

A step in the right direction

When I began my career in education, I never expected to be dealing with many of the threats schools face today. While school personnel have always had to face threats such as fire, air quality issues and weather-related concerns such as blizzards and tornadoes, the thought of a school shooting or bomb threat was as distant as the idea of Martians landing on Earth.



TIM LUTZ

Each school day in the United States, 53 million students attend more than 119,000 schools where an additional 6 million adults work as teachers or support staff. This means that on any given weekday more than one-fifth of the population can be found in schools. No other single American institution engages such a large sector of the population as can be found in schools, so it stands to reason that our schools should be the safest place to be when a natural or man-made disaster strikes. Most public schools and school districts in Minnesota are excellent at responding to emergencies thanks to the many drills they conduct throughout the school year. In Minnesota, schools are required to hold five fire drills, five lockdown drills and one tornado drill every year. In addition, administrators

in many schools, including Bemidji Area Schools, conduct “table-top drills” during which they lay out an emergency scenario and discuss how best to respond should a crisis occur. These “what-if’s” are very helpful in preparing schools for various emergency scenarios.

However, when schools and other organizations regard effective emergency management as simply being able to recover from disasters, they neglect the important responsibility of planning for and preventing such emergencies. Schools should not overlook the need to prevent, mitigate and prepare for crisis events. Most schools have safety response plans and checklists in the form of three-ring binders and flip charts. However, these response plans, excellent as they may be, are designed for reacting to an emergency or crisis. My goal is to prevent such events from happening in our schools.

That is why I was pleased to host an organization known as REMS: Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools – Technical Assistance Center, to assist the Bemidji School District, neighboring school districts, and numerous community agencies in developing emergency operating plans (EOPs) that will work towards preventing crisis situations from occurring. REMS is a branch of the U.S. Department of Education and works in conjunction with FEMA.

The purpose of a school

district’s emergency operations plan is to prevent, protect, mitigate, respond to, and recover from crises and emergencies. Having such a plan in place will help our school district analyze and rate situations by taking an all-hazards approach so that our schools, staff and students will be better able to identify potential hazards, prevent and mitigate the effects of such dangers, and be better at responding to events should they occur. Once vulnerabilities are identified, our emergency operating plans will be able to develop measures that, when layered, will help address and mitigate the harm that such threats may pose. A good example of this hazard mitigation is how schools have prevented fires over the years.

Take a look around any school for fire prevention methods. You will find sprinklers, flame-retardant materials, fire alarms, smoke detectors, fire exit signs, evacuation maps, emergency lighting and extinguishers. This level of redundancy could lead a person to believe that schools and fire marshals are overly protective, especially since there hasn’t been a student casualty from a school fire in the United States in over half a century.

But, according to author Jeff Kaye in School Emergency Management, it is this very redundancy that has prevented school fires and kept our children alive. We need to take the same layered

approach for all potential crises and emergencies and develop emergency operations plans that assess and measure the likelihood of all potential emergencies, manmade and natural. Then we need to evaluate their probable severity and damage, and develop protective layers to mitigate, prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from all of them.

The development of a cutting-edge emergency operations plan for Bemidji Area Schools is my goal and has been my aim since I started working as the superintendent of this excellent school district. We made great strides by hosting the REMS training earlier this month. Surprisingly, this was the first time that the REMS trainers provided training in any school in Minnesota, so I don’t know who was more excited about this training, me or the presenters who flew in during a very cold week. But one thing is certain: By hosting the REMS training, we made it possible for a number of school districts in northwest Minnesota to learn how to become better at preventing and planning for emergencies. That is a step in the right direction.

I repeat: who would have predicted, three decades ago, that we would need to take this type of action and provide this type of training in our schools? Certainly not I.

Tim Lutz is superintendent of Bemidji Area Schools. He can be reached via email at tim_lutz@isd31.net.

CARTOONIST’S VIEW



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Albrecht will serve tribal interests well

Other than voting against failed Republican Lieutenant Gov. candidate Donna Bergstrom, I don’t know her. Why she singled me out in her letter to the editor (Dec. 14) is a mystery to me, but begs for a response.

I’m originally from northern Minnesota. Bemidji Mayor Rita Hutchinson Albrecht is a longtime friend of mine. Mayor Albrecht is a successful, forward looking, results oriented, bipartisan public servant who will serve her district and tribal interests very well as a state senator.

Contrary to Donna Bergstrom’s claims, it has been Republicans who have repeatedly tried to undermine tribal gaming and treaty rights at the Capitol. They have attempted at times to make tribes a wedge issue for political gain.

Bergstrom’s statements regarding Democrats not supporting tribal interests are flat out wrong. Maybe she should spend time addressing the issues in her own party regarding tribal issues.

Richard Ginsberg, St. Paul

COMMENTARY

It’s about access, not heredity

In Bemidji, you do not need a calendar to know when the first day of the month is. When you go to get groceries at Walmart at this time, it is similar to a Black Friday-esque experience; the parking lots are as packed as the aisles, shoulder-to-shoulder. Witnessing this, it made me wonder why there seems to be a lack of access to grocery stores nearby, specifically on reservations. Along with this, it makes you wonder as to if there is a correlation between this fact and the high rates of diabetes type 2 among Native Americans. I think there is.

Evidence suggests that the nutrition environment on Native American reservations is characterized by few supermarkets and many gas station-type stores, a moderate availability of fresh produce, and a reliance on off-reservation stores for regular or bulk shopping. The lack of healthier options available on reservations has a direct correlation to the higher rate of diabetes; how is someone supposed to have a healthy diet if there is nothing healthy available within a reasonable distance? Gas stations and small grocery stores rarely have healthy fruit and vegetable options, and if they do, they are much more expensive when compared to a large grocery store chain.

It is easy to displace the blame and say that heredity is to blame for high rates of diabetes among Native American people, but is that really the case? Native Americans do not have the proper access to healthy and culturally-appropriate foods, and are thus at a higher risk of the development of diabetes and it is not always necessarily due to heredity.

As of recently, studies have shown that the rate of diagnosed diabetes among all Indian Health Service patients was 6.9 percent, which is almost three times the rate among all races in the United States. This is not just a mere coincidence; there is some reason why this rate is so high. Race specifically plays little to no role in the rates of diabetes; statistics show that some races are more likely to have or develop diabetes type 2, but that is mainly due to other outside factors, such as living situation, stress and finances.

Why should we care? It is the responsibility of the people to take care of themselves, right? And yes it is true, we must take care of ourselves. But how is one supposed to do so if they are put into a position that makes it extremely difficult to do so? Not enough research is being done on Native American populations. Native Americans are often dismissed when research is involved because with smaller populations it is more difficult to get “statistically significant” data. This often leaves a lot of room for problems, as there are health trends within the population that are not being studied or even acknowledged. We need to bridge this gap and continue to do these studies in order to keep our entire population healthy. We must support our fellow people in making sure they have access to the resources necessary in order to live long and healthy lives.

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From the Pioneer archives

10 years ago

December 21, 2009 — The Beltrami Soil and Water Conservation District would become a Beltrami County government function under a plan revealed by Beltrami County commissioners who gave their consent to the concept. The plan was negotiated in several meetings between county and SWCD representatives, who believe the merger will keep the SWCD operational.

25 years ago

December 21, 1994 — A 14-year-old Bemidji vocalist is one of three recipients of the 1995 Panasonic Young Soloists Award, a national honor given each year to talented young musicians and vocalists with disabilities. Stephanie Dawn Stomberg was selected by a prestigious panel of music professionals and music educators to receive a \$5,000 scholarship.

50 years ago

December 21, 1969 — Possible sites for a new National Guard Armory in Bemidji at the fairgrounds or industrial park were turned down by military authorities. Col. Cheesman told City Manager Rudy Mikulich, the Guard considered the Highway 2 and Highway 71 South locations “too remote” for security reasons and for raising income through rental of the armory.

100 years ago

December 21, 1919 — There was a relaxation and a loosening of tight collars and tightly buttoned outer coatings in Bemidji as the mercury ticked upward in a remarkable degree, registering around 40 above zero, a decided and welcome change from the severe cold spell that has been prevalent in Bemidji nearly every day since the first heavy snow on October 10.