

School Response to Community Crises*

Community-level crises – natural disasters, economic disruptions, and other large-scale events – have a direct impact on teaching and learning.

Crisis response and prevention is one of six domains of a comprehensive system of student/learning support (<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mh20a.pdf>). Schools generally have solid plans in place for on-campus crises. However, when a community-wide crisis occurs, the plans often lack sufficient detail about how schools and community systems will work together during large-scale crises and for longer-term recovery.

For schools, developing a more comprehensive crisis intervention plan is essential. The objectives are to provide immediate emergency responses and ways for school and community personnel and students and families to return to normalcy as quickly as feasible. Also, plans must address residual (longer-term) problems, and explore ways to minimize the impact of future crisis events.

Schools are critical stabilizing institutions in community crises, but their effectiveness depends on **pre-established, operationalized collaborations** with community systems. Without this, responses remain fragmented and reactive. This resource focuses on this concern.

Understanding the Broad Impact of a Community Crisis on Schools

Community crises may be single acute events (e.g., fires, earthquakes) or chronic conditions (e.g., homelessness, poverty). In either case, they affect students, families, and staff by disrupting access to basic needs, increasing stress, and creating instability – all of which are barriers to learning and teaching.

Importantly, single events often generate long-term consequences (e.g., displacement, financial stress, physical and mental health problems), blurring distinctions between immediate and ongoing needs.

A community-wide crisis is typically experienced simultaneously across four overlapping levels.

- *Individuals*: Effects on students, staff (e.g., trauma, displacement)
- *Small Groups*: Impacted subgroups (e.g., evacuated neighborhoods)
- *School*: Disruptions to operations (e.g., closures, damaged facilities)
- *Community*: Widespread effects across systems (e.g., housing loss, economic disruption)

Effective responses to crises require planning for all four levels and for handling both immediate and ongoing needs.

The proper handling of any crisis is essential to minimizing negative impact. Community crises disrupt the conditions necessary for learning by affecting access to essential resources, creating instability, and increasing stress.

*Material for this document was generated by Madelyne Goforth as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2026.

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Three Interrelated Arenas of Need

The impacts can be organized into three interdependent arenas:

1. *Survival* (e.g., immediate needs – access to basic resources such as food, water, medical care, school materials)

Addressing survival needs is essential returning to normalcy.

2. *Stability* (e.g., short- to mid-term needs – continuity in living arrangements and daily routines, financial capacity to meet ongoing needs, regular school participation)

Stability enables resumed engagement in schooling.

3. *Recovery* (e.g., Long-Term Needs – social, emotional, and mental health supports, economic rebuilding and long-term financial security, restoration of community connections and functioning)

Recovery involves more than returning to prior conditions; it involves adapting to changed circumstances and addressing enduring effects.

Note: Disruptions in any one arena can undermine functioning in the others. Effective responses require collaborative attention to all three.

Exhibit **A Cycle for Crisis Responding by a School**

An effective response follows a cyclical and iterative process:

Detect → Identify → Stabilize → Restore → Recover → Review

1. Detect and Classify the Crisis
 - Define the nature and scope
 - Identify affected stakeholders
 - Develop a shared understanding across collaborators
2. Identify Immediate Needs
 - Assess priority concerns (safety, resources, housing)
 - Determine organizational capacities and pressing gaps
3. Stabilize Operations
 - Ensure safety and communication
 - Provide access to essential resources
 - Maintain or re-establish schooling
4. Restore Continuity
 - Resume routines and schedules
 - Reopen facilities or establish alternatives
 - Rebuild consistent learning environments
5. Support Long-Term Recovery
 - Address ongoing mental health and social needs
 - Monitor emerging issues as conditions evolve
 - Attend to equity gaps widened by the crisis
6. Review and Improve
 - Conduct after-action assessments
 - Identify strengths, gaps, and lessons learned
 - Integrate improvements into future planning

This cycle emphasizes that recovery is not a return to the status quo, but a process of adaptation and strengthening.

No single organization has sufficient capacity to address large-scale crises alone, making collaboration essential.

Weaving School and Community Responses Together

Effective school responses to community-wide crises depend on the strength of pre-established school–community collaborations. Given limited school resources, no single organization has sufficient capacity to address large-scale disruptions alone. This makes it essential to have (a) formal agreements (e.g., memoranda of understanding – MOUs) with community agencies, (b) a well-designed operational infrastructure for communication, resource mapping, and data sharing, and (c) clearly defined roles and responsibilities before, during, and after crises.

When these elements are not in place, response efforts tend to fragment. Agencies duplicate services in some arenas while leaving critical gaps in others; communication becomes inconsistent or delayed; and schools are forced into ad hoc decision-making under pressure. In such conditions, staff are overextended, vulnerable populations are more likely to be overlooked, and recovery efforts become uneven across communities. Reliance on “informal coordination” is insufficient because it depends on personal relationships, is difficult to scale under stress, and often breaks down as demands increase and conditions evolve. In contrast, formalized collaboration provides the structure, clarity, and continuity needed to align resources, maintain accountability, and sustain coordinated action throughout both immediate response and longer-term recovery.

Illustrative Case: The 2025 Los Angeles Fires

The 2025 Los Angeles wildfires demonstrated the profound impact, immediate and longer-term challenges, and why it is essential to have a plan for school and community to work together.

Immediate Impacts

- Widespread school closures
- Displacement of students and staff
- Disruptions affecting hundreds of thousands of students
- Rapid shifts to remote or alternative learning

School Responses

- Activation of distance learning systems
- Use of temporary facilities
- Meal distribution and access to other basic resources
- Schools serving as community hubs

Ongoing Challenges

- Prolonged housing and schooling displacement
- Insurance and financial instability
- Mental health impacts
- Uneven recovery across communities

Schools Can't do it Alone

Schools can provide stability, continuity, and connection, but they cannot solve structural community problems alone. Strong pre-existing collaborative relationships are essential.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Expand school roles within a systems' framework – Position schools as key collaborators in enhancing community resilience, not as isolated responders.

Invest in infrastructure for collaboration – Develop MOUs, shared protocols, and resource mapping before crises occur.

Address immediate and longer-term needs – Plan for single acute events and chronic conditions.

Prioritize equity in recovery – Explicitly identify vulnerable populations and monitor disparities in access, assistance, and outcomes; target supports to those most affected.

Embed continuous improvement processes – Ensure that crisis response systems are evolved based on experience and formal evaluations.

Concluding Comments

Community crises reshape the conditions for learning in profound ways. Schools play a vital role in responding to these disruptions, but their effectiveness depends on effective school-community collaboration.

A comprehensive approach – grounded in understanding crisis scope, addressing stakeholder needs, and collaborating across organizations – enables schools to move from reactive responses to proactive, systemic support.

The challenge is to develop an effective operational infrastructure that fully embeds a systemic approach to crisis response and prevention.

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