

“Ensuring **Safety and Security** in Our Nation’s Schools”

by the U.S. Department of Education’s
Emergency Response and Crisis Management Technical Assistance Center:

Creating and maintaining a safe school environment is a goal shared by all schools and districts. Tragic events such as the shootings in Kentucky, Colorado, and Minnesota, the tornados in Alabama, and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita emphasize the importance of engaging school administrators in developing and maintaining school emergency management plans to prevent-mitigate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from all-hazards (e.g. natural disasters, school shootings, infectious diseases, etc.). Schools across the country are putting “safety on the agenda” by enhancing and strengthening school emergency management plans.

Addressing the Four Phases of Emergency Management

A comprehensive, all-hazard school emergency management plan is framed within the four phases of school emergency management: Prevention-Mitigation, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery. The four phases of emergency management guide and build the foundation for successful emergency planning. The interconnected phases are the basis for creating tailored and comprehensive district and school-based plans, in collaboration with community partners such as fire, police, public health, mental health, emergency management services, and other community agencies that have the expertise and resources to help before, during, and after an emergency. The plans should document everything required to implement and maintain the plans including but not limited to: chain of command, roles and responsibilities for staff, first responders, and relevant community partners; activities to be performed; benchmarks and timelines for accomplishing each task; resources required; and desired outcomes. These procedures must be put in writing, communicated appropriately to staff, students, families, first responders, and practiced through drills and exercises.

Prevention-Mitigation

It is important to assess and address the safety and integrity of the school facilities, culture, and climate to ensure a safe and healthy learning environment. Prevention is the action(s) taken to decrease the likelihood that an event or crisis will occur, and may include establishing communication procedures for staff, parents, students, and the media, and conducting comprehensive hazard assessments. Mitigation is the action(s) schools and districts take to eliminate or reduce the loss of life and property damage related to an event that cannot be prevented, and includes activities such as fencing hazardous areas, securing bookshelves to the wall, and anchoring outdoor equipment that could become a flying projectile.



Preparedness

School administrators should collaborate with local first responders, including law enforcement, fire safety, and emergency medical services in developing response procedures and protocols for evacuation, lock-down, and shelter-in-place. The lessons learned from past disasters, such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, illustrate the importance of establishing protocols that clearly assign roles and responsibilities to both school staff and first responders, developing Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) with partners, and pre-negotiating contracts for critical services (such as transportation, construction, mental health) that the schools may need following an emergency event. Emergency management structures, established through an Incident Command System (ICS), should be clearly established and communicated during the Preparedness phase. Providing training and conducting exercise and drills (such as tabletops, functional exercises and full-scale drills) enforces the plan, identifies potential weaknesses and ensures that the school community is better prepared.

Response

School officials and community partners should work together to implement the emergency management plan and effectively contain and resolve an emergency. The proactive efforts taken by the school community during the Prevention-Mitigation and Preparedness phases will facilitate a more effective response. Prior to an emergency, school officials should collaborate with local first responders and community partners to ensure mutual understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities during an emergency, and the physical structure of the school. Activation of the ICS team will assist with a school or district's response efforts. Finally, the response protocol, involved parties, and duration of response will vary depending on the severity and intensity of the incident.

Recovery

Working closely with community partners, government officials and other stakeholders, resources can be provided to assist students and staff in the healing process and to help restore the learning environment. School districts and schools must develop plans prior to a crisis or an emergency for physical/structural, emotional, business/fiscal, and academic recovery. Districts should make plans for both short- and long-term recovery efforts in their schools as Recovery needs and activities will also vary based on the scope of the incident. These plans must address the diverse needs of students and staff, including those with disabilities and special needs.

Involving School Administrators in Emergency Management Activities

Involving school administrators is crucial for effective emergency management at the school and district level. Administrator buy-in is the key to communication and collaboration among the entire school community, including teachers, staff, students, parents, and community partners. To actively engage school administrators in emergency management activities, schools and districts can utilize the following strategies:

- **Emphasize the Importance of Collaboration with Community Partners.** District and school-based administrators must realize they can help mitigate the impacts of a crisis by planning in advance with school staff and community partners. Administrators should be reminded that they would not be faced with resolving a crisis by themselves should one occur. It is important to emphasize to both district and school-based administrators that past crises such as Columbine, 9-11, and Hurricane Katrina magnify the need to have an emergency management plan. Administrators that have experienced a school crisis or emergency can be asked to speak with other administrators to emphasize the importance of collaboration, and share their lessons learned.
- **Help Administrators Understand the Benefits of School Emergency Management.** Emergencies and crises unfold quickly and it is unlikely that emergency responders are located next to schools. Therefore, schools must develop the capability to be self-reliant until first responders arrive. To help both district and school administrators

understand the benefits of school emergency management administrators should become familiar with the rationale and concepts of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Incident Command System (ICS).

- **Provide School-based Administrators Support to Engage in Emergency Management.** It is important that district-based administrators support school-based administrators by providing the leadership, access to training, resources, time, and processes needed for creating well-integrated emergency management plans. These activities should address how to design, implement, evaluate, and consistently update the plans. District administrators should raise awareness and show support through on-going dialogue, and informing principals of expectations, funding allotments, and training opportunities.¹

By collaborating with community partners and actively planning, training, and updating plans prior to an emergency, school administrators are better equipped to meet the safety and security needs of students, teachers, and staff. The U.S. Department of Education's Emergency Response and Crisis Management Technical Assistance Center (ERCM TA Center) offers resources for public and nonpublic schools and school districts to help strengthen and enhance emergency management plans. The ERCM TA Center has developed three emergency management publication series: *ERCMExpress* Newsletters, *Lessons Learned* and *Helpful Hints* that address topics such as food safety, dealing with weapons on campus, and addressing the needs of special needs populations. The Center also provides emergency management training opportunities, as well as detailed technical assistance on a variety of emergency management issues.

Resources

Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS), Emergency Planning Web site

Emergency Planning is part of the Department's "Lead and Manage My School" series, a group of Web sites designed to support administrators. OSDFS presents information and resources regarding the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Discretionary Grant Program alongside valuable emergency management for schools resources.

Accessible at <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/index.html>

Emergency Response and Crisis Management (ERCM) Technical Assistance (TA) Center Web site

The ERCM TA Center Web site offers school-based resources addressing emergency management. Resources include a Web cast, training documents presented by experts and publications addressing key issues. Information on the R EMS - formally Emergency Response and Crisis Management - discretionary grant program is updated annually.

Accessible at <http://ercm.ed.gov>

¹ For additional information on engaging school administrators in emergency management activities, please visit the ERCM TA Center's Web site for a forthcoming issue of a *Helpful Hint* document titled, "Engaging Administrators in School Emergency Management."