

**IT'S NOT MY FAULT:
THE ROLE OF DENIAL IN SCHOOL EARTHQUAKE PREPAREDNESS**

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ABSTRACT

A damaging earthquake, which strikes without warning, seemingly at random and reduces thriving entities to rubble, is a terrifying metaphor for death. Individuals normally employ a variety of defense mechanisms to alleviate the stress of coping with negative emotional states. It is argued that these defense mechanisms, often appropriate when employed on a personal level, can and do adversely impact decisions regarding policy and planning for school earthquake preparedness. This theme is discussed with reference to parents, teachers and principals at the site level, and superintendents and school boards at the district level. Suggestions are made for dealing with these powerful defense mechanisms so that the serious work of upgrading schools' earthquake management plans can begin.

FERNE HALGREN

Ms. Ferne Halgren has spent her entire professional life as an educator. A Los Angeles native, she taught English at Burbank High School before switching to parenting as a full-time occupation in 1970. In the aftermath of the 1971 Sylmar earthquake Ferne vowed to learn all she could about earthquake safety in order to be better prepared. In 1983, she founded Quake Safe, a non-profit organization dedicated to bringing earthquake education and readiness to those segments of the population who need it most. Ferne's commitment to earthquake preparedness led to her current position of Earthquake Project Coordinator for UCLA Extension. In this capacity she's produced, "Before It's Too Late," a videotape addressing problems in school earthquake preparedness; developed an awareness course and a certified school earthquake management training program for educators.

INTRODUCTION

National Geographic reporter Thomas Canby was talking about earthquakes with a bartender who worked on the 30th floor in San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel. The bartender wasn't worried. "Up here," he said, "you're away from those things."

Prior to a recent TV interview, I chatted with my host about school earthquake safety. She assured me that she never worried about her children because their school was in Pasadena, where there were no earthquakes. When I reminded her that the 1987 Whittier Narrows quake caused extensive damage nearby, she told me I was paranoid.

In order to live on the fault line, we Californians have convinced ourselves that a damaging earthquake is at best irrelevant; at worst a non-believable event. This "What - me worry?" approach is summed up by the typical resident who boasts that he's lived in California all his life and earthquakes are no big deal.

Less harmless is the attitude of an administrator at one of our sister campuses who feels that there is no need to replicate UCLA's proposed school earthquake management program because her rural communities will not have the major problems an urban area will face in a damaging quake; or the administrator who once confided to me that he didn't see the point in reducing non-structural hazards because his principals were men of God, and his schools would therefore be spared.

No one wants to see children suffer. However, if a damaging earthquake strikes during school hours, many will die and many more will be severely injured. Although some of these casualties will be unavoidable - simply a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time - many more are preventable. It is unconscionable and potentially litigable if those responsible for children's school earthquake safety allow their emotional defenses to interfere with the establishment, implementation, and regulation of programs designed to reduce earthquake risks.

DISASTER PLANS? OR PLANS FOR DISASTER?

April is Earthquake Preparedness Month in California. Last spring, school officials pointed with pride as students and teachers obediently performed disaster drills as a show of their school's preparedness. As a member of a special task force currently reviewing the level of preparedness in California schools, I know that these exercises disguised the fact that most of the state's 1027 districts are unprepared to handle the multiple crises that will arise when a major earthquake strikes.

According to a teacher at a Los Angeles Unified School District high school, "Improper routes were laid out to follow to assembly areas, ignoring potentially deadly hazards. These were: a 120 foot water tower directly at the end of the assembly area; high tension lines along and over the routes to safety; paths...between high walls and through narrow passages; fences and gates which inhibit ingress to the assembly area, causing crowding and potential for injury and further

panic; lack of safety equipment and first aid materials as well as water and food for the [72 hour] minimal time period."

Whose fault is this? No one's, because no one person or agency in the state of California is directly accountable for school earthquake safety - and everyone's, because parents, staff, and principals at the site level and district superintendents and members of boards of education have by and large responded inadequately to the threat. Why? Because we humans tend to avoid facing stressful situations by employing an arsenal of defense mechanisms. Those of us who are concerned about the low level of school earthquake preparedness can benefit from a better understanding of these defense mechanisms and their role in avoidance of responsibility in policy making and implementation.

At the Local Level:

Parents assume that schools are safe. (I first became involved in this field when I learned that only one person at my children's school - the custodian - knew where the utility valves were. When he went to Florida for a week to tend to his sick mother, not one person at that site could have turned off the gas in an emergency). Yet when the parents are made aware of their school's disaster needs they often respond with resounding indifference. A teacher writes, "...only 25% of the student body brought their supplies...to school...I think...the main reason [is] a general lethargic attitude [in] the community. 'It won't happen to us!'"

Teachers who have attended awareness conferences and classes are often doubly frustrated - first by their school's vulnerability; second by the resistance of many of their colleagues towards increased preparedness efforts. Says one, "To quote one teacher when the subject of earthquake preparedness comes up, 'Please, I don't want to talk about it, it scares me too much.'"

Public school principals look to their districts for direction. These administrators cite more pressing priorities: an assistant superintendent in a small school district angrily writes, "Just recently it was necessary to test drinking fountains for lead in the water. Apples and apple products were thrown away because of the Alar scare. A parent called last week and wanted the schools tested for radon. The local newspaper called to ask about school buses that are older than 1977, and therefore do not meet the current federal safety standards (new buses cost \$90,000 each)."

Of course money is a problem. That's because most district school boards consistently ignore the threat of a major earthquake. One year after the deadly 1987 Whittier Narrows quake, the giant Los Angeles Unified School District, with over 600,000 students, had not budgeted one penny for school preparedness.

As a result, says one teacher in a district which strides the San Andreas fault, "The current disaster plan for the district is inadequate and the staff is largely ignorant of its requirements." Adds another, close to the Newport-Inglewood fault, "The school had a written plan...However,

it had not been updated in three years, and many staff members were no longer working. Few staff members had knowledge of this plan."

These examples illustrate the defense mechanisms people routinely employ to avoid dealing with stress. Chief among them are:

repression, which relegates fear to the subconscious, allowing one to remain oblivious (the typical parent's belief that "it won't happen to MY kid"),

suppression, in which the individual is keenly aware of the fear but refuses to think about it (our teacher who begs, "Don't talk to me about earthquakes - I'm already terrified"), and

denial, in which a person, such as our harried assistant superintendent, copes with a threat by juggling its impact so that it becomes less important and therefore less stressful.

At the State Level:

Repression, suppression and denial don't work on the policy-making level. It would be political suicide for an elected official to state that there is no earthquake threat in California, or that he or she is simply too frightened to face it. The threat is real, of course, and it demands acknowledgement. However, it is abstract. Unlike AIDS or the homeless, the Big One is not perceived as an immediate event and it therefore requires no immediate response. Once acknowledged, it can be ignored. Thus, on the state level, we find **detachment**: a conscious strategy to avoid responsibility.

In 1984, the California legislature passed a bill, known as the Katz Act, which mandated schools to establish earthquake emergency procedures and develop school building disaster plans. Hailed as an important first step towards safer schools, the bill is largely ineffective because it contains no on-going mechanism by which governing boards, school districts, or county superintendents are notified that they are required to comply with its mandates; no system to review compliance, and no funding for implementation. Five years after the Katz Act was enacted, many public and private schools are still unaware of their legal responsibilities and many more lack the staff, time and financial resources critical to its implementation.

Two years ago, California Governor Deukmejian declared that April would become Earthquake Preparedness Month. He then vetoed legislation that would have established earthquake safety courses for school children - one day before the October, 1987 Whittier Narrows quake.

Public agencies are no better. According to a recent review of current status and recommendations compiled by a California Department of Education task force, no state agency has the lead responsibility for assuring school emergency preparedness. The Office of Emergency Services indicates the State Department of Education should have the lead; conversely, the State Department of Education indicates the lead should be the office of Emergency Services. There is no consensus on a standard by which to evaluate school site or district emergency plans, nor any

approval authority. There is no enforcement mechanism for requiring schools or districts to develop these plans.

In other words, it's not my fault.

Overcoming Defenses

I know of several very well-prepared schools. As you might expect, many are wealthy private schools with virtually unlimited resources and trustees who are sensitive to their personal liabilities. But one of the best prepared schools I've seen is South Gate Junior High School, with a largely Hispanic population of nearly 4000, and a rambling site in the midst of an urban industrial area. So it isn't simply a matter of time and money. Usually, it's a commitment from the top - the site administrator - coupled with strong support from other segments of the school population.

In South Gate's case, that commitment was sparked by the Whittier Narrows quake. The school, which operates year-round, was in session at 7:50 that morning. The district plan did not work. This prompted the teachers and administrators, in partnership with the parents (many of whom lost relatives in the 1985 Mexico City quake), to make earthquake preparedness a high priority.

Those of us in the field know that a moderate quake is our best motivational tool. But I believe that there are at least six carrots and sticks which can provide the incentive to prepare:

1. **Awareness** We must convince all concerned that a damaging earthquake is a highly probable event, and that it can adversely affect even the most "earthquake safe" buildings.
2. **Education** We must inform administrators of the specific risks and hazards they will face. For example, most disaster plans direct those in charge to send the injured to the nearest emergency facility. Once school planners learn that the Coalinga hospital - located 50 yards from the high school - was incapacitated by their quake, they begin to realize that they must train staff in mass medical care.
3. **Benefits** School boards in particular can be encouraged to realize that a fairly modest investment can reduce property losses. For example, putting lips on chemistry lab shelves can lessen the risk of a toxic spill.
4. **Liability** The cost of after-the-fact repairs and legal settlements can be enormous - and members of public boards of education are not protected from personal lawsuits; if it can be demonstrated that they were negligent in inadequately preparing for a highly probably seismic event.
5. **Guilt** Years ago, in Chicago, a Catholic school collected newspapers for a funding drive. Papers were placed temporarily under a fire escape. A fire broke out, and two children died while evacuating the building. The nun who had directed the newspaper drive suffered severe

psychosomatic illnesses as a result of her guilt, and eventually left her order. Could you live with yourself if you chose to ignore the earthquake threat, and children died as a result?

6. **Flattery** If **you** - with all your knowledge, compassion, organization skills and power - don't take the lead, who will? This argument applies equally to parents, teachers, principals, and local and state officials.

"BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE"

In January, 1988, I began raising funds to produce a videotape which would promote greater school preparedness. Two days ago in Los Angeles, my producer handed me the finished product. I will see it in its final form for the first time this afternoon. As you will see, we shamelessly incorporated all six motivational tools in order to strip away the emotional defenses of those who can make a difference. We at UCLA Education Extension fervently hope that this video, titled "Before it's Too Late," convinces everyone - from the parents of school children to the governor - to begin to take responsibility for our faults.

REFERENCES

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