



Tabletop Exercise: Chemistry Teacher Drops Beaker Containing Mercury

Traces of mercury were found in school hallways and in the homes of students who were in the classroom at the time of the incident.

Published: March 22, 2024 Author: Amy Rock

While most K-12 schools and colleges have emergency plans in place, some of those plans can go years without being touched. Incidents such as tornadoes, earthquakes or active shooters are rare, but the time to find out whether or not your plans and procedures are effective is not during a real emergency. Even something as random as responding to a lab experiment gone wrong should be drilled.

Practicing your campus' response to various emergencies is vital to keeping constituents safe. Since full-scale exercises pose significant challenges for many organizations and require lots of resources, conducting a tabletop exercise is a good alternative that can be done on a regular basis.

During these exercises, relevant stakeholders should be brought to the table and presented with real-life scenarios. Each stakeholder should share how they would handle the scenario and a subsequent debriefing should be held to address strengths and weaknesses within emergency plans.

Are you interested in conducting these exercises but are unsure where to start? As a jumping-off point, Guy Bliesner, an analyst for the Idaho Office of School Safety and Security (IOSSS), has provided us with incidents that happened at Idaho schools in the last five years and how those particular schools responded.

Each scenario provides details of the event, along with the real outcome and findings from an after-action report. They are designed to be completed in 10-15 minutes as part of an administrative meeting.

Scenario

- **Season:** Mid-winter
- **Day:** Wednesday
- **Time:** 2:56 P.M.
- **Weather:** Overcast with intermittent rain/snow
- **Temperature:** 33 degrees
- **School type:** Elementary (K-5)

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- **Event:** It is nearing the end of the day. The dismissal bell will ring in 4 minutes. A student tells the principal that a teacher engaged in a science experiment dropped a glass beaker containing mercury. The beaker has broken and an unknown quantity of the mercury has spilled onto the carpeted floor of the classroom. **What next steps should be taken?**

How the School Handled the Situation

By the time the principal got to the classroom, the end of day bell had rung and the teacher already allowed the 19 students to leave the classroom. The teacher was cleaning up the broken glass when the principal entered the classroom and the custodian was called in.

The custodian, a volunteer firefighter, recognizes the hazmat nature of the mercury spill incident, and the local fire chief is contacted. Under his authority, the state hazmat team is mobilized. The team arrives at the school just prior to 7:00 P.M. and the classroom is closed and abate measures are instated.

The hazmat team finds traces of mercury in the hallways moved from the classroom on students' shoes. Each of the students is contacted at their home and shoes and clothing are checked for mercury. Two students' shoes are found to be contaminated. The bus ridden by one of those students is also found to have trace amounts of mercury.

The entire school is closed for two days as the abatement process is performed on the classroom, two hallways, one school bus, and two private homes. The school district is financially responsible for the mercury abatement costs.

After-Action Review Findings

An after-action review (AAR) of a response should always be completed following an incident. See Part 1 for questions that IOSSS says should be used to review a response.

The AAR in this case determined the hazmat incident was not well handled and no protocol existed in district policy. As a result:

- Chemical storage and handling procedures were reviewed and a chemical hygiene plan was developed
- Chemistry class curriculum was reviewed, as was substance use and storage
- Chemicals not directly related to the curriculum were identified and removed from storage

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Tabletop Exercise

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Rock, A. (2024, March 22). Tabletop Exercise 6: Chemistry Teacher Drops Beaker Containing Mercury. CampusSafety. <https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/news/k-12-tabletop-exercise-6/96762/>

KCSS Resources

Emergency Guide: <https://kycss.org/emergency-procedures/emergency-guide/>

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