Modernizing Emergency Communication with Mobile Crisis Plans

Mobile devices offer quick access to up-to-date emergency plans during crises of all magnitudes.

By Nick Mirisis

Twenty-first century educational institutions must be prepared for a wide variety of emergency situations: from fire, medical emergencies, and severe weather to lockdowns and bomb threats. The types of emergencies that schools face differ in nature, so the responses to them must be custom-tailored to their unique environment.

Schools are supposed to be safe places to send our children to learn and prepare for the future. But since the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy in 2012, there have been 121 gun-related incidents in U. S. schools, according to Everytown for Gun Safety (http://everytown.org/article/schoolshootings).

In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting, authorities and administrators worked hard to identify how it happened and how something similar could be prevented in the future. One clear concern emerged across the board, from parents and staff alike: schools need more effective communication on how to implement safety plans as well as how to communicate *before*, *during*, *and after* a crisis.

SchoolDude research indicates that in 2014, an alarming 88% of schools had to communicate about an emergency safety situation. And although schools allocate much time and money to create effective crisis plans tailored specifically to their institutions, those plans are really only as effective as their ability to be accessed in a time of emergency.

Often, emergency plans sit in binders in a central office and are difficult to access when needed—especially during a lockdown. Access to those plans can be greatly improved by the devices that are commonly by the sides of teachers, students, and administrators: their smartphones and tablets.

Leveraging Mobile Devices

Stonington Public Schools in Stonington, Connecticut, recently adopted a mobile emergency response app and crisis management plan to help meet statewide crisis management mandates for reporting emergencies. According to Ken Donovan, the director of facilities and security for Stonington Public Schools, the transition has been fairly seamless.

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Stonington Public Schools rolled out the emergency response app in phases. First, they introduced the app to school administrators, including the superintendent, principals, and assistant principals. A version

of the app will be available for teachers later this year. The tiered approach will allow administrators to communicate the purpose and value of the mobile app to each user level and to customize the app's performance and accessibility according to individual user roles and responsibilities.

For example, parent access differs from access by faculty and first responders. And certain sensitive information, such as where first responders are to go or where cut-off switches are located, is password protected and not accessible by all users. When teachers and administrators leave the school or school system, they no longer have access to the ever-changing emergency plans.

The Benefits of Mobile Emergency Communication

School personnel must be able to communicate quickly and effectively during an emergency, even in lockdown or shelter-in-place mode. Emergency communication includes alerting faculty, staff, students, parents, first responders, and the greater community. Mobile devices are an ideal way to disseminate fully customizable information regarding updated emergency contacts, action checklists, easy-to-read facility diagrams, and shelter areas. The information resides in the mobile app, so an interruption in Internet Wi-Fi access does not pose a problem.

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Static, hard copies of emergency action plans are out-of-date almost from the moment they are printed. With mobile-enabled emergency plans, emergency phone numbers are updated in real time and can be accessed by simply clicking on a link during a time of crisis (one-tap key contact calling). In effect, the mobile device becomes a dedicated crisis communication system, a mobile command and control.

Palmer Trinity School, an independent school in Miami, Florida, with students in grades 6–12 and 130 staff members, recently implemented a mobile safety platform that offers staff step-by-step instructions for 18

distinct emergency response plans. The solution helps create a safer teaching and learning environment by guaranteeing that emergency plans are quickly available on the staff's mobile devices.

During an actual crisis, it is also helpful to have the ability to locate individuals without alerting those who are not intended to know (e.g., an active shooter). The apps can leverage GPS technology to locate people. Mobile-enabled emergency plans are equipped with real-time roll-call capabilities, and rosters can be continually updated so they have the most current contact information available, including photos.

Emergency action plans often change *during* emergencies. With a mobile-enabled plan, emergency information can be updated in real time, rerouting the user depending on the circumstances. This feature allows first responders to arrive more quickly, and it provides them with extensive situational intelligence. First responders can enter the scene knowing what has already been done and what the areas of concern or vulnerability are. Some apps also include access to large libraries of possible emergency scenarios complete with templates and images.

After the Crisis

Mobile-enabled emergency response plans often support complete reporting functionality, so all recorded and stored messages that transpired during an event can be accessed in one location, thereby allowing better reporting after the crisis. This feature may include forms for collecting information for future use, so the plans can be reviewed and improved for years to come.

In Stonington, Donovan is excited about being able to offer one-tap emergency calling and a simpler process for reporting incidents after they occur, which will make him more efficient. Using mobile devices for crisis planning and response has allowed the Stonington school system to make important emergency information immediately available to its administrators, and they can now report incidents as soon as they arise. In addition to meeting federal regulations, the mobile safety app helps the school system consistently follow Connecticut's school security and safety plan standards.

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