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"A Student [Came] Down and Said 'There's a . . . Guy in the . . . English Classroom With a Gun'": Recovering From Violent Invasion

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Abstract

On the morning of September 27, 2006, a 53-year-old drifter with no ties to the community walked into Platte Canyon High School in Bailey, Colorado, with several firearms, taking a college-prep English class hostage. After a 4-hr stand-off, one 16-year-old student—along with the drifter—was killed in subsequent police action. This case study examines the recovery prioritization and leadership foci of the school's administration throughout the year immediately following the shooting. Crisis recovery lessons—particularly those involving school violence—are presented and explored. The case study is presented from the perspective of Principal Bryan Krause.

Keywords

crisis preparation, school violence, school recovery

Crisis Setting

> I believe people moved to a community like Bailey so that events like this do not occur.
>
> —Principal Bryan Krause

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Travelers driving down U.S. Highway 285 pass through the quiet hamlet of Bailey, Colorado, in less than 2 minutes. Huddled at a bend of the North Fork Platte River, 50 miles southwest of Denver, the town of 9,000—which caters to outdoor enthusiasts—has an elementary-, a middle-, and a high school. Prior to 2006, Platte Canyon High School had no episodes of dangerous weapons or violence on campus. Described by Principal Bryan Krause as a "typical rural, mountain town," the 1,300 public school students of the Platte Canyon School District are neither particularly ethnically or economically diverse, with a student body that was 89% White and 16% free-and-reduced price lunch during the 2006-2007 school year (Colorado Department of Education, 2006a, 2006b). With a 95% graduation rate, Platte Canyon performed better than the statewide average in reading and mathematics and boasted, in Krause's estimation, an "established, experienced core of teachers that provided consistency to the school's culture."

Bryan Krause arrived at Bailey in 2000 to serve as assistant principal, in charge of student discipline and attendance. In August 2001, Bryan Krause was promoted from assistant principal to principal with the unanimous support of the high school's department chairs. Through the end of the 2005-2006 school year, Krause continued to enjoy widespread faculty, staff, and parent support in his tenure as principal, seldom having any incident occur of a more serious nature than a fairly routine personnel matter. At the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year, Bryan Krause was the young, popular principal of a safe, academically rigorous high school in a quiet, small town.

Crisis Description

> I think schools and communities can get lulled into complacency when it comes to safety, and I would say that we were. And we prided ourselves on that we felt safe and that was kind of shattered all at once.
>
> —Bryan Krause

The morning of September 27, 2006, heralded an uneventful day, beginning as many others had at Platte Canyon High School. However, immediately before noon, Krause was approached by a frantic student:

> A student had come down and said there's a guy in the English classroom with a gun. And so I headed towards the classroom, and as I was going up the stairs, I remember thinking, okay, he said guy. He didn't say student or kid or Johnny. . . so that kind of gave me pause, and I was reaching for the handle of the door that goes into the hallway of the classroom, that's when [the English teacher] came out. She said, "Don't go in there. There's somebody that has a gun that is holding us hostage."

The "somebody" was 53-year-o--ooooold Duane Morrison from Denver, who had been camping in the area for a few days. Postincident reviews of school security cameras showed him sitting in his jeep in the school parking lot for an hour that morning, then walking into the school during the class-changing hallway chaos endemic in all high schools. Nothing in Morrison's prior history indicated what he would do on September 27. Other than an arrest for obstructing police in July 2006 and marijuana possession in 1973, Morrison had no criminal or psychological history indicating violence or social maladjustment (Willett & Huspeni, 2006). However, on September 27, he walked into an English classroom at Platte Canyon High School, pulled out a gun, and ordered the teacher to leave.

Without more information than "a guy with a gun in the classroom," Krause immediately began lockdown procedures within the school. The uncertainty at the time was particularly troubling to the school's leader:

> It was a concern because we weren't sure of what the real threat was. We knew it was a gun and a hostage situation, but then there was a report from the teacher that he said that he had a bomb also in his bag, which didn't prove to be true . . . [So our] number one concern [was] . . . getting the kids out.

The staff smoothly executed the lockdown procedures they practiced annually (and had practiced the previous month). After locking their classroom doors, teachers moved students into a predesignated "safe" corner of the room. Almost immediately, the local sheriff arrived at the school, setting up an incident command post in a field a few hundred yards from the school. After setting up a perimeter to contain Morrison to one classroom, law enforcement began to methodically evacuate students from the building. Principal Krause continued to assist with the evaluation of the school while consulting with police concerning the layout and contents of the classroom.

Meanwhile, in the classroom, Morrison had ordered most of the students to leave, keeping six females with him. He began negotiating with the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team, sending out sparse information through the remaining hostages' cell phones and by yelling down the school hallway. As the day progressed, Morrison sporadically released four hostages. These students reported Morrison engaging in sexual assaults on the hostages. Principal Krause remained at incident command helping debrief the four students assisting the sheriff's department in brainstorming a possible solution. Eventually, Morrison stopped communicating, save indicating that "something would happen at 4 p.m." (Willett & Huspeni, 2006). With the vague, 4:00 p.m. deadline looming and reports of ongoing sexual assault within the classroom, Park County Sheriff, Fred Wegener, made the decision to enter the room.

At 3:45 p.m., the SWAT team set off explosives, blowing a hole in the wall of the adjacent classroom and at the classroom door. Morrison murdered the 16-year-old student he had been using as a shield, shooting her upon the breach of the classroom.

He then turned the gun on himself, firing one fatal shot. The other remaining hostage in the room was unharmed.

Recovery

> There was a time when, I was standing [at the incident command post]—surrounded by deputies and SWAT team members, and, there's yelling and radios and commotion, and then it got kind of quiet for awhile, and I thought this is—this will change who we are forever as a school, and, you know, it did.
>
> —Bryan Krause

The recovery of Platte Canyon High School emanates from a broader study of school leadership in times of crisis (Pepper, London, Dishman, & Lewis, 2009). Krause's actions were consistent with those of other leaders facing unpredictable crises originating outside the school community. Whether a school shooting, natural disaster (Hurricane Katrina), or terrorist attack (9/11), principals immediately face a multitude of critical and competing decisions, the responses to which determine how, when, and whether a community recovers.

The remainder of this case study follows the prioritization of Principal Krause's recovery efforts throughout the remainder of the school year. His actions followed a Maslowian hierarchical response model, focusing first on the school's staff who would be most instrumental in the recovery of the school. After concentrating on the staff's needs, the schools faculty collaboratively focused on the process of restarting school while meeting the emotional needs of Bailey's students. The final priority for Principal Krause was facilitating the difficult conversations with the broader community concerning the overall safety of Platte Canyon High School.

First Priority: Healing Staff

In initially recovering from his school's crisis, Krause was somewhat overwhelmed. He was beset by the national media demanding "someone" to blame for the shooting and flooded with offers to "help" from sources that seemed somewhat self-serving, insincere, and occasionally—to Principal Krause—potentially harmful. Krause also had a school building in which a student had been murdered and a classroom with a wall visibly torn by an explosion.

In formulating a response, Krause did not concentrate on the physical needs of the school building or responding to the national media. Other than maintaining a transparent and steady flow of information, he did not immediately concentrate on the needs of nonhostage students or their families. Krause noted that the student body would not be returning to Platte Canyon High School until well after the staff and faculty were in place. Instead, Principal Krause initially focused on the recovery of his human capital—the school's faculty and staff. Krause correctly understood that these individuals would directly interact with—and therefore influence—the perceptions

and reactions of students, parents, and the broader community (Pepper et al., 2009). Krause presciently anticipated that students would be more comfortable talking about the tragedy with their teachers than well-meaning "outsiders" (such as counseling groups). As a result, teachers would have their own psychological needs met first.

The day following the invasion, Krause took his first step toward facilitating recovery by gathering staff and breaking them into debriefing groups split by their proximity to the event. Each group, Krause states, had "their own separate set of needs and issues." The staff was assisted by a team from neighboring Jefferson County school district, home to Columbine High School. Therapists and counselors were available, and staff members were given "time to just spend together, eat meals together," absorbing the scope of the event and sharing their personal responses to it.

Throughout the process, faculty and staff members responded to the trauma in very different ways; however, they shared the commonality of being seemingly compelled to participate in the healing process by Krause. Although there were no "wrong" responses to the shooting, no employee was allowed to ignore its occurrence or refuse to explore his or her psychological response to it. This was a particularly important step given that school employees may be "embarrassed" to seek psychological assistance when addressing the impact of school shootings (Blatchford, 2009). These faculty gatherings presented the opportunity during which Krause facilitated diverse individual coping mechanisms:

> There was a whole gamut of reaction to it. . . . [W]e had one teacher that says, "I don't think I can come back. I can't walk inside the building," and that was okay. And we had another teacher that called me the next day and said, "You know what? I didn't pick up my midterms. I need to grade them." But that's the way that [some staff] coped with it. It's "I need my routine, I need to get back to grading my papers."

The seemingly random nature of the attack made information sharing vitally important to a faculty struggling to understand who the killer was, to understand his potential motive, and to accept that there was ultimately little they could have done to prevent his invasion. A consistent element of external, unpredictable school crises is stakeholders' need to understand "why" an event occurred (Pepper et al., 2009). Unfortunately, in school shooting crises, it may not be answerable. To this day, the Park County Sheriff's department cannot explain Morrison's motivations. However, they did provide faculty and staff ongoing information about Morrison's background and the incident. This transparency permitted Platte Canyon's faculty to understand the "who," "how," and "when" of the incident—even if they may never know the "why." Krause credits it as a significant element of staff healing.

Krause's differentiating responses communicated to school stakeholders the administration's recognition of the importance of their individual and collective concerns. With their own immediate needs addressed and with supports in place for anticipated evolving emotional needs (such as counseling available for faculty and staff on the first day of school), faculty and staff turned toward planning for the return of students.

Second Priority: Healing Students

After spending the first few postshooting days on staff needs, Krause and the school's faculty turned toward the return of students. Krause could not permit the tragedy to completely consume the school's mission and purpose, knowing that closure was a part of organizational (as well as individual) grieving, and teaching and learning would have to continue. Platte Canyon balanced restoring a regular pattern while allowing those students and faculty who need additional support to decouple from the school's routine if additional support was needed. Krause particularly credits the advice and counseling of the Columbine team with being important in shaping the ways in which he and his staff processed student needs:

> [W]hen we returned, yes, we were back in school, but, we would preface everything by saying, "If you're not ready for this, that's okay." We'd have some kids that would show up for an hour and then they would have to go home, and that was okay. I mean, we didn't take attendance, it wasn't what we're going to do.

With his approach defined, Krause next moved to identifying and securing resources to support students on their return to school a week after the shooting. As with faculty and staff, Krause used multiple and varied methods of supporting students' emotional and psychological healing. Learning from Columbine's recovery, Krause knew that faith was an essential component of recovery for many adults and students (Hammond, 2009). Consequently, time was dedicated for students wishing to engage in prayer and reflection, and to meet with teachers. Different resources were available for students who chose not to avail themselves of this resource. Support groups were formed, and the state's victims' assistance counseling services were available. Krause recalls,

> The teachers all had a counselor available for every class. I mean, there was that much help. Every class had an available personal counselor, and if kids wanted to leave they could do that, and if they needed to talk to somebody.

As Krause predicted, themes of familiarity and security resonated with students—talking with their teachers and returning to their classrooms. "[Students] were interested in talking to our counselors or their own teachers and not so much [to] outsiders."

Krause's final challenge was managing physical reminders of the tragedy—and specifically the impacted classroom on the reopening of the school. After Columbine, parents of students murdered in the school's library requested that it not be rebuilt, and Krause and his faculty reached a similar conclusion. After much discussion, the staff decided that they would "allow memorials [but] then clear [them]." Cards and flowers were left at the door of the impacted classroom, and at the end of the week they were removed. Krause describes the process as "very loose", and eventually, the frequency of flowers decreased, and the classroom was sealed.

Third Priority: Healing Community

The third—and lesser—priority for Krause was the larger community. In such crises, regardless of the irrationality of the attack, parents and community members may find closure in attributing perceived responsibility and consequences. After the Columbine shooting in 1999, Principal Frank DeAngelis recalled, people looked for someone or something to blame (Hammond, 2009). Ten years later, an article on the Columbine tragedy observed "finger pointing started almost immediately, and everyone had plenty of blame to throw around" (Vail, 2009). Superintendent Jane Hammond opined that a number of parents "grieve[d]" through filing litigation against the district and individuals they perceived to be at fault (Vail, 2009)

In this regard, Platte Canyon was very unlike Columbine. Generally, the community of Bailey supported the school and its administration, and Krause recalled few voices criticizing the school's handling of the crisis (Pepper et al., 2009). Instead, transparency in communication and opening the "healing" process to individuals beyond the school facilitated a positive community response. Krause focused on a proactive response, rebuilding trust by focusing on steps to increase the school's security. He and the superintendent led several community forums, inviting input from parents, students, and community members. This collaborative environment encouraged input and indirectly forced the community to accept both the randomness of the attack and the lack of measures any school could take to prevent such an attack. It also compelled a discussion of what Bailey wanted Platte Canyon to become. Krause describes this challenge as follows:

> That was the balance we had to try to find after it was over. Do we want this to be a prison? Do we put up razor wire and check everybody's ID as they come in the door? …[L]ike any school, we had people come in and out daily. We had parents, we have, friends, deliverymen.

Accepting the irrationality of the attack, these discussions resulted in no significant physical changes to the school environment. Instead, parents volunteered *en masse* for the Pass Program, stationing parents at the doors to welcome students and, Krause describes, provide "an extra set of eyes." Although this program would likely provide little deterrent to a well-armed and irrational invader like Morrison, it provided a conduit for community participation in the healing process—parents believed they were doing something to prevent a similar incident—and, in Krause's estimation, provided a tangible emotional assurance to returning students.

A Priority Throughout: Healing Oneself

It is the norm for school leaders to feel overwhelmed with constant and crushing burdens, and this is never truer than during a crisis. External, unpredictable crisis events—and school shootings particularly—take a significant personal toll on the school's

leader, who frequently (and generally incorrectly) views himself or herself as failing to do more to stop the incident (Pepper et al., 2009). In recovery, principals may become consumed in supporting their faculty, students, and community, at the cost of their personal lives and health. As a result of becoming absorbed in Columbine's recovery, Principal Frank DeAngelis' 17-year marriage failed 3 years later. A month following the Red Lake, Minnesota, school shooting in March 2005, in which 9 students and staff members were killed, the school's veteran principal, Chris Dunshee, suffered a heart attack, which he attributed to the stress related to the incident and recovery (Tom Robertson, 2005).

Krause certainly had an opportunity for a similar response. The shootings brought national media attention to Bailey, and reporters—unlike parents—were not reticent in implying that the "blame" for the incident lay partially or entirely with Krause. One morning, Krause opened his front door to find a network affiliate camera crew waiting on his front lawn. Although Krause reported attempting to be as transparent as possible with his faculty and staff, students, and other members of the Bailey community, he notes that his response to the national media was somewhat closed. Doubting their sincerity, Krause was formally correct in responding to the media. Fortunately, Krause benefited from an extremely tight-knit community, and this familiarity allowed for thorough, responsive support.

When asked what he would do differently in response to the crisis, Krause believes he "missed an opportunity" to model vulnerability and openness to his staff. He instead maintained more of a close professionalism. Eventually, Krause could not maintain this isolation and came to rely heavily on his family and church. Ultimately, his extensive support network and self-awareness allowed his personal and professional endurance throughout the stresses of crisis recovery.

Conclusion

> But you had to be prepared. You can't ever be fully prepared, but you can at least have a plan in place. And I think that's what got us through in the media's eyes, and maybe the community's eyes, was we did what we thought we should do and we were prepared for it—as well as we could be.
>
> —Principal Krause

The lessons of Platte Canyon High School show how school preparedness can usually prevent a crisis situation from becoming catastrophic. Postincident reports credit Krause's decision to hold a "lockdown" practice at the beginning of the year with greatly facilitating law enforcement response and limiting Duane Morrison's options. Immediately following the crisis, Principal Krause first focused his efforts toward supporting Platte Canyon's staff. Students were home with their families immediately following the shooting, and a school's teachers and support staff can

assist students with grieving only if they themselves feel supported by the administration. Once the staff's immediate needs were met, supports were provided to students in a fluid way. Finally, forums were held to help facilitate community processing of the event.

Principal Krause's actions during and immediately after the shooting facilitated widespread healing throughout the Platte Canyon community. This required strategically anticipating likely short- and long-term effects of the crisis on school stakeholders, identifying appropriate responses, and aligning resources and structures permitting those responses. As in similar school crises, Krause had little time to do so—particularly given that a commonality in successful school crisis recovery is returning to a semblance of "normalcy" as quickly as possible (Pepper et al., 2009). Victims often find comfort in the familiar, and reestablishing the "calm routine" is a key objective in crisis response (Wong, 2004). Platte Canyon was no exception. Despite the varied (and occasionally competing) concerns of parents, faculty, and students, virtually all shared a common belief that school must resume. Says Krause, "We decided we needed to get back to the business of being a school."

Teaching Notes

This case is designed to be utilized in a graduate-level school leadership course, and in particular, a course enrolling aspiring principals. It is during a time of crisis when strong leadership is most needed. This case describes the experiences of Principal Bryan Krause, who led Platte Canyon High School during its encounter with a tragic hostage situation and student death. The case explores Principal Krause's prioritization immediately following the violence.

Theory Questions—Please answer individually then discuss in a group setting:

1. What aspects of the hostage and evacuation situation were impacted by the event occurring in a small, rural district? What elements of the crisis might have been heightened or lessened if the crisis occurred in a larger and/or urban school district?
2. Krause states that he served as the school's "gateway" for external offers of assistance, separating offers that would benefit his students and community from those that would have been distractions—or were a proxy to exploit the school's crisis for the offeror's own benefit. In a crisis like Platte Canyon, what resources would a principal most need to address and remediate the crisis? How would you identify these resources and ensure effective deployment of them, particularly in light of logistical challenges posed by a crisis?
3. Immediately following the crisis, Platte Canyon implemented a practice of stationing parents at external doors to the school, believing that this would help prevent a repeat of the crisis. Would it have? Is such a practice likely to be sustainable in the long term—for example, the 7-year period separating the

shootings at Bailey and Columbine? Does such a practice serve as a placebo, preventing the school from considering other alternatives that are more likely to prevent a school invasion or shooting? What other realistic, attainable, and sustainable steps could Platte Canyon have taken to prepare for this crisis?
4. What structures of K-12 schooling might aid in the recovery of a violence event? What structures might hinder in the recovery?
5. In what ways could a return to a focus on teaching and learning assist in a school's recovery process?

Application Questions—Please answer individually then discuss in a group setting:

1. One of the most important elements identified in containing the crisis is Platte Canyon was school and law enforcement familiarity with a lockdown policy and annually practicing it. Does your school practice a lockdown procedure annually? Does all of your staff know how to act in a school violence situation? Do they appreciate the noise and chaos accompanying school violence crises?
2. Do you have a close relationship with local law enforcement? How knowledgeable are they about your leadership team and the layout of your school? Do they know what social and organizational behaviors your school is likely to exhibit during a crisis in which their intervention is required?
3. Reflect on the crisis at Platte Canyon and consider how your school would likely respond—today—to a similar crisis. Specifically, consider the security of your school campus and whether you have processes in place to prevent intruders from entering your building.

Authors' Notes

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Bios

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