governments; school boards; law enforcement; and the public. (U. S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019, p. 3)

All public education stakeholders need to be part of the process, and many tragedies that do occur can be prevented by involving others.

There is very little available information regarding the readiness of schools for emergency preparedness and reunification. “Little is known about how and to what extent schools in the United States are prepared for emergencies and disasters” (Kano et al., 2007, p 401). Research related to school preparedness for preventing school shootings and reunification planning is needed to ensure schools are the safest place for students and that schools are prepared in case an incident occurs.

Some researchers claim there is minimal guidance on what is required in safety plans for districts. “Although 45 states do require a school safety plan, it is important to note that the

quality or type of plan is not specified, only that there is one available” (McCleary & Aspiranti, 2020, p. 1156). A couple of studies have examined emergency plans posted on school and/or district sites. The content and comprehensiveness of emergency plans varies greatly from school to school. McCleary and Aspiranti (2020) found plans can range from 10 to 36 pages, and plans vary in the information they contain. Although many emergency plans may be insufficient, many organizations offer guidance about how to go about emergency planning.

Emergency Planning

It is expected that students feel should safe when they are in school (Katsiyannis et al., 2018). To ensure safety and a semblance of order in the event of an emergency, schools in Illinois practice a variety of drills every year. Schools are required to practice three fire drills yearly with one of them with the fire department present, one severe weather drill, and one lockdown drill with the presence of the police. These are the minimum requirements for all drills, but it is recommended that schools do more than minimally required. The drills are intended to allow students and staff the opportunity to practice situations they may possibly face. In addition to state-mandated safety drills, a great deal of guidance is set forth by researchers and professional organizations for how schools can plan for all phases of a crisis.]

NEA Guidance

The National Education Association (NEA, 2018) published a guide document that examines ways schools handle crises and adapt to the ever-changing needs of a school. The guide is broken into four parts: Prevent, Prepare, Respond, and Recover. The document addresses the full spectrum of school crises that can occur. The NEA defines a school crisis as

“typically sudden, unexpected, dramatic and forceful and may even threaten survival. A crisis can cause a dramatic and tragic change to the environment” (p. 1). A crisis can occur at any time, and schools need to be prepared in the moment and in the aftermath. Schools must be prepared once a crisis occurs and must address the mental health implications to reduce distress and possibly secondary crises (NEA, 2018). There are many facets of a crisis and the guide attempts to address all aspects.

The first part of the guide is centered on prevention. While some argue that certain crises, like school shootings or violence, can be prevented, others cannot be prevented such as weather emergencies or power outages. Schools need to be prepared for unexpected emergencies that can occur. The core of all prevention is centered on relationships of respect and connection between the adults in the building and the students (NEA, 2018). Connection is the key to prevention for tragedies that can be foreseen and possibly prevented. Along with connection, a positive school environment has the ability to increase the academic performance of students and decrease the likelihood of harm or threats happening to students.

Another step for schools to prevent tragedies is to have a comprehensive school and district emergency plan. The plan can protect the physical safety of students by securing the building and keeping students psychologically safe in an ever-changing environment. Schools must be prepared for trauma-informed practices and mental first aid during their day-to-day interactions with staff and students, especially if there is a crisis event (NEA, 2018). The NEA recognizes the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) as the most effective way to implement integrated services to keep schools safe and continue student learning. They note that the school climate can be enhanced using this framework to provide a continuum of behavioral supports and interventions to improve both student behavior and academic achievement. The key to

preventing incidents is addressing the behaviors before they escalate into larger issues. The MTSS model helps to support this work. Prevention is the responsibility of all staff members in that everyone needs to take ownership to ensure the school is a safe environment to learn.

The second part of the guide is to prepare. The most effective way to prepare for an event is to identify and practice the worst-case scenarios and involve a continuous plan, practice, and evaluation cycle into a school's and district's practices (NEA, 2018). Schools and districts must continually practice a variety of situations they may face and need to be prepared for what occurs prior to and during a crisis. They also need to be prepared for what occurs after the crisis. "The goal is to minimize psychological and physical harm as incidents occur and to have a system in place for immediate and effective response and recovery" (p. 15). Schools need to develop a comprehensive School Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). This plan needs to include planning to support leadership, utilization of assessments to customize the plan for all threats and hazards, consideration of all settings and times, assurance that it is a collaborative process, and incorporation of law enforcement (NEA, 2018). An important point that the guide brings up is that good plans are never finished. They are an evolving document that constantly needs to be adjusted and modified. Schools and districts that do not have a plan will be unprepared in the event of a chaotic situation or when a crisis occurs.

The guide suggests that school districts should align their plans to National Incident Management System (NIMS) guidance. Institutions of higher education are also places where incidents can occur, and administrators and professors also need to be aware of how to handle a variety of different situations that can occur. Meetings need to occur regularly and at the building level to ensure plans are up to date and that no changes need to be made.

“The Incident Command System (ICS) is a standardized management tool for meeting the demands of small or large emergency or non-emergency situations. It is a key feature of the National Incident Management System (NIMS)” (NEA, 2018, p. 22).” The ICS ensures that all school officials understand their role and the chain of command for handling the situation. Along with primary personnel, there need to be back up people for each of the required roles. The district and school each should have its own roles and responsibilities, along with each building having its own crisis response team policy. It is important to understand that once police or fire arrive on the scene, they most likely will take over the site (NEA, 2018). However, it will be the school’s responsibility to reunify the students and staff with their families. The NEA shares the I Love U Guys Foundation as a resource of the standard reunification method. It is important to understand that everyone handles stress differently. “Although school staff members have a general understanding of child development and possess instructional skills, many are not familiar with children’s reactions to trauma and stress, and how they relate to a child’s development” (p. 27).

Drills such as lockdowns, shelter-in-place, reverse evacuation (school is safer than outside), evacuations, and bus evacuation need to be practiced on a continual process. The guide provides a framework to set up a network to communicate information to the community and families. A number of useful documents are included at the end of the guide that provide resources schools can use to communicate information.

The third section of the guide centers on the response to the situation. The guide breaks down responding during the first hour, the next 12 hours, the evening, second day, etc. It provides the steps that should be followed to address the situation. The first day and 12 hours sections discuss reunification of families. It is important to have a list of all students and to

account for all students and ensure students are picked up by their families. “Parents should receive information on how their reactions shape students’ reactions and behaviors. This is especially true for younger primary grade students” (NEA, 2018, p. 38). Reunification is a vital part of the recovery process. The guide offers guidance on how to provide support for students as the days progress as well as how to provide support to the families of the victims. It also acknowledges that it is important to take care of the other schools in the district and offers guidance on what to do the first week and when students and staff start returning to school.

The final section centers around recovery, acknowledging that there will be long-term mental health needs for both staff and students that will need to be addressed. It is important to also provide support to crisis team members. Trauma-informed practices will need to be used for all staff and students affected by the tragedies. Post-traumatic stress can occur, and many signs cannot be seen externally. Support for everyone will need to be put in place. Additionally, at some point during the recovery phase, evaluation will need to occur to understand the response the school and community took to address the situation. It is important to remember there are many resources available to help support schools affected by school tragedies.

National School Safety and Security Services

Another organization that supports schools and examines the safety standards schools have put into place is the National School Safety and Security Services. Kenneth S. Trump is the school safety expert that leads the organization with over 30 years in pre-K-12 school safety. He has worked in the Cleveland City Schools for a number of years and has presented to House Committees, written numerous books and articles, and is a nationally recognized safety expert (Trump, 2022). The organization provides cutting edge knowledge that schools can use to

determine their emergency preparedness. The organization believes school leaders must work with community partners to practice cost-effective and common-sense measures, to be proactive, and to understand that each school is unique (Trump, 2022). The goal is to help prevent and manage violence, reduce safety risks and potential liability, and improve school communication relations centered around safety.

The National School Safety and Security Services a perspective that addresses a variety of needs for each school. Trump (2022), as the expert, looks at district specific plans and identifies concerns and needs, affirms the positives of the safety measures, provides recommendations for strengthening school safety, and suggests modifications to the currently plans, assesses risk management and liability, addresses school community relations, and makes suggestions so the district can demonstrate their commitment to safety. His organization shares the specific areas they will evaluate through their professional services. They also share the methods and approaches their experts used to address all aspects of school safety.

The next area they examine is the school emergency preparedness services. “Our evaluations help school leaders determine whether their written plans have appropriate content, if staff have been adequately trained, and if plans have been reasonably tested and exercised to improve preparedness for a real crisis (Trump, 2022, p. 3).” They review a variety of areas concerning emergency preparedness such as the evolution of district and school plans; training for staff; and review of past and future drills, public safety liaison relationships, and associated school security personnel. They provide tabletop exercises to help staff engage in crisis response and real-world emergencies. The organization reviews post-crisis responses and how input and community engagement are provided, examines the communication chain, and evaluates the background and relevant skills of school personnel.

The final area the organization examines is the Professional Development Training Program (Trump, 2022). They provide keynote conference presentations, workshops and seminars, meeting agendas and resources, and parent and community workshops and community meetings. The experts are prepared to present in front of a variety of audiences, including school officials, business officials, elected officials and parents and guardians. The National School Safety and Security Services concludes its brochure with training programs that include proactive school security and training on how to handle communication to parents and media as well as training on school gangs and how to handle transportation emergencies, school terrorism, and training and community programs (Trump, 2022).

NASP's PREPaRE Model

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, n.d.) has created a model school that can be used to prepare for school safety and crisis prevention. The model is called prevent, reaffirm, evaluation, provide, and respond, examine (PREPaRE) and is currently in its third edition. The model is taught in a workshop style format with documents and other relevant information schools are able to implement in their organizations. "The 1-day workshop participants will learn how to establish and sustain comprehensive school safety efforts that attend to both physical and psychological safety." The workshop provides a turnkey process to help support schools.

NASP (n.d.) offers two workshops and a train the trainer model. The first workshop is titled Comprehensive School Safety Planning: Prevention Through Recovery. It is a one-day workshop for school personnel that provides knowledge and resources on establishing and maintaining comprehensive school safety and crisis management, mitigation, and preparedness.

The organization shares the PREPaRE model can be adapted to the individual school's needs and size. NASP suggests the following individuals in a school organization can/should attend the training: mental health professionals, administrators, teachers, other pupil services personnel, security officers, front office staff, transportation directors, and before and after school activities coordinators. The cost for the course is very reasonable at \$45 and provides credit hours towards NASP's certification.

The organization offers a second workshop titled Mental Health Crisis Interventions: Responding to an Acute Traumatic Stressor in Schools. The second training is a two-day workshop that is most appropriate for school personnel filling in as the crisis intervention specialist. The workshop develops the knowledge and skills to provide immediate mental health crisis interventions to students, staff, and school community members that have been exposed to acute traumatic stressors (NASP, n.d.). They advertise the course as being excellent for all mental health providers. The cost of the course is reasonable at \$55. "The knowledge and skill developed within this session helps to build a bridge to the psychotherapeutic and trauma-informed mental health response sometimes required to address challenges associated with trauma exposure." The course helps to provide the necessary skills to school personnel who help support individuals who have been traumatized by an event in the academic setting.

NASP (n.d.) also provides a train the trainer model. The organization provides two separate courses on both workshops. The first training of the trainer requires individuals to access a one-hour module and attend a 10-hour (1.5 day) workshop. The second training of the trainer is a one-hour module and a 13-hour (2 day) workshop. Both workshops require a pre and post assessment test with a passing score of 100%. NASP has created opportunities for districts to train their own personnel to provide their school safety model.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, n.d.) provides workshops centered on prevention and recovery in school settings. The training provides the framework to prevent and address a crisis. The second training provides more details about how to support individuals who have been in a crisis. The framework does not include details on reunification, but it does share information on how to support individuals who have experienced a crisis.

Illinois Sample School Emergency Operations Plan

The US Department of Homeland Security has created a fictional school in their Sample School Emergency Operations Plan for November 2013. The document is listed on the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) website. The plan is broken into three sections: Basic Plan, Functional Annexes, and Threat and Hazard Specific Annexes.

The first section is the basic plan. It provides a variety of information for a number of situations. The plan is an Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) for the fictional school district. It was created to be flexible and easily implemented in a time of need. “Developing, maintaining, training, and exercising the plan empowers everyone involved in an incident to act quickly and knowledgably (FEMA, n.d.)” The plan outlines expectations for all stakeholders in the academic setting. It has delineated and defined the different occurrences that require it to be implemented: hazard, incident, threat, and/or vulnerability. It shares the specific numbers of school personnel at the school as well as the number of students and number of students with access or functional needs. It then defines the high-priority hazards in the school community. The plan states that the school district will follow the National Incident Management System (NIMS) principles and implement the Incident Command System (ICS). Specific responsibilities for each staff member are shared and what each person will be in charge of in the event the plan needs to be

implemented. The principal/building administrator can be the incident commander or they can delegate authority to a qualified individual. It then gives clear guidelines for teachers, instructional assistants, counselors, social workers, psychologists, school nurses, health assistants, custodians, school secretaries, food service workers, bus drivers, other staff, students, and parents/guardians. The plan reviews the chain of communication and provides a flow chart for communication. Training for staff is covered along with costs to implement the plan.

The second section is called the Functional Annexes. This section addresses the critical operational functions for all threats and hazards (FEMA, n.d.). Communication should occur prior to the incident, during the incident, and after the incident. The document then covers evacuation of the school building and provides specific procedures for indoor and outdoor evacuation. The document reviews full lockdown procedures in the building. The final section covers psychological healing procedures following the traumatic event or incident.

The final section of the document is the Threat and Hazard Specific Annexes. The documents cover specific threats that can occur, including flooding, hazardous materials, active shooter, and pandemic flu. The guide gives specific guidance for each and how to handle it. The active shooter section bullets reunification but no other information is given about reunification.

In the document the reunification site is listed: Springfield Recreation Center. “Reunification refers to getting students reunited with their parents or guardians in an efficient and orderly manner. Reunification can be an enormous challenge and takes a lot of planning” (p.16). Other than the reunification site and quote above, there is no information about reunification.

The Sample School Emergency Operations Plan provides a fictional school’s framework of an Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). The document is a valuable resource with a wealth of

information and examples of how to build an EOP. Reunification is mentioned very briefly in the document, but only minimal information is covered.

FEMA Guide for Developing Emergency Operations Plan (EOP)

A number of federally funded organizations have collaborated to create the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plan. The organizations include the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation and Federal Emergency Management Agency. The plan is broken into three sections: The Planning Process, Plan Content, and A Closer Look. The guide has been designed for school teams to use it to guide their development and the revision of their EOP. The organizations advise schools to use the concepts and principles of the National Incident Management Systems (NIMS) and the Incident Command System (ICS) suggested by NIMS.

The guide shares the principles that are key to a comprehensive school EOP. They include planning must be supported by leadership, planning uses assessment to customize plans to the building level, planning considers all threats and hazards, planning provides for the access and functional needs of the whole school community, and planning considers all settings and all times. Creating and revising a model emergency operations plan is done by following a collaborative process (FEMA, n.d.). Each of the principles is explored in more depth in the document. The principles provide a framework for developing and reviewing a comprehensive EOP.

The second part of the document is the Plan Content. This section builds the steps and information that need to be included in the EOP. The guide transitions to the Functional Annexes

Content. The Annexes are broken down into evacuation, lockdown, shelter in place, accounting for all persons, communication and warning, family reunification, continuity of operations, recovery, public health, medical, and mental health, and security. The Family Reunification Annex provides things that should be considered when developing goals, objectives, and courts of action. They include

how to inform families and guardians about the reunification process in advance, and how to clearly describe their roles and responsibilities in reunification. How to verify that an adult is authorized to take custody of a student. How to facilitate communication between the parent check-in and the student assembly and reunion areas. How to ensure students do not leave on their own. How to protect the privacy of students and parents from the media. How to reduce confusion during the reunification process. How frequently families will be updated. How to account for technology barriers faced by students, staff, parents, and guardians. How to effectively address language access barriers faced by students, staff, parents, and guardians. (U.S. Department of Education et al.,2013, p. 31)

The questions can guide the school planning team to develop the most appropriate plan to support students social emotionally and to reunify them with their families.

The final section is Taking a Closer Look. It examines the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and explains its impact on the EOP (U.S. Department of Education et al.,2013). It transitions into School Climate and Emergencies and discusses how they impact prevention, response, and recovery. Schools need to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment and use a multi-tiered intervention and support system (p. 55). It finally examines an Active Shooter Situation and covers how schools can plan, respond, and recover from an incident. The section does discuss threat assessment teams, responding to an Active Shooter Situation. It advised students and staff to apply the run, hide, fight system when able to in the event of a shooting. The document then explains how to interact with first responders and how to respond after an active shooter incident. It is important to provide family members with timely, accurate,

and relevant information if immediate reunification with loved ones is not possible (p. 66). The document provides guidance about how to communicate with families if a child or staff member is injured or killed. They advise before an emergency, the planning team must determine how, when, and by whom loved ones will be informed (p. 67).

The Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans was collectively created by a number of government organizations. The document provides guidance to school personnel on how to create an EOPs to handle a variety of emergencies in the school setting.

Why?

Parents/guardians send their most prized possession to schools every day, and it is our responsibility to ensure students are safe and they get home safely every day. If a shooter does enter a campus, school personnel and students must find the safest way to ensure everyone's safety. However, after a shooting, the school becomes a crime scene. At that point, the school/district is responsible for transporting students to an external location and reuniting them with their families. Support needs to be available for students, staff, and parents attempting to pick up their students at this location. Although many district administrators believe they are prepared in the case of an incident occurring, research needs to be completed to determine to what extent they are prepared. Also, staff need to be interviewed to determine their knowledge and level of comfort while executing the plan. Finally, this material needs to be distributed so districts can make changes and be prepared if an incident occurs.

Emergency Plan Checklists

There are tools available to examine emergency response plans to ensure they have the necessary sections for an emergency response. One tool is the Comprehensive Crisis Plan Checklist (CCPC). The CCPC includes seven items across the areas of crisis prevention, intervention, and postvention based on the theoretical model put forth by Caplan (1964). The plan was revised and updated and is now called the CCPC-2 (McLeary & Aspiraniti, 2020). The purpose of the CCPC-2 is to provide school districts with a free tool to facilitate communication. It should act as a catalyst for districts to form crisis teams to draft emergency plans for the district and for schools within the district.

Other states have their own tools that suggest sections that need to be included in the plan. DuPage County has the DuPage County Homeland Security EOP. The I Love U Guys Foundation and ALICE offer their own formats, but the CCPC-2 is a framework that can be used to assess reunification plans to ensure they have all the necessary components.

DuPage ROE School Emergency Operations Plan Guide

The DuPage Regional Office of Education (ROE, 2019) created a School Safety Task Force in 2018 to develop a guide for DuPage area schools. The guide was introduced to schools in April 2019. The guide shares that “utilizing a consistent county wide base emergency operations plan, developed in partnership with municipal and county emergency response agencies, will increase shared resource effectiveness and efficiency during emergencies” (p. 1). The guide is divided into three sections: Basic Plan, Functional Annexes, and Threat and Hazard Specific Annexes. The Basic Plan is complete if the Functional Annexes are listed but

explanations are not provided. It was shared by the ROE Safety Specialist that the DuPage ROE has adopted the I Love U Guys program.

The Basic Plan shares the steps schools should include in their EOP for the approach to operations before, during, and after an emergency. The documents provide the framework of what should be included in the plan, including who approves the documents, purpose, list the school board policy, score, and situational review. They share that NIMS is the basis of the plan and that ICS should be used to manage all incidents and major planned events. Specific responsibilities are assigned to school personnel. There is an explanation of training and exercise that all schools need to complete.

The DuPage ROE document was stopped because the committee recommended the ROE align with the I Love U Guys organization. The document includes the Basic Plan that has information each school safety plan needs to have. Each school will need to determine the best way to support their students and staff based on each annex.

University High School Reunification

On April 6, 2018, University High School, along with Illinois State University, practiced a reunification exercise with high school students and provided findings in an After Action Report. “The exercise tests the recently completed Relocation and Reunification Plan, including a number of support services offered to parents and students. While each Lab School conducts an annual relocation drill to Redbird Arena, this is the first time the student-part reunification component was exercised” (ISU, n.d.).

Students and families were told the school was practicing the reunification exercise, and students and parents signed up to participate. The day of the event a communication was made

over the school-wide public address system. Students walked from the school to Redbird Arena on the Illinois State campus. Students were checked in at the arena, and a number of services were offered to the students. Snacks and water were distributed by the Salvation Army.

The exercise was overseen by a team of 40 controllers, evaluations, safety officers, and support staff. A variety of takeaways were identified on ways the school could improve the reunification process. Some of the takeaways included doubling the number of computers, decreasing bottlenecks in the arena, cleaning up the Greeting Station job card, creating and storing check out signs, and students' names entered on the video board as soon as parents check in (ISU, n.d.).” According to the document, the exercise went well. A survey was administered to participants, and the results are included in Appendix 1 of their document. The Chronology and Statistics for the event were included in Appendix 2. The specific role is included in Appendix 3, and pictures of the event are in Appendix 4. The appendices are useful documents to gather information about the planning and preparation that occurred and how the event was conducted.

There is limited information about reunification, but the ISU After Action Report shares successes and challenges that occurred during their reunification exercises. The document is useful for school teams as they prepare their EOP and prepare for reunification.

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)

The Illinois State Board of Education has a number of resources available to schools in the case of a school emergency and/or crisis. On August 16, 2005, Public Act 094-0660 (105 ILCS 128) was signed. Its purpose was to have schools review their safety plans with first responders and conduct school safety drills. The ISBE provides resources for documenting steps schools can take, but many of the expectations for schools are minimum compliance.

The ISBE website provides a variety of resources schools can access. It includes the laws and requirements for school safety. The website provides links to the specific legislation related to school safety and provides resources of a sample EOP. The appendix documents have a number of resources schools can use prior and after a school emergency. The website provides a variety of information; however, there is very little information about reunification.

School Shootings: A Unique Crisis in America

Thus far my literature review has provided an overview of emergency planning and preparation without a focus on a specific type of crisis. The next sections of my literature review focuses on active shooters with an emphasis on schools and how schools practice safety drills.

Active Shooters

The FBI and Secret Service have created a variety of research briefs centered around various types of shootings. Some of the available reports are “The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective” (2000), “Report on Indicator of School Crime and Safety: 2021” (2021), “Active Shooter Incidents: 20-Year Review” (2022), and “Protecting America’s Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence” (2018). The following section examines community violence and then school shootings.

“There have been nearly 600 mass shootings in the U.S. this year, according to the Gun Violence Archive, a nonprofit that tracks U.S. shootings. This organization defines a mass shooting as a situation in which at least four people are shot, excluding the shooter (*Wall Street Journal*, 2022, p. A3).” Shootings have occurred in a variety of places and the outcomes of shootings have been very different. They have occurred at malls, parks, bars, schools, businesses,

health care facilities, open spaces, etc. There is no specific research pointing out why they occur, and typically they occur without warning to the people in those settings. The following paragraphs provide data related to history, statistics, and trends for public shootings.

A 20-year review was completed by the FBI examining active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2019. The findings were shared in a report titled “Active Shooter Incidents: 20-Year Review” (2021). They found 333 incidents in 43 states involving 345 shooters, with 16 of them wearing body armor, and 11 occurred in Illinois. Initially, they found 305 incidents, but after the report was released, it was updated with an additional 28 incidents. In 2000, there were three incidents involving a shooter, and the numbers gradually increased over time until 2010 when the total reached 27. The numbers dropped slightly below 21 until 2017, when the number shot up to 31. In 2019 and 2020, there were 20 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021, p. 6). The numbers recently have continued to rise, and this is a concern for many.

There was a gradual increase up until 2009, but since then the number of incidents has dramatically increased. From 2019 to 2020, there was a 33 percent increase, and from 2020 to 2021, there was an increase of 52.5% (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2022, p. 3). The increased number of active shooter incidents requires all community organizations to be prepared about how to handle a shooting incident and its aftermath.

Businesses open to pedestrian traffic have the most incidents, and they are more than double the incidents that occur at schools. There were 96 active shooter incidents at a business open to pedestrian traffic (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021, p. 7). Schools are third behind open spaces. There have been 50 open space shootings, while there were 44 shootings at schools Pre-K to 12th grade. Schools are not the most prominent location for shootings.

Many local and national news agencies report on active shootings. But the frequency of shootings does not align with the data presented above. A larger percentage of news agencies' time is spent on shootings involving schools.

Also, shooter outcomes vary by occurrence. Many people assume that shooters either commit suicide or are apprehended immediately by police. In 2021, the Federal Bureau of Investigation broke the active shooter incident outcomes into five categories: apprehended by police, committed suicide, killed by police, killed by citizens, and at large (p. 25). The largest category is apprehended by police at 150, and the 2nd largest is committed suicide at 119. Sixty-seven were killed by police, five are still at large, and four were killed by citizens (p. 25). This is important information to know in the case of reunification. The culprit is not always caught or killed after the traumatic event. For example, the gunman at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, dropped his weapon and fled the school with other students. The gunman was apprehended by police later in the day on a community street. It is important to be aware that further tragedy can occur at an external location even after the initial event.

Also, there can be delays in catching and apprehending the gunman on the incident site. At the 2016 Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, a detective shot at the gunman from outside the club. More officers arrived, but they did not enter for several minutes until after the gunman paused. Forty-nine people were killed and 53 were wounded. Similarly in Uvalde, police waited to go into the school to confront the gunman. Police are under scrutiny based on their timeliness in entering the shooting environments.

There is no accurate profile or picture of a typical person who commits a school shooting (Protecting America's School, 2019). Shooters come in a variety of makes and sizes. Because of this, the community needs to stay vigilant, take all rumors seriously, and look into everything

reported. A third of adults avoid some settings due to a fear of violence occurring there (Walters, 2022).

School Shootings

School shootings are not the most prominent type of shootings that occur in the U.S., but they tend to get the most media coverage. Many parents/guardians send their children to school to get an education and do not expect them to be harmed while obtaining that education. Schools have developed a variety of safety measures to protect all students. School shootings have a long history of occurrences, especially, but not exclusively, in the United States. School shooters target schools because of the impact they can have on communities and the availability of a large number of individuals in one area. Shootings have drastically increased in the last 20 years. From 2000 to 2019 there were 419 casualties from school shootings (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2022).

Elementary, middle, and high schools have experienced gun violence. However, the most prominent locations for a school shooting are high schools, with 73% of shootings occurring at the high school level. The next largest group is middle schools at 22%. Elementary schools are at 2%, along with other schools at 2% (Protecting America's Schools, 2019). These data show that all schools need to be prepared for a school emergency and reunification after the emergency.

Research has shown that active shooter attacks do not last very long. Eighty-three percent of attacks are concluded within five minutes, and 98% of attacks are concluded in under 15 minutes. Forty-four percent of attacks occur in less than one minute, while 24% are one to two minutes and 15% are two to five minutes (Protecting America's Schools, 2019). Schools and districts need to be prepared to administer reunification plans quickly after attacks occur.

Typically when assailants enter a school, they are looking for areas with the greatest amount of people so they can inflict the greatest amount of harm. Schools have been or could be attacked at the following building locations: classrooms, cafeteria, locker rooms, outside of school, hallways, gymnasiums, offices, restrooms and vestibules. Safety measures need to be implemented to protect all staff and students in all locations. Students have to be kept safe if an attack occurs outside of the building, at bus stops, on buses, or in the school. Reunification plans need to be able to address all situations and locations. Locations of attacks are also important because in larger spaces, there is a greater risk of lost lives. Procedures and plans need to be implemented to handle attacks in a variety of locations in school buildings.

The Report on Indicators of School Crime and Safety (2021) surveyed schools about their written plans in selected scenarios. The survey showed that 96.2% of schools have plans in place for active shooters, 91% have plans for suicide threats or incidents, 52.7% have plans for hostages, and 89.3% have post-crisis reunification of students with their families. This survey asks if they have plans in place, but it does not ask to what extent the plans are ready to be administered.

In 2019 the United States Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center also looked at the race, gender, and age of attackers (U.S Department of Homeland Security, 2019). While there is not a specific phenotype of a school shooter, they found that 83% of attacks were committed by male students. White was the dominant race/ethnicity that committed the attacks at 63%, Black/African American was second at 15%, with two or more races being third at 10%. The grade level of attackers varied from seventh grade to being former students. Tenth grade had the highest number of attackers at eight with ninth and eleventh both having seven.

The study also examined attackers' motives for committing school attacks. The study found that "most attackers had multiple motivations for carrying out their attacks" (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019). Some of the motives included grievances, bullying, staff, romantic partners, desire to kill, suicidal thoughts, fame/notoriety, and/or psychotic symptoms. The highest percentages of motives were grievances and issues with peers.

Preparing for an Active Shooter in Schools

School and community violence is not a new phenomenon. Violence has occurred in many settings and communities have not been prepared to handle the aftermath. Schools and organizations more recently have started to develop safety plans in the case of a violent act or inclement weather. The state of North Carolina held its first Task Force on School Violence in 1993 (Youth Violence, 2002). The state recognized the need to ensure the safety of its students and to set up requirements and guidelines for schools. School violence has long been a concern for many communities.

Schools endorse two types of drills in response to school shootings: the traditional lockdown and the multi-option response (Jonson et al., 2020). Students and staff lock the door to the classroom and move out of sight lines from the hallway in the traditional lockdown approach. In the multi-option response, students and staff are provided a variety of options they can use in an active shooting situation. Many schools have started to adopt the multi-option response. Center Cass School District 66, CUSD 303 - St. Charles, and Northern Illinois University have adopted run, hide, fight.

The multi-option response has been shown to increase the likelihood of survival in simulations. A study by Jonson et al. (2020) determined that a multi-dimensional approach

reduced the resolution of a traumatic incident. The traditional lockdown lasted 22 to 290 seconds in their simulation, while the multi-option simulation lasted 4 to 70 seconds. When students and teachers are provided options, the likelihood of survival increases. In a real-life situation, various responses were unintentionally used. At Virginia Tech, various responses were utilized in the five classrooms. There were fewer injuries in rooms that barricaded the door and used items for weapons than in the rooms in which they did not do either (Jonson et al., 2020).

There is great fear in the public about the safety of their children in schools. School shootings have hit close to home for many U.S. parents. “In a new Research Center survey, roughly a third (32%) of parents of children in K-12 schools say they are very or extremely worried about a shooting ever happening at their children’s school” (Hurst, 2022, p 1). Schools must be prepared to handle a variety of situations and keep all stakeholders safe.

I Love U Guys

The I Love U Guys Foundation is a professional organization organized to help prepare schools for tragic events. The I Love U Guys Foundation was started by a family whose daughter was killed in a school shooting. The last thing she texted to her family was I Love U Guys. They have created and shared a variety of free resources for school districts. They have developed language to be utilized in all situations and created reunification plans and materials in the event of a situation on a school campus. To use the materials, school districts must have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the organization. I Love U Guys provides the MOU for schools to use. The materials address a variety of issues in the school setting. The I Love U Guys organization has identified that anyone can put a school into lockdown. Initiating reunification can occur when anything abnormal occurs at a school (I Love U Guys Foundation,

2018). A variety of individuals have put schools into lockdown and have saved numerous lives. In one situation the school secretary recognized the threat, and that quickly made all the difference between 100 kids being around today and dozens being shot or killed” (Kohli, 2017). Schools and community organizations also need to be prepared for a partial reunification. “In some cases it may be only a partial student population reunification. For instance, criminal activity in the area might result in reunifying students who walk to and from school” (I Love U Guys Foundation, 2018, p 12).

ALICE

There are a variety of companies/organizations that provide training and/or support to schools to help schools in the aftermath of an active shooter. One of the organizations is called the Alert, Inform, Evacuate, Lockdown, and Counter (ALICE, 2022) training program. ALICE, similar to the I Love U Guys Foundation, is an all-encompassing process to handle school safety. They provide a variety of resources that schools can use to help support all students and staff in a reunification plan. It was started by a husband who wanted to ensure the safety of his wife. The vision of ALICE is “to empower all citizens with the skills and knowledge to respond when shots are fired. If the police cannot be there in time to help, the next best thing is to prepare our civilian population to help themselves until public safety arrives.” It is a step-by-step system that provides guidance on how to handle an active shooter situation. The acronym provides an easy way to remember the steps needed to follow. The ALICE organization provides training to the public at a cost. ALICE also provides training for schools, workplaces, law enforcement, hospitals and healthcare facilities, and churches and houses of worship.

DuPage Regional Office of Education Data and Plans

The DuPage Regional Office of Education (ROE) in Illinois has created a template for all school districts in their jurisdiction. This template was developed based on feedback from area school districts looking for commonality in the reunification process. The template lays out specific roles and responsibilities to be assigned to individuals. Each person has a specific role they are responsible for, and directions are shared on how they will execute their role. “During crisis situations such as these, school personnel need to know exactly what action to take in responding to events” (Aspiranti et al. 2011, p 146). The roles need to be clearly explained and school personnel must know and understand the expectations.

The ROE has surveyed school resource representatives to determine their level of readiness in the face of a variety of situations. The data show that many school districts are not as prepared as they need to be if an incident occurs. The DuPage ROE collected survey data in October of 2021 and of the 32 responses collected, 87.5% said they have an Emergency Operation Plan for their district. Some of the plans are aligned with the Emergency Operations Plan in DuPage County, while others are not (Heiderscheidt, 2021). Of the districts with a reunification plan out of the 32 responses (84.4%), and 13 responses shared that they have conducted a reunification exercise in the past five years. The criteria used to determine what occurred during the reunification exercise were not shared.

Another survey was administered the following year, and the results were shared in February 2022. Thirteen percent of the 23 responses shared they use an agency (for-profit or not-for-profit) for the district’s reunification plans. The three districts used the I Love U Guys Foundation, Raptor Reunification using I Love U Guys, and Crisis Go (Heiderscheidt, 2021).

The survey asked districts what they are looking for from the DuPage ROE, and the responses shared a common reunification among districts and agencies, collaboration on the best practices and emerging trends in school safety, and ROE recommended training for district staff. Follow-up needs to occur to determine which of the recommendations, if any, were implemented at the ROE.

Threat Assessment Teams

Schools have recently started to develop a team approach to handling individuals that make threats to schools that involve the safety of themselves and others. Threat assessment teams are a combination of staff in an academic building that uses a framework to determine the extent to which an individual will carry out the threat. Threat assessment teams were originally developed by the secret service to prevent assassinations (Secret Service, 2019). The team would come together to determine the extent of the threat and would make suggestions moving forward. “A multidisciplinary threat assessment team, in conjunction with the appropriate policies, tools, and training, is the best practice for preventing future tragedies” (p. 3). A threat assessment team has shown many benefits to deter and/or prevent a tragedy from happening. “A multidisciplinary threat assessment team, in conjunction with the appropriate policies, tools, and training, is the best practice for preventing future tragedies” (Secret Service, 2019). Future tragedies can be prevented by bringing the right people together to examine situations.

Schools need to create opportunities for threat assessment teams to come together and receive training on identifying threats. A system needs to be put into place to notify administrators and staff of concerns. Only 17% of schools had any type of system in place to notify administrators or staff of threatening or concerning student behavior before an attack

(Secret Service, 2019, p. 8). This is a major concern in that communication is breaking down and preventing threat assessment teams from supporting students and preventing school tragedies from occurring. “Staff and faculty may hear this information but sometimes discount it as typical youthful talk that does not warrant concern. However, staff and faculty would be advised to take these conversations seriously and investigate further when the situation suggests such action” (US Secret Service & US Department of Education, 2008). Threats need to be taken very seriously to avoid catastrophic incidents at schools.

It is also important to know if there is a time when incidents have the greatest likelihood of occurring. Traumatic incidents occurred most often at the start of the school year (September) or after students returned from winter break (January). These are typically very busy times in the educational setting and staff need to be aware of these times and the issues students face when returning to school.

The United States Secret Service National Threat Assessment (2019) report did identify that over half of the attackers engaged in observable planning behaviors. This is important information for the threat assessment teams to be aware of as they work through the process. Many attacks are planned, and threat assessments can hopefully identify instances before they occur. Possible signs of planning for an attack are weapon research and selection, deceptive practice, planning of the execution of the attack, practicing with a weapon, recruiting others, packing an attack bag, and documentation of plans (National Threat Assessment, 2019).

Addressing Trauma

Mental health has become a major concern in the United States and throughout the world. Mental health has been at the forefront of news telecasts and has started to become a major focus

in schools. Schools employ psychologists and social workers to help provide support to students and staff. When trauma has occurred, supports need to be put into place to help support students both academically and outside of it. Many students have been affected by a traumatic experience that cannot be seen externally. These traumatic experiences can affect people psychologically and have lasting effects.

Shootings create very traumatic events for all who witness or experience the events that occur. In the event of a shooting, the main concern is the students' and staff's physical safety and mental well-being (Aspiranti et al., 2011). Once students are safe, then the mental well-being of all individuals needs to be supported. Everyone handles situations differently and supports the need to meet the needs of each individual at different levels. Plans need to be put into place to provide support so the impact of the traumatic experiences can be downsized.

“Crisis recovery starts with the crisis, not after. Simply “winging it” when reuniting ignores not only the mental health demands that accompany a crisis, but the responsibility of the school and the district to maintain the chain of custody for every student” (I Love U Guys Foundation, 2018, p. 11). The reunification plan must address the social-emotional needs of all individuals affected by traumatic events. When a plan is not in place, then the after-effects of the reunification can be harmful and create a stronger social-emotional impact on individuals. This is why a thorough and planned reunification plan is required to help support all individuals.

Parts of a Good Reunification Plan

There is limited research directly related to reunification plans but research has been conducted on Emergency Operations Plans (EOP). The following paragraphs I will draw on the research and current knowledge to develop the four pillars required to have a successful

reunification plan. The pillars help to guide the development and implementation of a reunification plan. These four pillars should be consistent in every reunification and will help to ensure that the plan has the necessary components to be administered correctly.

There are a variety of types of Emergency Operation Plans. Similarly, there are multiple ways to construct a reunification plan. As indicated directly above, it is important to have threat assessment teams in place prior to any incident occurring, and it is imperative to try to mitigate trauma on the back end of an incident. However, in the next few paragraphs, I present recommendations specifically for a proper reunification plan based on the previous literature review. The four pillars needed in a reunification plan are operational roles and duties, transportation, communication plan, and materials, supplies, and signage. Each will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The first pillar is operational roles and duties. Staff need to know, prepare, and practice their specific roles if reunification must be started after an emergency. They need to know how they are arriving at the reunification site, their specific responsibilities, and where to seek out additional support if needed. These responsibilities are the number one priority of the staff at the reunification site. They also need to know who their backup and third person are if the emergency at the school involves the staff member. Knowledge of specific roles and responsibilities is essential to the success of the reunification plan.

The second pillar is transportation. Every district is different in how they conduct transportation in their districts. Some districts contract with outside organizations, while others have their own fleet and drivers. The timing of the emergency has the ability to impact other schools in the community and outside of the district. Plans need to be in place if reunification needs to occur during another school's dismissal or if other district's transportation departments

need to help move students to the reunification site. These logistics issues need to be planned and addressed during the planning phase of reunification.

The third pillar is communication. It is essential that a plan is in place in case of an emergency. Communication is vital to parents/guardians and the community after an emergency event occurs. Specific directions need to be provided on the location of the reunification site and how families will be reunified with their students. This is an area that can determine the success or failure of a reunification event.

The final pillar is materials, supplies, and signage. These three are essential at the reunification site. Materials need to be on-site to support students and staff. Reunification can take time, so supplies, food, and drink must be available to everyone at the site. Also, materials related to reunification like rosters, pens and pencils, and check-in and out paperwork need to be available. Signage needs to be accessible and strategically placed so students and staff know where to go when arriving at the reunification site. The signage also needs to be visible when parents/guardians start arriving to pick up students. All materials, supplies, and signage need to be kept in a centralized location and be easily accessible if an emergency event occurs. Proper planning ahead of time needs to occur so staff can be prepared for students.

Proper planning for reunification is essential for its success. The four pillars of a proper reunification plan identified by the author are operational roles and duties, transportation, a communication plan, and materials, supplies, and signage. The four combined pillars create the ideal reunification plan and help to ensure a successful reunification.

Concluding Remarks

Recall that Paper 1 addresses the following research questions:

1. What type of incidents need to occur for a school to implement a reunification plan?
2. What types of reunification plans are included in Emergency Operation Plans for school districts?

School emergencies, tragedies, emergencies, and school shootings are on the minds of many parents and community members. Schools must be prepared to handle the variety of situations that can occur and have plans to ensure the social emotional needs of students and staff are met and students and staff are reunited with families in a timely and safe manner. The purpose of this study was to examine how many school districts have reunification plans, to what extent they are developed, and if they have been implemented with fidelity. Schools must plan all aspects of a reunification plan and must be able to adapt them to the variety of situations that can occur. Additional research needs to be conducted to determine if schools are prepared and to what extent they are prepared to handle emergency situations.

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PAPER 2

Introduction

Many aspects of a school tragedy have been researched and discussed locally and in the national news, but little research or communication includes the reunification process. “Literature does not reflect how students are kept safe during an emergency event. Existing studies contain little, if any, discussion of safety actions, evacuation protocol, student supervision, or family reunification requirements” (Shah et al., 2020, p. 3). Schools continually work to develop plans to prevent school tragedies from occurring and routinely practice how to evacuate buildings, but rarely do they practice leaving the building to go to an external location. Many districts have developed relationships with organizational facilities outside of their district to reunify students with their families externally. However, this information is not communicated externally and has not been shared how often and to what extent emergency plans are examined and reassessed. Furthermore, there is very little research examining reunification, whether schools have a reunification plan, and whether they are prepared to implement the plan. The primary goal of this study was to determine to what extent schools are prepared to implement reunification in the event of a tragedy, weather emergency, or school mechanical failure. The specific research questions guiding this paper were

1. What does a typical reunification plan consist of within a school district?
2. Are school districts prepared to implement their reunification plans with fidelity?

3. How are students, staff, and parents/guardians prepared with prior knowledge of the plan and what is their role in reunification?

Summary of Prior Literature

Illinois Law

Laws have been put into place to protect all students and staff in schools in the state of Illinois. Public Act 094-0660 (105 ILCS 128) was signed on August 16, 2005. Its purpose was to have schools review their safety plans with first responders and conduct school safety drills. Safety plans are required in every district and are vital for protecting all stakeholders. The State has provided minimum requirements schools are required to follow to protect all. These minimums must be adhered to, but it is recommended that schools and districts go further than the minimum requirements. The Illinois School Board website shares that schools must have a safety plan and provide guidance on what needs to be included in the plan. Reunification is one of the requirements, but specific requirements for reunification are not provided. It is the district's responsibility to determine to what extent they will have a plan in place.

Team Approach

It is important to have a team approach to developing a safety plan. "While communities can advance many school safety measures on their own, our experience tells us that keeping schools safe requires a team effort and the combined resources of the federal governments; school boards; law enforcement; and the public (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019, p. 3)." Parents and students are an important part of the reunification planning process. "Having

identified inclusion of parents and students in the planning process as one of the weaknesses of the first round of planning, principals were encouraged to hold meetings with them as well as with law enforcement and community leaders to discuss safe school plans” (Youth Violence, 2002). Having multiple individuals at the table strengthens the EOP for all districts and schools.

Threat assessment teams are an important part of a school’s safety plan. The teams are designed to assess situations and determine the next steps to support the students making the threats. Threat assessment teams were originally developed by the Secret Service to prevent assassinations (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019). The threat assessment team in schools convenes to determine the credibility of a threat and the next steps. “A multidisciplinary threat assessment team, in conjunction with the appropriate policies, tools, and training, is the best practice for preventing future tragedies” (U. S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019, p. 3). The best way to avoid a school tragedy is through prevention and threat assessment teams help prevent a tragedy from occurring.

Emergency Operations Plans

It is imperative to have plans in case of an emergency. Legislation in the state of Illinois requires every school district to have safety plans. The plans have multiple layers and facets involving a variety of individuals. Schools need to develop a crisis management plan document that includes prevention, intervention, and post-intervention (Aspiranti et al., 2011).

A number of organizations have developed emergency operation plans to support all stakeholders in the educational setting. The organizations are the National Education Association (NEA), National School Safety and Security Services, National Association of School

Psychologists, FEMA, and the Illinois State Board of Education, who have provided a sample school emergency operations plan.

The NEA published a guide that divides school safety into four categories: prevent, prepare, respond, and recover. Each category has specific supports and keys to prevent foreseeable tragedies. Prevention is key and building relationships is vital. The core of all prevention is centered around relationships of respect and connection between adults in the building and students (NEA, 2018). The guide also recommends that schools and districts have a comprehensive emergency plan. A district's plan should lay out supports and procedures in case an emergency situation occurs. The emergency plan should align with National Incident Management System (NIMS) guidance and implementation of an Incident Command System (ICS) process. The guide provides timelines for how to respond after an event has occurred and reviews long term supports that need to be provided to staff and students. It is a very thorough document that provides ways to protect a school community.

The National School Safety and Security Services offers support to examine a school's safety plan at a cost to ensure that schools are prepared for an emergency event. The services are robust and can address a variety of weaknesses in a school's plan. The services include providing recommendations to strengthen school support and training for staff, reviewing past and future safety drills, and providing community meeting frameworks and parent and community workshops, etc.

The National Association of School Psychologists has created the PREPaRE model. PREPaRE is an acronym for P - Prevent, R - Reaffirm, E - Evaluate, P - Provide, a -, R - Response, and E - Examine. The model is a workshop format with two different classes. The first class provides their model for developing a school safety plan and the necessary steps to train

staff. The second class is specific to mental health personnel who will support students after the tragedy. They offer a train the trainer model so districts can internally train their staff.

The Illinois State Board of Education has linked the US Department of Homeland Security Sample School Emergency Operations Plan for November 2013. The document presents a fictional school district and provides paperwork and planning the guidelines recommend a school has in their Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). The plan also mentions that schools should implement the NIMS principles and the ICS. The guide offers clear guidelines for all school personnel and covers specific emergencies that can occur and how to address them.

FEMA has shared a Guide for Developing Emergency Operations Plan. The guide is a collaborative effort between a variety of national organizations and advises that schools use concepts and principles of NIMS and ICS. The guide shares the key principles of an EOP and the necessary steps and information that should be included in the EOP. FEMA provides a variety of questions that can be used to guide the planning and preparation of the EOP.

The DuPage ROE has started to develop an EOP that was created with their School Safety Task Force. The guide utilizes many of the principles suggested in the FEMA guide. Once again NIMS is the backbone of the plan while implementing the ICS process. The DuPage ROE has identified and recommended the I Love U Guys Foundation for reunification.

Each of the documents offers a robust plan related to EOPs and supporting students before, during, and after a school emergency. Most plans mention reunification, but very little attention is given to reunification. When an event occurs typically you do not want to take a chaotic situation at a school and transport it to another school that is calm. This is why an alternative location is ideal for reunification if possible. Schools need to plan and be prepared for

a variety of situations. There is a lack of guidance on how schools and districts should conduct their reunification plans.

School Safety Organizations

Two of the organizations that provided guidance and planning for reunification are the I Love U Guys Foundation and ALICE groups. Both provide a variety of information that school and community organizations can use for reunification.

The I Love U Guys Foundation provides all the necessary information and materials to administer a reunification plan. Their materials are free to districts, but they ask that the school districts have an MOU with the organization. The organization provides training on reunification and provides all of the necessary signage. The organization was started by a father after his daughter died in a school tragedy. The I Love U Guys organization does site visits to assess the readiness of districts.

The second organization is ALICE. The organization was started by a husband who wanted to ensure the safety of his wife. ALICE stands for Alert, Inform, Evacuate, Lockdown, and Counter. They have a step-by-step process for schools to follow if there is an emergency threat of violence. They provide companies and organizations with the necessary support in the aftermath of an active shooter too. The acronym is supposed to be easy to remember and implement in a possible chaotic situation.

Both organizations provide a plethora of resources schools can use before, during, and after school emergencies. The resources vary but both organizations are there to help support schools. There is minimal research examining to what extent districts and schools have created

reunification plans and if they are prepared to implement them during an emergency situation. The intention of this research was to fill the gap centered on district and school reunification.

Methodology

The primary goal of this study was to determine to what extent schools are prepared to implement reunification in the event of a tragedy such as a school shooting, weather emergency, or school mechanical failure. There is very little research available examining reunification, whether schools have a reunification plan, and whether they are prepared to implement the plan.

Study Design

There is a variety of information centered around shootings, school shootings, and crisis management plans, yet there is minimal information/research specifically examining the readiness of schools and districts to implement reunification plans. This study was a qualitative exploratory study to determine to what extent schools have reunification plans and are prepared to implement their reunification plan with fidelity.

Participants

Schools and districts have a variety of individuals with different titles and responsibilities. Most individuals tasked with reunification are school district level administrators, typically superintendents, assistant superintendents, or directors. The goal of this dissertation was to interview three districts in each category. Appendix A is a list of school districts in DuPage County, which provides a robust opportunity to determine to what extent the districts have prepared plans and to compare whether there is a difference based on their grade

level (CUSD - Community Unit School District, Kindergarten to 8th grade, 9th grade to 12th grade). DuPage County gives a robust grouping of schools that is typical for a county in suburban Chicago, but the research can be applied outside of DuPage County. Below is a list of the participants interviewed along with their job title, level of their position, years of experience, and type of district.

Table 1
Participant Information

Participant	Job Title	District or School Level Position	Years of Experience	Type of District
1	School Safety, Security, and Emergency Preparedness Coordinator	District	31 years	K-12
2	Director of Facility and Plant Operations	District	20 years	9-12
3	Dean	School	10 years	K-12
4	Assistant Superintendent of Finance	District	15 years	K-8
5	Dean	School	20 years	9-12
6	Director of Facilities	District	30 years	K-8
7	Assistant Superintendent for Administrative Services	District	22 years	K-12
8	Superintendent	District	30 years	K-8
9	(2 People) Assistant Superintendent for Student Services/Assistant Superintendent for Finances and Operations	District/District	29 years/ 16 years	9-12

Instrumentation

Participants in the study were interviewed using Zoom virtual meeting software and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. The research was qualitative, and the questions are included in Appendix B. The interviews started with questions about the interviewees' backgrounds and experience. The questions about reunification were divided into four research questions: 1) What is the status of the reunification plan in their school districts? 2) Have you rehearsed your reunification plan and to what extent have you practiced the plan? 3) What communication has occurred with parents and students about the reunification plan? and 4) Have you thought through specific scenarios that can occur at the reunification site? The series of questions provided the answers to the questions guiding this dissertation.

Procedures

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained through Northern Illinois University. After approval was obtained, emails were sent to individuals in charge of operations at the school district identified in Appendix A to determine who is responsible for reunification. Once the individual was determined, another email was sent to schedule a sixty- to ninety-minute interview. Participants were notified the meetings were voluntary, and the data guided the research in the field of reunification and school safety.

Researcher Role

As a practicing school administrator and principal in Illinois, I have characteristics in common with the interviewees. I am currently in my first year as a principal at a middle school,

with seven other years as an assistant principal, associate principal, and athletic director. I have not been in charge of reunification or held a position at the district level.

The importance of this work was brought to my attention by John Baird while both of us were employed at St. Charles CUSD 303. John has passed away, but I have continued to explore reunification. School districts need to be prepared at any time to implement a reunification process and plans must be developed to support all stakeholders at both the district and building level.

Findings

Nine participants were interviewed to learn more about their district's reunification plan and how they implemented it or intended to implement it in the event of a tragedy. The following sections examine the qualitative research gathered through the questions guiding this dissertation. Each participant provided information that was helpful in determining the fidelity in which districts are prepared to implement their reunification plans.

Theme 1: Specific Reunification Plans

Eight of the nine participants had a reunification plan designed to support students and staff in the event of an emergency or tragedy. One of nine had an emergency operation plan but did not have a plan specific to reunification. The reunification plans can be categorized into the following subcategories.

Table 2

Subthemes of Specific Reunification Plans

Subtheme	Number of Participants that Discussed this Theme	Impact on Reunification Plan
Roles/Responsibilities	7/9 participants	Specific individuals have been identified and staff understand their role
Materials/Supplies	5/9 participants	Signage is prepared and ready to go in the event of need
Accounting for Students that run	1/9 participants	Reunification sites identified for students that run
Students with Disabilities	5/9 participants	Students are supported in the event of reunification

Subtheme: Roles/Responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities are a necessary part of a reunification plan. Staff need to know their duties and responsibilities in the event reunification is needed. Seven of nine participants listed the specific responsibilities that individuals have assigned to them. Participant 1 shared:

We've tried to have 2 or 3 people as your main go to people, which is your Principal, your AP, and your student services Coordinator. So that's who we have. We're less concerned with others rolling it out, because, as you know, with I Love U Guys, just as I told him this morning (they debriefed after a recent reunification). so that I could come in this room, and in 15 min I could tell every one of you what they are (explaining someone's role and responsibility during reunification).

Other districts have people specifically assigned to the roles in their reunification plan.

Participant 3 shared: "I have assigned roles. I do not have backups for the roles." Most districts

have assigned roles, but a few have assigned backups. None of them assigned backups to the backup or a third person.

Subtheme: Materials/Supplies

Materials are an important part of any reunification plan. The DuPage ROE will be supplying reunification kits for school districts with proper signage. Five of the nine participants had the proper signage prepared as well as the possible extra materials required at a reunification site. Participant 8 shared:

So when we drill the first thing I do is, I send an advanced team to the reunification site with what we call the bear box. It is a big orange box. What does it have in it, it has laptops that we check charge on every 2 weeks. It also has our entire portable wireless system, so that no matter where we are, we can go live and I can run my finance department. I can run my student information system. From there I can do everything I need. Wherever that box is, I can run a school district.

Participant 6 added:

Yeah, I have a whole rock box. I have actually 2 of them. I have a trailer set up to go for the reunification or emergency management. We carry tables, chairs, lighting. We used exactly after I Love U Guys foundation had a list and then we created our own. We made our own binders. We made our own set of materials from their list. It took a while for us to do, because it's a lot of materials but I'd rather put it together because you put your hands on it, and you go through it all right. and you know what it entails.

The other participants did not have materials put together in the event of having to do a reunification exercise.

Subtheme: Accounting for Students who Run

Most districts are moving toward the ALICE system or implementing a run, hide, fight system in the event of an intruder on a school campus. Students are encouraged in both systems

to run out of the building if they believe they can do it safely. One of nine participants has specific designated locations that students can run. This allows students to know a safe place to go after an incident and provides the district the opportunity to locate the students after they leave campus.

Subtheme: Students with Disabilities

All students need to be kept safe when a reunification is implemented. Three of the nine participants have prepared a plan to support students with disabilities, while other districts did not. Participant 6 shared: “It’s definitely something that every district has to talk about. And then, if you have a rescue station, we can go to the rescue station first and then we tell paramedics. Okay, here’s our rescue station. We have seven people going to that location.” This participant identified how they will get students out of the building and the specific spot students will go to get support.

Another participant spoke about how they will support students with disabilities at the reunification site. Participant 7 noted:

We do. We have a room that is for kids that are more disabled, low level with the Special Ed Director and other special ed teachers. So we do have an area for that. It’s not gigantic, but we do have an area dedicated to the more fragile kids that we couldn’t put in, but they’d be in a room (at the reunification site) overseen by the Director of Special Ed or her understudy. And then there would be special education teachers with those kids.

Other participants had not prepared for students with disabilities. Participant 5 said: “We have not.” Most participants do not have a plan at the building site or the reunification site for students with disabilities.

Theme 1 Discussion

Almost all participants had identified specific individuals for the roles/responsibilities in their reunification plans. The participants that did not are confident they will be able to explain to someone what they are supposed to do for reunification. This is an administrative decision and they are making the assumption that they will be onsite and ready to explain responsibilities. There are times people cannot be on district property and how will they go about handing these situations is a concern.

A little over half of the participants are prepared with having the necessary supplies. They proactively monitor their supplies and ensure everything is charged and ready to go. The participants that do not have the supplies prepared will be rushing and their reunification sites will be more chaotic than necessary.

Only one of nine participants identified specific places for students to meet up if students and staff have to run. Most DuPage County school districts encourage students to run if they are able to when there is an intruder and this is a concern that locations are not identified and/or communicated to students.

A little over half of the participants identified how they will support students with disabilities. This is a concern because students with disabilities typically have additional needs that school districts need to be prepared to handle. Typically there are administrative personnel and specific teachers assigned to this population and they need to be aware of their students' needs during reunification.

Theme 2: Drills/Implementation

Some of the participants shared that they implemented a reunification plan after an incident. Some have practiced their plans, while others noted they do not want to practice reunification. The table below categorizes drills/implementation into three subthemes.

Table 3

Subtheme Drills/Implementation

Subtheme	Number of Participants that Discussed this Theme	Impact on Reunification Plan
Practice/Implemented	3/9 participants	Districts have implemented their plan in need or during an exercise
Completed Table Top Scenarios	8/9 participants	Districts have walked through possible safety situations
Identified Possible Threats	1/9 participants	Districts have identified possible threats that could affect their sites

Subtheme: Practice/Implementation

School districts have devised reunification plans and are prepared on paper. Some have either been required to implement their plans or have practiced reunification in their district. Three of the nine participants either implemented their reunification plan after an incident or practiced reunification. Participant 6 explained:

We want to be proactive. You never want to be reactive. That's the number one thing in reunification. Because, yes, it is possible to do it without having a plan. Yeah, we can.

You know we're educators, we could probably figure it out, it's not going to be pretty. We're going to get a lot of comments, but you know, we want to be able to have that plan ready and execute it, well. Because you know, in a moment of an emergency, you're gonna have feelings, the parents are gonna have feelings. Where's my child? Where's my student? Where my kid? Things like that, like we want to make sure that our kids and our parents are taken care of. You know the reunification portion of it. Don't worry about it. We have your kids. We have a plan, and you know we're gonna give you your kid back here in in a short time and what we've learned in all the studies and things like that. That's what everybody remembers. You know the part I was like. I waited for my kid 4 hours, and you know I wasn't getting information. Blah! Blah, blah! That's you know what we want to avoid. We want to let everyone know that we have a plan, at least, and we we're going to practice that plan.

Participant 6 noted their district had practiced the plan multiple times and learned from every practice. Participant 1 had to implement their plan in an emergency situation:

Yeah. So we had a an incident of an intruder at one of our middle schools. A former student, who is now 20 years old, walked in with a backpack on, looking like a middle school student with all of the other kids at that school that we're getting off buses and walking in. He did get inside our front doors, and a staff member asked him if they could help him. He said he was, you know, looking for a meeting or something. So they walked with him and said, I'll take you to, you know, to the office to get signed in. and then some things just seemed a little wonky about that. So an assistant principal came out. They started questioning more and didn't like the answer. They told him he needed to move outside the building, and eventually you know that wasn't going fast enough. So he was pinned against the wall while we called police.

After police apprehended the suspect, the school did a reunification on site. They communicated information to the families that students could be picked up and parents/guardians came to school to pick up their students. They implemented the plan they had put in place to reunify students with their parents/guardians onsite. Two participants shared that they were planning to practice a reunification exercise next year.

Participant 8 shared that he was opposed to practicing the reunification plan. “I won’t practice and I won’t play my hand on what we will do.” He is opposed to his community knowing about his reunification plan. Participant 4 explained:

Not since I’ve been here have we had that discussion (about practicing). I think it might be worth it once we get this finalized between the High school and you know our new plan. It might be worth putting in. Yeah, I guess at a minimum we do have a new reunification site. We send out a news and notes kind of newsletter every Thursday, and I think our communications Guys are always looking for different pieces of information that could go in. There are things that we might need to know. I think that would be. I think, a good introduction that we are thinking of these things, and we do have a place to go. Should anything. you know go awry? but not that. That’s a good idea.

Proactive communication about reunification needs to occur to let families and the community know that districts are prepared in the event of a tragedy.

Subtheme: Completed Tabletop Scenarios

Tabletop scenarios are a way to walk staff through situations to prepare them as well as possible. A variety of situations can be discussed, and best possible solutions can be identified.

Eight participants shared that they have completed tabletop scenarios. Participant 5 said:

There was an outside agency that came in, and it was administered with community personnel, police, fire, and emergency management. We went through a full tabletop of what they would do in case there was an intruder in the building. We sat back, and they walked through the whole thing. They then had the school staff for 2 hours go through a full reunification practice like I was at the desk. I had the slips of paper. The police officers acted as parents. They would come on up, and then we would have to practice. We don’t know where your where your son or daughter is. You’re right here or they’re deceased like we had to. We walk through a full practice reunification in a hotel, but you know the process of it.

This type of tabletop scenario allowed them to practice the situations. Participant 2 noted:

We did tabletops. So, we would basically sit with 15 people, and they have no idea what I'm coming with. As far as this is what's gonna happen to me, what you would do. And then obviously, dialogue is afterwards, you know, going over everything. So I think people at our buildings are prepared. The list I kind of gave, you know what to do in that situation.

Participant 7 explained:

Yeah, we did that 5 years ago a pretty intensive tabletop. Then we actually did it. But then, this year, we did a tabletop with one of the colleges close to me going into lockdown. And so it really helped them understand what they would do if it ever happened, and which streets they would shut down, and how they would let parents get in. And really they looked at our plan, and they're gonna use it for them as well. So you know they're looking for, what do they do? If something happens to us in college? Could they use a part of their campus? They are a little bigger than we are? Or would they use some of our buildings? So we just did a tabletop for about two and a half hours with them. It's helpful. Both sides learned a lot.

Tabletop exercises were utilized by almost all participants and were found to be beneficial to brainstorm how to address a situation and learn how others would respond to the situation.

Subtheme: Identified Possible Threats

Schools can face a variety of threats based on their population and their proximity to airports, trains, power plants, etc. One participant identified possible threats they could face in their school settings. Participant 6 shared:

Yeah, we do that like we go through tabletop scenarios on relocation, reunification portions from different scenarios, like bus accidents to tornado shelters. You know, all different scenarios, and we run that monthly. We have our police fire. We have all admin. We probably have close to 30 people.

Their tabletop scenarios align with the possible threats they may face. Others practice possible threats in their community but have not identified them in their reunification plan. Participants 5 explained: "We do not as part of our plan, documented and written. We do not have that."

Multiple participants shared that they have not identified possible threats that their districts may face.

Theme 2 Discussion

There were a limited number of participants that shared they had either practiced and/or implemented their reunification plan. Two participants had implemented their plans because of an emergency and one had practiced it. One of the administrators shared they did not practice because they did not want to show their cards to their community. The administrator choose not to practice the reunification exercise.

Almost all participating had completed table top scenarios. These scenarios provide time for staffs to brainstorm and identify possible way to support students in the event of reunification. The scenario brainstorming is very beneficial and is extremely help full in preparing real life scenarios. Table top scenarios help to ensure the staff is as best prepared as possible.

Only one of the nine participants identified the possible threats their district could face. This is very concerning and area that many participants neglected in their planning. More work must be done to ensure the safety of all stakeholders in the academic setting.

Theme 3: Communication

Today's public education environment requires consistent and constant communication to all community stakeholders. Communication is vital to the success of a reunification and communication needs to occur to students, staff, and parents/guardians. Every participant's district communicates with their communities, but how they communicate as well as the

frequency of communication were very different. The following sections identify subthemes related to communication.

Table 4
Subtheme Communication

Subtheme	Number of Participants that Discussed this Theme	Impact on Reunification Plan
Proactive Communication about Reunification Plan	1/9 participants	Communication has occurred to school stakeholders about the reunification plan.
Communication Plan in the event of an emergency or tragedy	6/9 participants	Districts have created templates they will use to communicate information
Groups of students and tailored communication	1/9 participants	Communication is tailored based on the different types of students affected by incident

Subtheme: Proactive Communication about Reunification Plan

Communication is vital to the success of any school district and vital in the event of reunification. One of the nine participants shared that they actively communicated about having a reunification plan in their district and have communicated when they will practice their reunification plans. Participant 6 explained:

I mean, we've had relationships with all the different entities here in town. So this isn't anything new for us. We've had them for many years because you never know, and we used to practice just relocating, but never reunification. So that was a big change for us 2 years ago. So that's what we've started.

Before they conduct their practices, they communicate a time frame with their community, so they are aware a safety exercise is occurring and parents are prepared. Students have an opportunity to experience the reunification and parents are aware the district is prepared.

Subtheme: Communication Plan in the Event of an Emergency or Tragedy

Timely and organized communication is vital after an emergency or tragedy.

Parents/guardians will be concerned about their students and will want to know as much information as possible. Any foreseeable situation needs to be planned and prepared for and a communication plan needs to be ready to implement in the event of an emergency or tragedy. Six of the nine participants have prepared a communication plan that can be implemented in the event of an emergency or tragedy. Participant 2 noted:

Actually, we're very lucky to have a communication director and assistant that is very good, and we do have a communications plan, and it's well thought out, and who does what. It is broken all the way down on who from the Command Center should be speaking to the press. Really, it's a thorough plan. But you know, I think that's very important, and we're just lucky to have someone that's really good at that. I think that you know we could check that off that we're up to date and really good at what we would do from the communication aspect of it.

Participant 5 said:

We do. So I'm looking at it right now. Title, phone assignments, responsibilities during a crisis. So, I'll give you what we have. It may not be exactly for reunification. So we have procedures for who is going to go to which hospital. We have procedures for answering phone calls when handling a phone call. Speak this way. Say these things, stick to facts. We have what to do in case parents come into the school instead of going to the reunification site.

Some districts have not prepared a communication plan for reunification, but they do have a person in charge of communication. Participant 4 shared:

We have a director of Communication full time here, so I think we would rely on him and his expertise. For I think really 2 main things, one internal communication. So we use Google Chat. We have different groups set up for that if there's something internal going on. That's how we, you know, let those people know. We also have other channels for just our Administrative Council. You know the principal system principals, directors, those types of things. You know those types of people. So I think we would have this internal communication which would obviously be vital. And then from his standpoint out to the community and the parents. Yeah, I think that's just as vital. I'm sure kids will get on Snapchat and get on Twitter or on their text lines, and things like that, and start giving information out a that probably isn't accurate, you know, out there. So and then obviously the timing of all that. So if reunification has to happen. You know, we, as administrators, probably need to be about 3 steps ahead of where everyone else should be in terms of where we are going, what are we doing? Who's doing what before we let people know? And obviously your hands are people that's top in their car and drive to wherever to pick up their kids. So yeah, I think communication is huge.

Participant 9 shared:

“Yeah, we struggle a bit more, though, too, because, you know, our approach is very much a principal centric, and when possible, we like the principals to communicate directly with their parents in the community. And so sometimes, when we get things that are beyond that individual community then it becomes all right. Is this coming from the district? Or is this coming from the building? And there's that a little bit of a lag and so it's an area of focus for us to try to help clean that up a little bit and try to have a little bit of work in this area.”

Districts have recognized this is an area that they can improve on and be prepared for during reunification.

Subtheme: Tailored Communication

During the conversations with participants, one participant shared they have tailored communication for four different groups affected by a school tragedy. Participants 8 explained:

There really are 4 types of people in a mass casualty incident from a parent perspective. There are parents who have children we have control over who are uninjured. And so when I talk about reunification plan that's the fourth group that's a group we're looking

at, because the other groups would be groups of children. There'll be a group of children we cannot account for, and we do not know if they're well or injured, so we're looking for them hopefully inside of a law enforcement control perimeter. Right then, there are the children we know, who are injured and are on their way to various emergency rooms. see treatment, and will be so. That's another group that we're looking. We wouldn't unify with them. We'd be looking to the reunification to happen onsite at the ER as we go. Then, unfortunately, there is group number one, which is the group: parents who have experienced catastrophic loss. Child is died. and we would handle that within the perimeter. So when we talk reunification plan, we are talking about group 4 in my language, which are kids we have control over, and we can't safely reunify with their parents.

This type of approach allows for tailored communication with the different types of individuals affected by the tragedy. Participant 8 is the only interviewee who shared the four different groups and how communication is differentiated based on the groups. The other participants did not share an individualized communication plan based on the types of parents and students affected by the tragedy.

Theme 3 Discussion

Communication is vital to everything we do in today's world. A school districts success can be made or broken based upon communication. School districts need to be prepared to share information about their reunification plans both proactively and reactively. Schools that share information about their reunification plan ahead of time have a greater chance of success when they implement the plan.

The research found that only one of the participants shared information about the reunification plan proactively. This is a major concern because this is an opportunity for districts to demonstrate how they are prepared to support students in the event of emergency or tragedy. Similar to practicing reunification, some administrators do not want to share their information

because they believe they are sharing information that can be used against them.

Many of the districts have a communication plan prepared in the event something occurs. Most have these plans because they have a communication director. This individual has prepared statements that can be used in the event a reunification needs to be exercised.

One of the participants had tailored communication based upon the needs of the students and families. This type of communication provides the ability to give targeted information to specific groups and can help to alleviate some of the miscommunication that can occur. It is recommended that all districts create tailored communication based upon the types of student situations school will have when implementing this reunification plan.

Theme 4: Community Members

All participants included some level of community engagement in their reunification planning. The engagement by community members varied by district. Some districts partnered with or were aware of external organizations they can utilize during a reunification event.

All nine participants shared that they have community members who are part of their planning purposes. Involvement of the community members can be categorized into subthemes based on their impact on the reunification plan.

Table 5

Subthemes of Community Members

Subtheme	Number of Participants that Discussed this Theme	Impact on Reunification Plan
Police/Fire Officers	9/9 participants	Helps support the plan and provides resources
Parents/Guardians	0/9 participants	Helps support the plan
Outside Organizations	4/9 participants	Helps provide resources

Subtheme: Police/Fire Officers

Schools meet at least once a year with local police and firefighters to review the safety plans for fire drills, severe weather, and lockdowns. The meetings typically occur in the summer prior to the start of school. All nine participants reported meeting with police and firefighters about their reunification plan. Participant 3 shared: “I would say the reunification plan right now is specifically a majority by ourselves and our police officers.” Participant 4 involves police and fire in their monthly safety meetings.

So police and fire attend these meetings. So we invite them during that first meeting, we give them a list of all of our meetings. And so you Guys are welcome to come, you know....one of the big things this year is locking doors. And why we should have classroom doors locked. So it is nice to have committee members to support larger decisions.

School districts are structured to involve police and fire in their emergency planning to support all students in the event of an emergency or tragedy.

Subtheme: Parents/Guardians

None of the participants involved parents/guardians in the creation of their reunification plans and none involved parents in the exploration or determination of reunification sites.

Participant 2 said: “Not yet.” Participant 6 responded: “On the actual procedure, no.” However, parent/guardian feedback was gathered by Participant 6 when they practiced a reunification exercise.

Input was gathered as they went through the line as they went to go. We used probably 10 to 15 parents to go through, and actually go through the line, go through the whole scenario and wait. We used their feedback to see how we can, you know, streamline that a little bit better, little quicker we learn.

Parent/guardian feedback was not part of the planning process, but feedback was gathered when their district practiced reunification.

Subtheme: Outside Organizations

There are a variety of resources available to a school district that four participants mentioned in their interviews. These resources are not commonly known but can be very beneficial to school districts when training for reunification or in the event a reunification plan needs to be implemented. Participant 6 shared:

You know when we hooked up with emergency management and homeland security. Here (for transportation) we can use them. That was a resource that we didn't know that we could tap into that they would kind of be a unified command with us, and saying, hey we need buses. I can get 3 buses from FirstStudent or whatever busing company you can get. They're trying to get more. But guess what? They're still working other area districts. So what if we can't get bussing? Well, they can help assist us with other agencies or other busing or other things.

The additional resources provided by governmental agencies can help dramatically. Participant 6 continued:

But all these connections you make and you're like oh, wow! Let's go see what they have to offer. So we just went over there (Homeland Security) gave us a tour. You know they could provide tables. They can provide communications, a mobile office, port-o-potties, you know, whatever things you don't think about, and in the middle of the moment you know you're like well, I got a contact. All you gotta do is tell them, they'll look for it.

Participant 5 explained: "So we have our system. We have our fire department chief, police chief, Principal, our director of HR, and our city manager. It's good to have them all part of the process."

The DuPage County ROE is starting to put together a system of individuals who can help support other school districts in the event of a reunification. These professionals are the individuals in charge of reunification in their own districts who will have had training and possible experience with reunification. Participants 1 noted:

Why could we rely on that? Who wouldn't we send that, we would send ours to someone else. So that idea was created through the State's Attorney Office. They're setting up an MOU. So all of us sign on that. Will use this and pay for supplemental training and best equipment for the group. And so we took it to the next step in DuPage County, we are all adopting the I Love U Guys. They put in a request for the RX box. So everyone will physically have it. So it's already right here for you to adopt.

Many districts are interested in joining the DuPage ROE support; however, one participant did express concern that they would need to take this information to their Board of Education because of the MOU.

Theme 4 Discussion

Community members are a great resource that schools can tap into to provide additional support before, during, and after an emergency. They are able to support the school district in handling emergency situations and unifying families with their children. School districts need to

leverage these relationships prior to emergencies or tragedies to ensure they are supporting all stakeholders.

School Districts do a good job building relationships with police and fire. This is spurred on because the state requires that districts meet with both prior to the start of the year to review safety drills. This relationship is vital and can be one that is mutually beneficial. School must leverage the relationships they have built with police and fire fighters.

An area that schools must grow is involving parents/guardian in the planning and implementation process of reunification. Zero of the districts studied included parents/guardians in the process and this is a community resource that is under-utilized. Parents/guardians can provide necessary support and provide valuable information that school administrators are not aware of when they are creating their plans. They can be valuable observers when school are practicing the drills and can provide meaningful feedback.

Schools must leverage the outside organization when creating and preparing for their reunification plans. Organizations like Homeland Security, Emergency Management, and the Regional Office of Education can provide valuable resources and information that school can utilize to prepare for reunification or in the event of reunification. These resources must be used to support the efforts of school personnel.

Theme 5: Other Information

There were a variety of topics shared that focused on reunification or supported reunification efforts. The following paragraphs present the different ideas that can help make a reunification event successful. Participant 8 talked about a cell phone service called First Net.

The phone utilizes a separate cellular service that is given priority in times of high traffic.

Participant 8 explained:

Well, this is on first net. This is for law enforcement. It's all prioritized. And this is a push to talk device that actually has cell phone capabilities. So I've got groups. I push to talk with my security Guys. I can say campus monitors, over. They'll be right back. And so everyone has these. Those are like the Nextels, but better. So this is called. They call it a brick. Everybody's got a brick IP. Teachers have a brick when they go out.

The brick phones provide the school district the ability to always stay in contact with each other.

The phone is used when students leave their school building during the school day for physical education classes or when they attend a field trip off campus.

The DuPage ROE has a joint agreement that needs to school board approval to allow districts to share personnel and resources. Participants 1 said:

You know what's been awesome in law enforcement specifically do. DuPage County is the mutual aid task force that has come up. We had a couple of different, say swat teams and canine teams and other, you know, Major crash reconstruction teams, public integrity teams, forensics, units. We had all these, but they were maybe 8, 10 towns, and south DuPage, a bunch of the north, east, west whatever. So a couple of years ago DuPage put that together for everybody. So we have one team called Merit. It encompasses everything. Everybody's working off the same sheet of music for the police. So we're trying to do that in education.

Participant 6 noted: "If we could get that mutual aid and spread that through the county, whether you use it or not, whatever doesn't matter. But we have it, you know. Police have it. Fire, have it. Schools need it. We could share our resources. One of our people." This is a system other public organizations use and a way for districts to pool resources to support one another. Participant 6 also identified other governmental resources school districts can use to help support their staff for reunification and training.

So. And there's training that the fire department puts on it's down State. and the first one I went to it involved pretty much police and fire. On the first day, and they involved the school and that was one of the first tabletop scenarios that we did years and years ago.

What does it look like? Let's invite schools and see what it is And then what we took off with. And then we hosted 2 here. Yeah, and we involved all you know our entities here in town, and it's because a lot of us here in town. I grew up here in town, so I knew my dad was a police officer for 35 years, so we knew a lot of us. When we'd show up to an emergency we are like face to face. It's easier to know the people that you're working with in an emergency. You know that you can count on them. They can count on you. You know things like that we had a bus accident once. You know it's weird being there right in the middle of everything where you know, because just that relationship we build, and that that training a lot of eyes for all our agencies, and that that's what brings us back to the table every time. You know, when we hooked up with Emergency Management and Homeland Security. Here we can use them. That was a resource that we didn't know that we could tap into that would kind of be a unified command with us ...It's very, you know, like they want to help so much, and they just nobody knows they're there, and it's the hard part where you know. One of our safety consultants is introduced, which also was a firefighter here in town retired. But all these connections you make. and you're like oh, wow! Let's go see what they have to offer. So we just went over there gave us a tour. you know they could provide tables. They can provide communications, a mobile office, but a port of parties, you know, whatever things you don't think about, and in the middle of the moment. You know you're like, "Well, I got a contract.

Almost all participants spoke about how the DuPage ROE is putting together reunification kits for each district. The kits will be based on the methods supported by the I Love U Guys Foundation. The interviews with the participants shared multiple additional resources districts can use to support their reunification efforts. These resources can be purchased or shared in the event of an emergency.

Theme 5 Discussion

Through this research I was able to learn more about specific resources that schools can use to support their students and staff. The resources allow the ability to keep students safe on a day to day basis and in the event of an emergency. Schools must use these resources to ensure the safety of all students and staff.

First Net is a valuable resource that schools district are not aware they have access. First Net is a cellular service for first responders that provides them priority on cell phone networks. In event of an emergency there is a chance that many people will be attempting to use their cell phone, First Net ensures that emergency personnel and school districts will be able to make the necessary cell phone calls they need to make. Schools can also utilize First Net when they send their students outside of the school building or on field trips. This will ensure that no matter where they go, they will be able to access support they need.

The DuPage ROE has put together a task force of local individuals in charge or who have received training on reunification. In the event of an emergency, schools can share resources with other school districts. This is very similar to what police and fire do during emergencies. School districts Board of Education sign an MOU that allow other districts to provide resources to be utilized in the event of tragedy or emergency. This will allow trained individuals the ability to support other districts in need.

Districts must utilize the variety of resources available to them. Both fire and police can offer a variety of supports that can be beneficial to school districts. Districts must proactively seek out these supports and find ways to utilize them. Similarly, Homeland Security, Emergency Management, and the Regional Office of Education can offer similar supports to school districts.

Recommendations for School Districts

Each participant interviewed brought a different perspective and different ideas related to reunification. Appendix C is a compilation of those ideas in a Best Practice Document. The document is intended to be a checklist that goes behind the basic components of a reunification

plan. Each participant provided their unique flavor to reunification, and the document is a helpful checklist to support districts' reunification plans.

Discussion

The purpose of my study was to examine the fidelity in which school districts are prepared to implement their reunification plan in the event of tragedy or emergency. The specific questions answered in Paper 2 were

1. What does a typical reunification plan consist of within a school district?
2. Are school districts prepared to implement their reunification plans with fidelity?
3. How are students, staff, and parents/guardians prepared with prior knowledge of the plan and what is their role in reunification?

Through interviews, I was able to qualitatively gather data and determine to what extent school districts are prepared and/or if they have implemented their reunification plan and what they learned through the process of implementation.

Type of Incidents to Initiate Reunification

There are a variety of incidents or emergencies that could require implementation of an onsite or offsite reunification. An emergency can be described as:

A crisis event is an event that has potential to affect a population and is perceived to be unpredictable (happens suddenly and without warning), uncontrollable (creates feelings of helplessness or powerlessness), and extremely negative (may cause physical or emotional distress). (Brock et al., 2016, p. 4)

It is vital to be prepared and ready to implement reunification knowing the potential for foreseeable and unforeseeable emergencies. School districts need to be prepared for all types;

however, my research found that few districts have identified the foreseeable risks their individual school districts can face. Some districts were located close to airports, while others were close to trains. Each of these incidents could cause a different type of reunification, and schools need to be prepared for them. More work needs to be completed by schools/districts to identify potential risks and determine how they will respond to the emergencies.

Types of Reunification Plans

There are a variety of crisis response methods districts can implement. The following organizations have identified their own crisis management system: National Education Association, National School Safety and Security Services, National Association of School Psychologists, Illinois Sample School Emergency Operations Plan, FEMA Guide for Developing Emergency Operations Plan, I Love U Guys Foundation, and ALICE training. Each of these crisis management systems was discussed in the Review of Literature in Paper 1. Almost all of the districts have utilized the framework the DuPage County ROE has provided for reunification. Also, the DuPage ROE has provided reunification kits based on the I Love U Guys Foundation, and all are adopting their signage materials. This collaborative approach provides the necessary resources to school districts and helps to prepare them in the event they are required to implement a reunification plan.

Almost all of the districts had adopted the reunification template from the DuPage ROE. However, one district has not adopted it because they have not created a reunification plan. They do have an EOP (Emergency Operations Plan), but they do not specifically have a reunification plan. They did share they will need to develop one and most likely will base it on the DuPage ROE template. Almost all had reunification plans for each school, but a few had plans for their

district offices.

Components of a Reunification Plan

I discussed the four pillars of a reunification plan in Paper 1. The pillars discussed are operational roles and duties, transportation, communication, materials, supplies, and signage. These are the required components that must be included in a reunification plan. The pre-planning of a reunification exercise is vital to the success of implementation. The districts were prepared at a variety of different levels. Almost all have identified the operational roles and duties in their reunification plan. Most have assigned individuals to the specific roles and duties, but they do not have backups assigned or have backups to the backups. This is necessary to ensure that individuals clearly understand their roles and responsibilities because you never know who may not be available to help on certain days.

Some of the participants have identified how they will supply transportation from the school to the reunification site. Some reunification sites are within walking distance from the school. Others have their own district transportation from the school to their reunification site. Finally, some districts will utilize an external organization for their transportation company. Some have agreements with their transportation companies with support if needed. Some have made assumptions that they will receive support, while others have not had the discussion with the transportation company. Districts need to ensure that they have identified how students will be transported from schools to the reunification site. This is not something that should be figured out in the moment, it should be planned for ahead of the event or emergency.

Scenarios

Scenarios are an important way for schools to determine if they are prepared for possible emergencies they may face and to provide training for all staff members. All districts studied have completed tabletop exercises in which an emergency event is shared and the staff have to work throughout the situation. These scenarios provide opportunities for staff to discuss how they would respond to the situations but also provide staff the opportunity to hear how others would respond. Staff can learn from each other and use this learning possibly in the future if an emergency response is needed. Scenarios have been practiced by the researcher with teachers and have been very beneficial in helping to learn how to address a situation and to get the necessary resources for staff and students. Districts can create scenarios based on the specific possible threats their schools can face. However, very few participants have identified possible threats their schools may face. Each district has unique situations that can occur and their responses to similar situations can be very different. If districts have identified possible threats, they are able to create scenarios to help prepare staff and students.

Rehearsed or Practiced Reunification Plans

It is important that all schools be prepared and practice for possible threats they may face. All schools have the potential to face gun violence. However, the prominent location for school shootings is high schools, as 73% of shootings occurred at the high school level. The next largest group is middle schools at 22%. Elementary schools are at 2% along with other schools at 2% (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019). These data show that all schools need to be prepared for a school emergency and reunification after the emergency.

Some of the districts studied have either had to implement their reunification plan or have practiced it. These opportunities for practice or implementation have been tremendous learning opportunities for the districts. They have been able to learn how their staff handle the situations and adjust the reunification plans. Practice makes perfect, and implementing a reunification plan can be a great learning experience.

Students, Staff, and Parents/Guardians Prepared with Knowledge

My research found that there is limited staff who are aware of their district's reunification plans. Staff are expected to implement the plans in the event of a situation or emergency, but with limited knowledge and training, there is a chance things will not be successful. A couple of participants shared that they believe the roles are clear and that staff should be able to execute them with limited direction.

Most parents/guardians and students are not aware their schools have reunification plans in place. More proactive communication needs to occur. One way to proactively communicate plans is to involve parents/guardians in the planning process. School emergency committees must include parents and a clear communication network.

Having identified inclusion of parents and students in the planning process as one of the weaknesses of the first round of planning, principals were encouraged to hold meetings with them as well as with law enforcement and community leaders to discuss safe school plans. (Youth Violence, 2002)

Parents/guardians have additional information about the community they in which live that can help in the event of a reunification exercise. "Having identified inclusion of parents and students in the planning process as one of the weaknesses of the first round of planning, principals were encouraged to hold meetings with them as well as with law enforcement and

community leaders to discuss safe school plans” (Youth Violence, 2002). None of the participants included parents/guardians in the planning phase of reunification. This is an area that needs to be strengthened in all of the researched school districts.

Communication

Communication around reunification can be categorized as proactive and reactive communication. Proactive and reactive communication are very different, but districts that proactively communicate about reunification can be very successful in the event that reactive communication needs to occur.

Districts can and should proactively communicate information about their reunification plans. A couple of participants shared that they proactively communicate information about their reunification plans. They keep the communication very general and do not share a wealth of information. They want their communities to know that they have a plan in place and are prepared if a reunification exercise needs to occur. Others shared they need to be more proactive with their plans with both their students and parents. They identified this as an area for improvement and said they are working to find ways to share this information with their communities. Finally, some explained that they do not want to share that they have a plan. They believe they are giving away too much information to potential threats and are adamantly opposed to giving this information. It is the recommendation of the researcher to proactively communicate that districts have reunification plans and that they are prepared for any type of incident or emergency the schools may face.

All districts identified need to be prepared for reactive communication in the event they need to implement a reunification plan. Some districts have created templates they will use.

Others have an individual in charge of communication or have departments that will communicate information out to communities. Others studied did not have communication people or departments and did not have templates put together. One participant has created four groups to communicate with after a school emergency who will tailor communication to each group. Communication needs to be planned prior to the event or emergency.

Are Districts Prepared to Implement with Fidelity?

The focus of my research was to determine whether school districts have reunification plans and whether they are prepared to implement them. Almost all of the studied school districts have reunification plans, but not all were prepared to implement them. Every district was at different stages in the planning and preparation of reunification. Some had thorough plans and had practiced reunification multiple times, while others were behind. More work needs to be completed to ensure all districts are prepared and ready to implement their plans to ensure they are ready when the time comes.

Future Research Considerations

This research was centralized to a county in Northern Illinois, and the Regional Office of Education has taken the lead on reunification and is working to provide resources to help school districts be prepared in the event of reunification. Expanding this research of this study to examine other counties in the state of Illinois and outside of the state is recommended. The researcher had a prior professional relationship with the safety coordinator at the DuPage ROE and was able to have contact with him to answer questions. It is recommended that future research should also interview the person leading reunification in their county ROE.

Conclusion

Nine districts were studied to determine to what extent they were prepared to implement their reunification plans. Each district had a number of positive things occurring in their district, but each district still had room for improvement of their plan. Schools must be prepared to implement their reunification plan to ensure the safety and social emotional concerns of students, staff, parents/guardians, and the community. The intention of this research was to determine how prepared school districts are to implement their reunification plan in the event of an emergency situation. It was determined through an empirical study that the school districts in DuPage County are prepared at very different levels. Some are well prepared and have practiced and/or have implemented their plans. While others are not fully prepared to implement a reunification plan successfully. This research is important because there can be a lot of harm to all stakeholders in the event of reunification, and if an event or emergency is foreseeable, then school districts need to be prepared to address the situation.

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APPENDIX A

SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN DUPAGE COUNTY

CUSD	K-8	9-12
<u>Lisle Community Unit SD #202</u>	<u>Itasca SD #10</u>	<u>Glenbard Township High SD #87</u>
<u>Indian Prairie SD #204</u>	<u>Bloomington SD #13</u>	<u>Community High SD #99</u>
<u>Elmhurst Community Unit SD #205</u>	<u>Marquardt SD #15</u>	<u>Fenton Community High School</u>
<u>Westmont Community Unit SD #201</u>	<u>Medinah SD #11</u>	<u>DuPage High SD #88</u>
<u>Wheaton/Warrenville Community SD #200</u>	<u>Queen Bee SD #16</u>	<u>Lake Park High SD #108</u>
<u>Naperville Community Unit SD #203</u>	<u>Wood Dale SD #7</u>	<u>Hinsdale Township High SD #86</u>
	<u>Keeneyville SD #20</u>	<u>Community High SD #94</u>
	<u>Benjamin SD #25</u>	
	<u>West Chicago Elementary SD #33</u>	
	<u>Winfield SD #34</u>	
	<u>Glen Ellyn SD #41</u>	
	<u>Lombard SD #44</u>	
	<u>Villa Park SD #45</u>	
	<u>Salt Creek SD #48</u>	
	<u>Butler SD #53</u>	
	<u>Downers Grove SD #58</u>	
	<u>Maercker SD #60</u>	
	<u>Darien SD #61</u>	
	<u>Gower SD #62</u>	

	<u>Cass SD #63</u>	
	<u>Center Cass SD #66</u>	
	<u>Woodridge SD #68</u>	
	<u>Community Consolidated SD #89</u>	
	<u>Community Consolidated SD #93</u>	
	<u>Burr Ridge Community Consolidated SD 180</u>	
	<u>Community Consolidated SD #181</u>	
	<u>Roselle SD #12</u>	

APPENDIX B

RESEARCHER CREATED QUESTIONS

Background Knowledge: The following questions will have open response options.

What is your position title? Open Response

How long have you been in your current position? Open Response

What is your highest level of education? Open Response

How many years of experience do you have? Open Response

Research Questions	Interview Questions
<p>What is the status of the reunification plan in their school districts?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Does your school district have a reunification plan? If so, can you give me a synopsis of your plan? ● What is the purpose of your reunification plan? (efficiency, care, checking off an ISBE box that you have a plan?) ● What would differentiate an onsite reunification vs. off site? ● When was the last time your document was updated and how often do you update it? ● Have you identified a list of possible emergencies and if so what emergencies? ● Do you have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with community partners? If not, how do you go about working with the community? ● Do districts and schools have a plan or only one? ● How do you support people with disabilities during reunification? ● Who has been part of the planning for the school crisis preparedness and response plan? Was fire/police included in the planning process? ● What ways did you incorporate community input on safe locations to reunify?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is the copy provided to public agencies including police and fire? Do they have copies of building schematics? ● Do you have supplies, materials, and signage ready? If so, what supplies do you have ready? ● What are the specific roles you have identified? Have you identified backups for those roles? ● How will you transport students to the reunification site?
<p>Have you rehearsed your reunification plan and to what extent have you practiced the plan?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What training have you provided for staff? Who have you designated as the person to provide the training? What evidence do you use to ensure that everyone understands his or her role in a crisis? ● System in place to notify school staff and administrators of threatening or concerning student behaviors before an attack? ● Do you practice safety drills? How many and how often? Have you practiced reunification? Have you done a tabletop exercise to analyze emergency situations?
<p>What communication has occurred with parents and students about the reunification plan?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is your communication plan? ● If you need to build one, what are the necessary components to include in a reunification plan? ● How is the plan communicated with appropriate stakeholders? With letters or emails explaining the crisis response procedures and the reason for them? ● How do you inform families and guardians about the reunification process in advance? ● How to clearly describe their roles and responsibilities in reunification?

Have you thought through specific scenarios that can occur at the reunification site?

- How do you verify that an adult is authorized to take custody of a student?
- How do you ensure students do not leave on their own?
- How do you protect the privacy of students and parents from the media?
- How frequently will families be updated?
- How do you account for technology barriers faced by students, staff, parents, and guardians?
- How do you effectively address the language access barrier faced by students, staff, parents, and guardians?
- How do you plan to utilize technology in the event of an emergency? Do you utilize social media applications to communicate information?

APPENDIX C

BEST PRACTICES DOCUMENT

Reunification Plans

- Create a Reunification Plan
- Practice the Reunification Plan
- Districts need to have an identified Reunification Site with an MOU with the facility
- Involving parents/guardians in the reunification planning process
- Have reunification meet up spots for students that run
- Do you have a backup reunification site if you are unable to use your reunification site?

Operational Roles and Duties

- Assign individuals to the specific roles in the reunification plan
- Assigned backups and backups to the backups for the individual roles
- Clearly explain expectations and roles for each individual

Transportation

- Create plan to ensure students can be safely transported to reunification site
- If using external transportation, have an agreement to provide support if needed
- What is the plan if reunification is needed at another school's dismissal time

Communication Plan

- Identify possible scenarios that would require reunification
- Four groups to communicate information with
- Tailored communication for each group
- Purchase cell phones on First Net

Materials, Supplies, and Signage

- Have reunification kits put together and easily accessible
- Designate someone to pick up water and snacks for the reunification site
- Ensure all electronics are charged at least bi-monthly

Others

- Explore resources with Homeland Security
- Explore resources with Emergency Management
- Explore resources with Regional Office of Education
- Explore apps or systems to use to notify staff and students of an emergency
- Create District/School Safety Committee
 - Meet Monthly
 - Involve multiple stakeholders
 - Administrators
 - Teachers
 - Support Staff

- Police and Fire Officers
- Emergency Management
- Parents/Guardian