



Risk Management in Schools

By Bill Raab

A formal risk management program can help identify risks and allocating resources.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. once said, “I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.” A formal risk management process can provide the “simplicity on the other side of complexity” by creating stronger risk intelligence and resilience within the school.

School districts constantly face complex risks, such as cyberbullying, active shooter events, and lead in water. In their 2009 *Harvard Business Review* article entitled “The Six Mistakes Executives Make in Risk Management,” Nassim Taleb, Daniel Goldstein, and Mark Spitznagel suggest that we often use hindsight and mistake it for foresight.

A comprehensive risk management plan allows a school district to develop foresight and prepare for potential risks.

Leadership Commitment

A risk management program that lacks leadership support is doomed to fail.

Leaders who do not become involved in difficult discussions about risk create “cultures of silence.” Such cultures encourage employees to remain silent about their concerns because of the repercussions from speaking up—akin to whistleblowing. By establishing open and transparent risk management practices, leaders can create a strong risk culture in which employees feel free to discuss risk with their supervisors. The result is a school district that is more resistant to risk.

Getting Started

Establishing a risk management plan can seem daunting. Many organizations don’t know where to begin the process.

Districts should first establish a risk management committee that includes a cross

section of professionals from throughout the district, including the school business officer. The committee should be a diverse mix of both employees and management-level individuals. A committee composed of like-minded people will be ineffective. Having members who are comfortable engaging in “respectful dissent” lessens the groupthink that may reduce the committee’s effectiveness.

Next, reinforce the leadership’s commitment to the risk management program through a policy statement that is signed by the superintendent and disseminated to the entire staff. The policy statement addresses the school district’s commitment to the risk management plan and encourages employees to report any threats or opportunities to the risk management committee without fear of retaliation.

Develop a Risk Inventory

Districts may use outside experts to develop a risk inventory, but they may miss some aspects of risk management that only employees can see. Developing a risk inventory can be a way to engage district employees in the risk management process. For instance, a teacher may be aware of a risk potential that is unique to the school district’s culture.

The most effective process for developing a risk inventory is to hold council-style meetings where a cross section of employees can speak about the risks they believe the school faces. Such meetings allow leaders to build trust in the process. Some groups even use a “talking stick,” whereby the only people who can speak are the moderator and the individual holding the stick. Encouraging employees to participate will enhance the outcome of the process. The point is to ensure that nobody’s concerns are minimized.

Recognize that some participants might mistakenly believe that a disaster is imminent; such *Chicken Little* risks will be identified in the process. Those types of events are hard to quantify and forecast but ignoring them can be a mistake. The risk inventory process can help reduce the district's vulnerability to such catastrophes.

For example, a member of the committee might bring up the risk of a meteor strike; although the actual risk is unlikely, the controls are identified for other exposures.

Create a Risk Registry

The risk committee uses the information obtained in the risk inventory process to create a risk registry. The purpose of the risk registry is to formally assign a "risk owner" and to discuss the effectiveness of current risk treatments. The risk treatment is intended to reduce vulnerability to a risk, not to ensure that it won't happen. The risk owner does not have to

be on the risk management committee but should be required to report to the committee at least annually.

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For example, the district's human resources director may own the risk of sexual harassment in the workplace. To "treat" the risk, the school district will likely create an anti-harassment policy, provide training for the employees and administrators, and investigate every accusation. All of those activities will discourage sexual harassment, but they are unlikely to prevent it completely.

As the risk owner, the director of human resources is responsible

for keeping up with changing case law on that risk and enhancing the controls in place to reduce the likelihood of occurrence and for keeping the committee informed.

In the end, the risk registry may help identify weaknesses in the school's current risk management practices. The identified risks must all have a level of treatment that makes the district comfortable in its ability to manage them.

Risk Recognition

A formal risk management program can help a school district enhance the education of its students by identifying risks and allocating resources appropriately. According to Taleb and colleagues, "Any organization that doesn't recognize its Achilles' heel is fated to die because of it."

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Safety and Security Measures in Public Schools

Schools use a variety of practices and procedures to promote the safety of students, faculty, and staff. Certain practices, such as locking or monitoring doors and gates, are intended to limit or control access to school campuses, while others, such as the use of metal detectors and security cameras, are intended to monitor or restrict students' and visitors' behavior on campus.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2013-2014 school year, 93% of U.S. public schools reported that they controlled access to school buildings by locking or monitoring doors during school hours. Other safety and security measures reported by public schools included

- The use of security cameras to monitor the school (75%)
- A requirement that faculty and staff wear badges or picture IDs (68%)
- The enforcement of a strict dress code (58%)
- The use of random dog sniffs to check for drugs (24%)
- A requirement that students wear uniforms (20%)
- A requirement that students wear badges or picture IDs (9%)
- Random metal detector checks (4%)

Use of various safety and security procedures understandably has risen in the past decade. For example, for the 1999-2000 school year, 74% of public schools reported that they controlled access to school buildings by locking or monitoring doors when school was in session. Only 19% used security cameras to monitor the school and 11% required students to wear uniforms.