

The Unthinkable Opportunity

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As school administrators, we generally like to be in the middle of action and activity. We like the high, positive energy that is involved with our school, staff, students, and families. We believe in doing the best we can to support, encourage and challenge children. As we are always ready for anything and every opportunity to serve, deep down we know there is always a chance we will be caught off guard and the unthinkable may happen.

On January 11, 2006, the unthinkable happened at Mary McLeod Bethune Academy, a kindergarten through eighth grade school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A beautiful, new multi-million dollar public school building experienced the worst thing that could happen at a school. One of our students was shot on the playground. The miracle is that the girl is sitting in class today, alive and well.

A dispute over a cell phone three blocks away triggered the event. Shots in our school neighborhood are not uncommon. The argument turned into shots fired as the bullet traveled at least five hundred yards, past its intended victim, high above the blacktop of three city blocks, over several staff cars in a parking lot, past hundreds of innocent children and several adults supervising them, onto a tot lot playground and finally in and out of the neck of an eleven year old girl.

After calmly walking into the school with a complaint of neck pain, the young girl accompanied by our school safety arrived in the principal's office. After we removed her coat, which was stuck to her neck, we saw the unthinkable. We surmised in a state of disbelief that we were looking at an entrance and an exit wound. As our adrenaline shifted into high gear, the school crisis plan became a reality.

911 was called, a code red was given, the wounds where pressure was applied with a dry, clean cloth bled through. The media, police, and central service personnel all arrived. The unthinkable had happened and an opportunity to overcome it had quickly developed. I believe this was an unthinkable opportunity.

Preparation, flexibility and being proactive are keys to successful and efficient resolutions to a crisis. During the tragic event and the days that followed I found myself in overwhelming awe of the resiliency of our students and families. My "global perspective" which had long been broadened since my thirteen years as an urban educator, was now exploding. Dealing with crisis teams, traumatized students, scared families, shocked staff, and the unrelenting media, made me realize what a continually changing, sometimes unimaginable, and yet healing place a school can be. As our societal beliefs are challenged, we can rise above, work as a team and learn from each other, relying on one another's reactions, strength, and faith.

I believe we now live in a world where we must turn the unthinkable into the very possible, positive opportunity.

"When written in Chinese the word crisis is composed of two characters. One represents danger, and the other represents opportunity."

John F. Kennedy

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