
The Scenario

The bell rings. School is out for the day and you return to your office to do your daily email and respond to phone messages. As you review your email, you realize that there is a message posted from your supervisor calling for an emergency meeting of all school psychologists to discuss impending budget cuts. The school board has announced that due to a $10 million shortfall they will be cutting 10% of all positions that are not “classroom based,” including all related service providers and classified personnel. Cuts will be in accordance with seniority and the degree in which personnel can demonstrate the essential nature of their work.

Recognize that if this scenario happens, school psychologists are immediately transformed from crisis responder to victim. Individuals fearful of losing their jobs and not being able to meet their family’s needs may become irritable, egocentric, and territorial. The “survival of the fittest” principle could potentially guide all interactions, and chaos and desperation may characterize typical responses. Faced with this possible scenario, what do school psychology leaders need to do to minimize the damage done?

Responding to the Crisis

Step 1: Crisis Planning

- As with any crisis, it is essential that a school psychologist leader gather together the “troops” to conduct a realistic evaluation of the situation and plan a thoughtful and purposeful response. It is critical that a team of leaders be identified that are ready and able to implement an action plan. These leaders will be the “face” of school psychology and need to be the professionals that are highly regarded for their work across stakeholder groups. They need to have a clear understanding of the issues, problems, proposed plans, and potential alternate solutions.
- It is imperative that leaders demonstrate cool and calm and try to empower victims to act on their behalf. It is a very real possibility in this scenario that those called to respond will also fall victim to the budget cuts, so leaders need to be prepared to adjust their responses as the landscape changes.
- It is important to gather as much information about the proposed cuts as possible. Exhibit B in this Roadmap will help your crisis team evaluate the problem; identify available support, resources and materials; and determine your vulnerabilities and assets.
- Exhibit J in this Roadmap provides a template for action planning. We recommend that you use some type of tool like this to help organize your response. Thinking broadly about your response, you need to have a clear sense of WHO will be responsible for WHAT in accordance with a specific timeline (WHEN).
- Exhibit H in this Roadmap will assist you in thinking about how the public may be motivated to respond to your crisis. The reality is that if a school district is planning to cut a significant portion of an already stretched group of professionals, an impact will be felt by students, their families, and their teachers. This is a good time to get these stakeholder groups to express their fear and concern at such a loss. Working with local media outlets (newspapers, television,
or radio) to present the potential harm that could be experienced as a result of the proposed cuts will help garner public support that could potentially hold off the cuts altogether.

### Step 2: Implement the Crisis Plan

Once a plan has been developed it is critical that it be implemented as efficiently and effectively as possible. The team leader needs to conduct short-term checks of progress and needs to support members who are struggling to fulfill their commitments. Opportunities for team members to communicate progress, ask questions, and request additional support needs to be facilitated through rapid communication methods such as cell phone calls, text messaging, or email. Regular all group opportunities to process about the implementation of the plan are also helpful and can be conducted through face-to-face meetings or conference calls.

### Step 3: Evaluate the Plan

The gathering of data reflecting the current status of the relevant issues (including but not limited to student outcome data) is an important part to Step 1 of any crisis plan. In order to determine if you have gotten anywhere as a result of your advocacy efforts, you must have original benchmarks that reflect where you have come from. During Step 3 of this process, you will objectively evaluate the impact of your advocacy efforts. For example, if the original goal was to cut 10% of the school psychologists, what was the final rate that was decided upon following your advocacy efforts? It is safe to say that if these data reflect positive changes as a result of your advocacy, you are well on your way to success. It is also safe to say that if there is little or no change or the situation worsens, then your team needs to have a “heart to heart” with someone about why your efforts failed and how things can be improved in the future.

### Step 4: Determine ongoing needs and steps

Once you have a sense of how well your plan has worked to respond to the immediate crisis, you can determine any ongoing needs for support and future steps that need to be taken. As with any crisis, challenges and opportunities are typically realized. Perhaps one side effect of a crisis such as this is that it helps school psychologists recognize that they need to be actively engaged in advocacy for their positions and services. Perhaps an online resource should be developed promoting school psychological services and the benefits of having access to these services for all students. Or maybe the crisis prescribes that in the future certain student outcome data points need to be regularly gathered by all school psychologists so that a clear picture of services and their impact can be articulated. Whatever the need, it is critical that school psychologists learn from their experiences and every crisis provides this unique opportunity.

### Resources for Crisis Response

1. **Communicating your Message**

At this link, you can access three key resources to assist you in formulating your response:

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/economic/index.aspx  These resources include:
A. PowerPoint presentation: Effectively Communicating with Administrators and Decision Makers in a Tough Budget Climate (NASP Convention Special Session 36, Boston, MA, 2/27/09)
B. Tough Budget Climate Message Development Activity ((NASP Convention Special Session 36, Boston, MA, 2/27/09)
C. NASP Key Messages

II. NASP Letter of Support

At this link, you can access a sample letter of support that can be personalized with your school district’s information and data and then sent by the NASP President on official NASP stationary to your local school board:

http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/psychservicesroadmap/samplememo_roadmape.doc

III. Example of an Effective Crisis Response

Case Study: Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Florida

The Issue: On May 9, 2008 the Miami-Dade County School Board sent letters to 17% (41/240) of their school psychologists saying that they were being laid off due to district budget cuts. This triggered a variety of advocacy activities on behalf of these school psychologists that was led by individuals and state school psychology association leaders.

The Outcome: As a result of a comprehensive advocacy campaign, all 41 school psychologists were rehired and the needed cuts to the district were made in other ways.

To read a full accounting of how this advocacy effort unfolded, please click on this Communiqué article: Saving School Psychology in a Time of Fiscal Crisis, by Philip J. Lazarus, March/April 2009, Vol. 37, No. 6, starting on p.1 (http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/mocq376lazarus.aspx)

Miami Herald column: Miami-Dade Students Pay Price of Psychologists Cuts, written by columnist Daniel Schoer Roth, August 21, 2008

NASP letter to Miami-Dade County School Board
(http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/psychservicesroadmap/naspmemo_roadmape.pdf)