

Pierce County's School Violence Preparedness Program

A First in the Nation!

National polls indicate that the primary issue in public schools is student safety. Many schools throughout the nation have instituted preventive measures against violence by establishing policies, increasing student awareness and hiring School Resource Officers. But parents are still asking, "Will my children be safe if something does occur? Will they know where to go and how will they be protected?"

The escalation of school violence has created the need for expanded school emergency preparedness and better-coordinated emergency response. In evaluating a number of incidents that have occurred both locally and nationally, it became clear that in the midst of school violence, information and communication are key.

Even before the Columbine, Colorado tragedy, Pierce County's Department of Emergency Management was building the foundation for a new approach to school safety. But a recent visit with Columbine's local officials provided Pierce County EM personnel with the essential information they needed to fine tune their program - a program that addresses the key information needs of Law Enforcement, Fire, Emergency Medical, and School Personnel. The program has two components:

- An interactive, on-line web-based school information system called Pierce Responder System.
- Community partnership-building between emergency response agencies and schools.

The Pierce Responder System

- Displays information about each school's contacts, utilities, shut-off valves for water and alarms, and floor plans. It also displays digital photos of the school's interior and exterior spaces, aerial photos of the surrounding area, and videos of the interior hallways.
- Allows emergency responders to enter incident action plans, communication plans, and situation reports that are immediately available to all responding public safety and school personnel. This information is vital to the incident managers who must coordinate large numbers of resources and communicate with hundreds of concerned parents.
- Uses low-cost Internet technology, wireless modems and laptop computers so all emergency responders see identical, current information and receive instructions without relying on radios or face-to-face communications.

But Does it Work?

The first 10 minutes of an incident are critically important for achieving the most favorable result. Literally hundreds of decisions must be made by the responding agencies, and the Pierce Responder System provides emergency personnel with vitally needed information and communications. All actions and situation reports are logged and, as the event progresses, can be retrieved to analyze patterns and review actions.

To test the effectiveness of the Pierce Responder System, an act of school violence event, that included a hostage situation, was recently simulated in a large high school and involved both Teachers and students. Responding agencies used laptop computers and successfully viewed floor plans, maps, and were able to track the incident successfully at the command center via wireless communications.

The best verification of Pierce Responder System's significance is the response it has received from agencies around the country. The Littleton, Colorado Fire Department has adopted the Pierce Responder System as its primary database for school pre-incident planning. Littleton Fire Capt. Jim Olsen shared:

"To date we have entered almost all of our high schools and middle schools. The program has been greeted with enthusiasm by the law enforcement resource officers assigned to the school and by all of the school officials that have viewed the system. It is my opinion that a system of this nature would be of enormous benefit to any jurisdiction confronted with an incident similar to the Columbine tragedy."

Benefits

The current beneficiaries of the Pierce Responder System are the students, families, school faculty and emergency response teams in Pierce County.

- Emergency Responders are prepared to act quickly and with less confusion.
- Peace of mind. Parents are relieved to know that if an unfortunate event occurs, schools and agencies have been trained and know what to do immediately.
- The relationships that have developed between local Schools, Fire and Law Enforcement Personnel as they have worked together on this project.