# MAJOR CRITICAL INCIDENT CHECKLIST

Although they are rare in occurrence, a major critical incident in a school system can have significant and long lasting ramifications not only to the physical structure, but more importantly, to the emotional and psychological well-being of everyone involved in the community.

Below are some suggestions for you to consider as you enter the response, planning, and recovery phases of any critical incident. This list is meant to be a mental checklist, so that important steps are not forgotten in the middle of the response. It is not uncommon for local decision-makers to be pulled in so many directions that some considerations go overlooked. Some recommendations are particular to specific crises, and will be noted in obvious fashion.

People will be looking to YOU for answers. Although not the general rule in these situations, you will be best served if you keep an open mind and anticipate some chaos, rumors, potentially inappropriate behavior from inside and outside your district. The purpose of this word of caution is not meant to cause alarm, but just raise awareness. People at the focal point of a tragedy can tend to be hyper-focused as they deal with the ebb and flow of an incredible amount of information, and contingencies can occur without warning.

## Keep an open mind and surround yourself with your strong, supportive people; they will serve you well.

This chapter is designed to be a list of friendly reminders, and serve as a resource when you’re being pulled in a myriad of different directions. This resource has been compiled by your colleagues from **NEMLEC STARS,** including public and private educators, administrators, school-based mental health professionals, police officers, and fire officials. It is meant as a guideline only, and conferring with the experts in your district is still the recommended approach as you deal with this incident.

Please remember to take care of yourself too, so that you may best serve your district in this incredible time of need. There are many public and private resources and colleagues in other school districts, as well as many other professionals statewide at your disposal, eager to help. You don’t have to navigate these waters alone!

The **NEMLEC STARS** team hopes this resource will serve you well, and we are here to support all **NEMLEC** school districts in any way we can.

## IMMEDIATE CONCERNS FOR EARLY ON IN CRISIS

* Security of scene, students, staff, first responders.
* Determine if evacuation/reunification will be utilized. Is transportation necessary?”
* Local or regional buses available if needed?
* Separate and private area for parent/student reunification.
* Are achievable goals different for before and/or after school hours, transition periods, etc?
* Communicate with staff, students, and families as often possible during and after the event.
* Communicate with pre-established relocation sites and transportation companies (private and public) for possible need of services.
* Activate local school-based and district-wide crisis teams, crisis recovery teams.
* For Incident Command and leadership personnel representing all disciplines: Assign someone to scribe for you! You are making decisions. Someone else should be documenting for you, in a clear and concise manner for later review, and harvesting info for reports, potential recovery of financial losses, and protection during litigation,
to name a few examples.
* Contact appropriate public safety officials, district/regional crisis teams, superintendent of schools, city/town management, DPW, other schools/organizations etc., that can support your needs.
* Early on in the incident, you should exchange cell phone/email contact info with major decision-makers and planners on scene, to account for communication after hours and in the days to come.
* Sign-in sheets for major planning meetings. Who was there? This helps later on in reporting.
* Physically, where are immediately affected families relative to this incident? Is a School/Law Enforcement liaison necessary? For how long?
* Do I need to cancel classes for this school, all schools in district?
* Depends on scope and significance of crisis.
* Do I need to cancel any impacted after school activities (plays, clubs, sports) in district or traveling outside of district?
* Safety check of community. Who else is affected? What about when school is not in session (holiday/seasonal breaks)? Consider the ripple effect on your community.
* Identify chain of command. Is it a unified command in some areas and not in others? Can it be flexible in some parts? I.e, District Attorney, superintendent of schools, police chief, fire chief, etc. Who are the major players? Who has what role and authority? Keep an open line of communication to work collectively toward a common purpose: the fullest recovery of the school community possible.
* Identify “go-to” staff in your building or in district that you can lean on for a variety of necessary tasks: liaison between police, victims’ families, perpetrator’s (if student) family, scribe/record keeping, and helping to establish a memorial, etc.
* You will not be able to stay ahead of social media, but getting out some information from a public information officer as soon as possible may reduce rumors and false stories. If you have the ability, maintain your monitoring and info sharing.

**CAUTION: Be mindful of sharing confidential and/or sensitive information.**

## ONGOING ISSUES AND PLANNING

* Addressing faculty and students in separate assemblies/classrooms.
* Address faculty first for crisis briefing, formulate/advise of plans, then address students.
* Handouts can be provided for faculty and students on dealing with grief and other emergencies.
* Consider having an additional faculty meeting at the end of the day for briefing and review of self-care guidelines.
* Hold off-site meetings if appropriate – consider if law enforcement security is needed.
* Remember the athletic director, coaches, custodial, support staff, substitutes and others that may not be in building on a daily basis. The message/plan should account for all of your staff, whether full-time or not.
* Is/was the student on an IEP? Does that affect anything in your response and planning?
* Consider religious, cultural, ethnicity factors – do you need translation services? Will it be necessary to translate written or electronic materials?
* Parent information nights – great way to share information on response and planning, and how you will be helping their children.
* Consult with law enforcement and DA’s office if crisis involves a crime about what can be lawfully shared so as to not impede the overall investigation and future trial if applicable.
* Handouts should be provided to parents on grief and/or other appropriate material relative to the critical incident.
* Provide coverage or extra coverage for victim’s classes – who?
* How to handle the classroom? Is any victim a student or a teacher?
* Who will take over teaching? How do you select them temp vs. permanent? Support them; this is a difficult new role for them.
* Provide extra substitutes for the hallways and common areas for the first few days of school to help cover classes for staff that may need a break and to help identify students that are having difficulty and getting them to help.
* Receiving and managing community support.
* Outpouring of support, donations, food, flowers, cards.
* You may have to identify publicly what you need/don’t need and/or want as your school can be overwhelmed.
* Relative to the school community and responding personnel, remember food, hydration, sanitary facilities, and tissues, for your staff and other people present helping out.
* Make available various stress-reduction activities (coloring, stress balls, etc.).
* Union/Labor management concerns.
* Legal concerns – advise/consult legal counsel.
* The local municipality’s legal counsel, as well as school department counsel should be contacted immediately to inform them of the incident and to ask for advice for immediate concerns and for the duration of the incident.
* Do you need to remove victims/perpetrators from: (*Check with law enforcement entity if a crime involved – any of this may have significant evidentiary value!)*
* Emergency notification systems (Connect-Ed, Alert Now etc.).
* Mailing lists.
* Class lists electronic and/or paper, grade book, substitute plans, go-kits, recess roster.
* School website.
* Voice mail inbox for staff member.
* Social media sites, email portals, faculty/student management portals.
* Clean out the classroom and/or office of the deceased staff member.
* Consider what to do with displayed work of the deceased student and/or perpetrator.
* Clean out hallway locker, locker room and/or team room, and/or classroom, and after school activity locker storage area.
* Adjust configuration of the seating in classroom of student that is deceased and/or perpetrator.
* When necessary, meet with other district administration to provide updated information, and support and guidance for the other schools that will be dealing with the incident as well.
* Inform private and charter school within the district for the same reasons and inform neighboring districts when appropriate.
* Did the victim/suspect have siblings at their schools?
* Reminder: Do not send notification to the family of the direct victim (ex: the child killed
in an accident).

## MEMORIALS

* Temporary (set a deadline & communicate).
* Permanent: appropriateness, location, what does it look like, how will having a permanent memorial affect students, staff, the community? Is it a good idea?
* Easels, with white boards, markers, post it notes, condolences book
* Monitor content to ensure that it is appropriate.
* How has your district done them in the past?
* Under what circumstances? Consider issue of setting expectations/precedent beforehand.
* Location appropriate – safety/emotional considerations, expectations from others/groups
* Consider “living memorials”.
* Donations to causes that victim was involved in, charity drives, road races, etc. Consider having community members/parents take charge of living memorials instead of the school.
* Consider need for counselors on hand when first established, especially if on site of school grounds.
* Community vigils which may impact your school community, may occur.

## MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

* Provide staging off of school grounds
* Reasonable and lawful site lines for photo opportunities for them, or they will find a
way – very resource draining and upsetting
for staff and students.
* Where do the communication/press briefings occur?
* Neutral area vs. school grounds, why? Will be driven by type of crisis.
* Are you looking to show school is safe?
* Do you hold off-site to be more sensitive to victims?
* Who is the local Public Information Officer?
* Unified press releases where appropriate.
* Inform school committee, and city council, selectmen, etc. to keep public comments to themselves for the duration of the incident. One spokesperson will release statements
to the press and community.
* Anticipate that you may be called at work, home, or cell phone.
* Be aware of media interviewing students and faculty as they leave school grounds or at their homes, as well as neighbors; remind staff that you will have ONE designee to speak.
* Be aware of the many methods used by media to gain access to staff and students (blast emails to faculty – harvested from your school website, kids via Facebook and other forms of social media, such as Twitter) asking them to get photos of scene for them, make statements etc.
* What is the information process to communicate to staff, students, community?
* Do you need to obtain/hire a press liaison with experience in school crisis communication management?
* Staff, students, and parents will want to hear from school leadership!
* Morning announcements – how does that look?
* One announcement from Principal
* Over PA (**not recommended**)
* In an assembly?
* Announcement read by each teacher at a designated time, from scripted and authorized statement with time to process and ask questions.

## ANTICIPATING QUESTIONS

* How do I tell staff, students, parents, community \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  occurred?
* Is there a script I can use, resources at my disposal?
* Parents coming to school/calling.
* Staff, student, parents – am I safe, is the building safe, is my child safe?
* Personal possessions – **respectful of family’s wishes.**
* Are they of evidentiary significance? Always partner with law enforcement to be sure
* What do I do with the seat/desk in classroom?
* What do I do with the contents of the hallway locker/physical education locker and/or team/ extracurricular activity locker and/or team room?
* What do I do with any school work on display in the classroom, around the school, and/or on the school website?
* What do I do with personal storage in other classrooms like art, music, vocational classrooms?
* What do I do about social media accounts of victims, perpetrators?
* How do I ensure removal of ConnectEd, email address, voice left on school phone message, attendance sheets, office mail box, Student Information System?

## TRAUMA SCENES

* This process **must** be authorized through local Police Chief/District Attorney’s Office.
* Maintain integrity of investigation. If investigation is hampered by the release of inappropriate information, the community may not achieve full closure, district could face legal action. Talk with District Attorney’s Office and local Police Chief first prior to cleaning or altering in any way.
* Closing off scene of trauma/death. For how long?
* Can it be re-opened?
* Should you re-open it?
* Outside professional cleaning and sanitization services.
* It is highly recommended that you not allow cell phones to enter the area (so no photos can be taken and leaked to media/social media).
* Thorough second and third checks to make sure no evidence of scene is visible or left behind, *after* the cleaning.

## WAKES/FUNERALS

* Family’s wishes?
* Who will be attending?
* How to arrange for transportation?
* Coordinated travel?
* Staff and students going on their own?
* If using buses, will parents be joining their kids on the bus?
* Police escort possible for longer distances?
* Walk through at funeral home or church?
* Answer questions as they arise, regarding what a wake or funeral service looks like, might be their first one and may be experiencing anxiety; encourage students to talk to their parents/guardians.
* Utilize mental health staff to work with students directly impacted (sports teams, band, etc.).
* Arranging coverage for staff to attend (substitutes/administrative coverage), as well as extra coverage in hallways if appropriate.
* Not every child or staff member will want to go or feel comfortable going and may express the desire to stay behind – they should be supported in this decision and not made to feel badly about it.
* Consider if sports teams/extracurricular groups will be impacted.

## COUNSELING

* What crisis services do I have at my disposal?
* How do I set it up? Who should coordinate?
* Implement the District’s counseling team or pre-established, contracted, outside service providers, if you have one.
* Provide multiple private counseling areas on-scene or off-site if appropriate.
* It is advisable to have a separate area for staff.
* Identify vulnerable students and staff as quickly as possible through school officials, student reporting, on-scene crisis counselors.
* Provide “escorts” to triage/support areas to prevent flight of emotionally overcome staff and students.
* Psychological triage and identify those in need of future resources.
* Is it an emergency? Get help immediately, if not, provide referrals and/or guidance for next steps.
* Long term resources: Who is available?  Who do I trust to refer to?
* Use caution when accepting help from volunteer crisis groups you know nothing about. Fully vet them to ensure licensure and that services offered/background are appropriate to your needs. Crises draw out all kinds of people who may be looking to have access to the crisis/crime scene and/or offering services for a fee (just generating business). A service that charges is not necessarily bad; just know who you are dealing with.
* Teaching phase: Have a qualified clinician provide a separate session to help educate staff to look out for warning signs for colleagues and students.
* Consider providing separate sessions for parents, also.
* Don’t forget: Siblings/family members (victim or perpetrator) in school affected, other schools (could be student or staff) in district.
* Neighboring districts? What is the impact? Media coverage/harassment, bullying, etc. – contact and alert them. Bring them into the planning if deemed necessary and appropriate, i.e., if there is a significant bridge of your crisis into one or more of their schools (siblings, staff related to victim/perpetrator).
* Can you provide extra staff, substitutes, and public safety personnel, when students return to school?
* Establish a plan for staff and student return. Is it segmented? Over hours? Days? Longer?
* Include first responders in your ongoing counseling plan, when appropriate.
* Handouts for staff, students, emergency responders, and families for signs and symptoms of trauma and grief.
* Don’t forget to include the night shift staff, as they may have a reaction/relationship with the emergency and/or student or staff member involved.

## Remember, the goal is to return to a sense of normalcy (even if it’s a “new normal”) as soon as possible – but this is not to say that you rush it. Listen to your colleagues, the advice from qualified experts and the staff and student body to see how they are reacting, and listen to your own well-developed instincts.

## FUTURE CONCERNS

* Check in with administration and staff at periodic intervals.
* How are they? How are the students?
* Pay close attention to circle of friends, faculty, and family around victim(s) and perpetrator(s).
* Have you identified any long term effects and/or mental health needs?
* Prepare for plans for uniform recognition by teams or clubs.
* Prepare for recognition (or not), at graduation and/or in yearbook, depending on the age of the child.
* Anniversary dates/important dates: court hearings, motions, similar news occurring in the future that may lead media to re-examine your case, other anniversary dates for victims, staff, students, perpetrators that may share a closeness to cause an impact.
* School should consider putting a notice in student file (siblings, too, if appropriate) if impacted by crisis/trauma, or death, to follow them as they move through system. This will warn of anniversary dates, and make faculty aware if similar situations arise. In the future you may see unexplained drop in performance, attendance, and/or discipline issues at certain times of year. New teachers may not understand why.
* Long term counseling or mental health support from professional local or state resources (grief and loss experts, trauma experts, Critical Incident Stress Debriefings).
* Students and staff will react to trauma and grief differently and at different times. Other events could trigger a relapse or first time reaction to this new incident and a past incident. The staff or student may not have any visible signs and symptoms but could a week, month, or year later.
* Consider seeking grant funding to support long range goals.
* A word of caution: grantors will often publicize the release of funds to local news outlets and this can have ill-effects on relations with victims’ families, or even staff and students. Talk with grantor in advance and ask if award can be given without public fanfare normally associated with grant awards.

Keep a detailed list of actions taken during incident – remember your scribe.

Remember to stop occasionally, breathe, eat, and hydrate, and confer with a trustworthy confidant. You will be carrying the majority of a great deal of responsibility, and you must take care of yourself, too.