

Emergency Response Safety for Schools

Most school districts and individual schools have emergency management plans in place. However, they are not always practiced regularly; coordinated with community resources; discussed with families, staff and children; updated regularly; or based on factual data and circumstances. As a result, when schools and districts find themselves in situations that merit an emergency response, they are often left unprepared.

Having a solid emergency response plan in place is essential, as emergencies of all shapes and sizes occur in schools on a daily basis, and these incidents can have lasting physical, emotional and educational ramifications.

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, there are several phases involved in planning an effective emergency management program.

Phase 1: Mitigation and Prevention

Mitigation is the action(s) schools and districts can take to eliminate or reduce the loss of life and property damage related to an event(s) that cannot be prevented. On the other hand, prevention is the action(s) schools and districts can take to decrease the likelihood that an event or crisis will occur.

Some examples of mitigation include:

- Bolting bookshelves to the wall
- Fencing off hazardous areas

Some examples of prevention include:

- Forming policies related to food preparation, mail handling and building access
- Assessments related to threats, physical infrastructure, and culture and climate of the school
- Current school efforts such as anti-bullying policies and wellness activities

Having a solid emergency response plan in place is essential, as emergencies of all shapes and sizes can occur in schools on a daily basis.

To put this phase into action, school officials must:

- Know the school building thoroughly and the community at large.
- Become acquainted with local first responders, community partners and the state emergency management agency.
- Bring together regional, local and school leaders.
- Make regular school safety and security efforts part of larger mitigation and prevention efforts.
- Establish clear lines of communication.
- Conduct safety and security need assessments.
- Incorporate lessons learned from previous

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emergencies and drills to update emergency plans.

Phase 2: Preparedness

The preparedness phase is designed to get the school community ready for potential emergencies by coordinating efforts with community partners. This involves developing protocols and policies, creating incident command systems and conducting formal training and exercises.

To put this phase into action, school officials must:

- Identify and involve stakeholders in the planning process.
- Determine what crises the plan will address.
- Define roles and responsibilities.
- Develop methods for communicating with staff, students, families and the media.
- Obtain necessary equipment and supplies.
- Prepare for immediate responses.
- Create maps and facility information.
- Develop accountability and student release procedures.
- Predetermine policies for locating staff/teachers following an emergency.
- Establish systems off-site for storing registration information and for conducting payroll services.
- Practice your program with all those affected by a potential emergency.
- Address liability issues.

Phase 3: Response

The response phase encompasses taking action to effectively contain and resolve an emergency through the implementation of the school's or district's

emergency management plan.

To put this phase into action, school officials must:

- Expect the unexpected.
- Assess the situation and choose the appropriate response.
- Notify appropriate emergency personnel and the school crisis response team.
- Evacuate or lock down the premises, as appropriate.
- Triage injuries and provide emergency first aid to those who need it.
- Keep supplies nearby and organized at all times.
- Identify primary and alternative evacuation sites in case the primary sites are not available during an emergency.
- Move district resources (buses, etc.) out of the disaster area.
- Trust leadership to know how to handle the situation.
- Communicate accurate and appropriate information.
- Activate the student release system.
- Establish a system for distributing or disposing of food stored in school facilities, if it is a large-scale disaster and the buildings were evacuated for an extended period of time.
- Allow for flexibility in implementing the emergency management plan.
- Document the process and how successful it was.

Phase 4: Recovery

The recovery phase is designed to assist students, staff and their families in the healing process and to restore

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the educational operations at the school. This includes repairing the physical/structural aspects of the school, attending to business or fiscal needs, getting back to academics and healing psychological or emotional wounds.

Planning for recovery involves establishing community partnerships, developing policies, providing training and developing memorandums of understanding.

To put this phase into action, school officials must:

- Assemble a crisis intervention team.
- Return to the “business of learning” as quickly as possible.
- Keep students, families and the media well-informed.
- Provide assessments of the emotional needs of the staff, students, families and responders.
- Provide stress management after class resumes.
- Conduct daily debriefings with staff, responders and others assisting in the recovery efforts.
- Take as much time as needed for the recovery.
- Pre-negotiate contracts for transportation, food, construction and other district needs.
- Implement a system to manage receipt of donations.
- Evaluate their actions during this time.

Goal of Emergency Response Systems

If an emergency response system is created and executed correctly, it should hopefully achieve the following:

- Address all four phases of emergency management, as listed above.
- Take an “all hazards” approach. This means that the

plan addresses the following perils:

- Natural disasters – earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, etc.
- Technological – power outages
- Infrastructure – roads, bridges and utilities
- Nonstructural – portable room dividers, bookshelves, suspended ceilings and light fixtures
- Man-made – hazardous materials release or acts of terrorism
- Biological – flu pandemic or contaminated food
- Physical well-being – broken bones from playing too rough or student suicide
- Student culture and climate – bullying, drugs or violent behavior on the premises

By engaging the local government, law enforcement, the students and their families and the school district in these emergency response efforts, you are taking the appropriate measures to make your school and district a safer place to learn and work.