



Empower Schools with Tools

Executive Summary

This case study summarizes a presentation at the National Symposium on Model Performance in Fire Prevention in May 2012.

A risk assessment demonstrated the need for training of school personnel to respond to fire and non-fire emergencies, including school violence. As a result, train-the-trainer training was provided to School Incident Response Teams (SIRT's) throughout the school district.

School personnel are now empowered with fire prevention and safety knowledge and tools and are working to change old, complacent habits. School personnel model safety awareness at school, home, and the wider community. The school district emergency manager states, "SIRT members advise that the regional fire safety training was an eye opener. They now create more detailed fire safety plans at their homes and places of work and no longer take everything for granted, assuming fire safety is always taken care of by other staff. They now take an active role in school fire safety and other community safety committees."

Overview

In response to a survey of school personnel indicating the need for fire and life safety training, regional fire departments joined forces with county school district emergency management under the umbrella of the non-profit Fire Prevention Association of Nevada. Using a DHS Fire Prevention and Safety Grant, fire personnel from the Sparks, Reno, North Lake Tahoe, and Sierra (Nevada) Fire Departments developed and delivered proactive fire-safety and prevention curriculum to School Incident Response Team members throughout the district. Ten administrative, support, custodial, counseling, and teaching staff members comprise each SIRT as the designated "first-line-of-defense" in emergencies within schools.

Formative Evaluation (qualitative or quantitative risk assessment)

The area is prone to earthquakes, wildland fires, drought, and flooding, and is at risk of terrorism/WMD and hazardous materials incidents. Yet risk assessment shows the biggest vulnerabilities cited for the school district are lack of training for school personnel and increased violence within schools. Specific problems included:

- State reports cite problems with all school-district emergency plans
- No record of comprehensive fire-safety training for staff exists
- School personnel do not know how to prevent fire-related casualties

- 14% of teachers surveyed "Strongly disagreed" when asked if they feel safe at school
- Only 2% of principals felt staff is "highly knowledgeable" on conducting emergency drills
- 78% said they *do not* know how to request or have not conducted emergency training
- Incident data reflects high increases in crimes
 - 100% increase in bomb threats
 - 811% increase in gang incidents
 - 20% increase in unlawful disturbance at school (including malicious-intent fire alarms)
 - The Washoe County Youth Firesetting Intervention Program and local law-enforcement agencies report ever-increasing fire-setting activities.

Our proposed solution was to train SIRT members in train-the-trainer (T-t-T) classes so they can then teach the rest of the school about the knowledge and materials needed to reduce injuries and loss of life and property.

Our objectives were to empower schools by providing SIRT members with:

- Train the Trainer: Fire Safety Awareness and Resources
 - General Prevention & Awareness (for both school and home)
 - School Exit Drill Procedures and Requirements
 - Youth Firesetting: How and When to Refer Youth for Intervention
- Training for SIRT Members Only (not as Train-the-Trainer) on
 - When and how to use a portable fire extinguisher
 - Recognizing & correcting basic safety concerns using a Fire Life Safety Checklist
- Knowledge to help teachers teach fire safety and prevention curriculum in their classrooms
- For 3rd grade and under, SIRT members use CD with PowerPoint given to all elementary schools in 2008
- For 4th grade and older, SIRT members use PowerPoint for "General Fire Safety Education" with this program

Process Evaluation (analysis of the program's development and early implementation)

Curriculum development involved:

- Regional team with decision makers of fire departments and the school district
- Production of 1250 training booklets and DVDs with material segmented to fit time, evaluative measures, and resources and references
- Purchase of electronic system and instructional DVD for portable fire extinguishers.

Training sessions for of the 123 schools in the district were scheduled and initiated. Purchased resources included a digital extinguisher training simulator; training binders with dividers; printed material; an instructional DVD; CDs with all training resources; magnetic escape plans and "Respect Fire with Smart Choices" wristbands.

Review of initial evaluations necessitated re-direction of efforts. Initial evaluations expressed the need for all curriculum components, but indicated more time needed to cover the curriculum versus the 60-90 minutes each school could allot. To streamline training yet retain the entire curriculum, two SIRT representatives from each school were invited to one of five T+T classes taught through December 2011. Each representative is now responsible for sharing the material with other SIRT and school staff members.

Impact Evaluation (identification of measurable changes that are cognitive gains or behavior changes that reduced risk)

Pre-tests, post-tests, and evaluations were administered during T+T sessions and evaluated to assess knowledge gained. These evaluative components were also provided to SIRT members for their use while teaching the material. The regional fire team will collect these and evaluate results every six months for five years beginning June of 2012. For T+T sessions, participant comments on evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. Participants missed an average of seven questions prior to training and one-half question after.

Outcome Evaluation (longer term documentation that supports reduction of injury, death or economic losses)

For a minimum of five years, the school district will collect data (including names of staff trained, pre- and post test scoring, and evaluation results) to determine the impact and effectiveness of the provided training.

They will also track school-safety checklists and retain a record of problems noted and corrected. Records will be maintained to identify trends that include the cause of fires and the effect training had on preventing losses. Beginning in May 2012, responses to annual school surveys will be benchmarked against answers to the 2005-2008 surveys cited in the risk assessment above.

Standardization of fire safety procedures and training through this program has eliminated confusion and opened the lines of communication among the schools and the five fire departments that respond within the county school district. This proactive solution is expected to decrease time required to handle fire-safety deficiencies and crises and enable the school district to better prioritize and budget. As the educational messages spread throughout the community, behavioral changes will be reflected by a reduction in fire incidents, fewer deaths and injuries, and reduced property damage.

Recommendations for Others

Open communication and flexibility are crucial to this program. Coordination of a regional partnership necessitates patience and time in order to schedule around multiple obligations, time conflicts, and staff shortages. Top-down commitment is essential. Ensure buy-in of superintendent and ensure supervisors will attend and mandate attendance.

For More Information

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To see an expanded version of this case study that was presented at the 2012 National Symposium on Model Performance in Fire Prevention hosted by Vision 2020, click <http://strategicfire.org/page.cfm/go/2012-Model-Performance>.