

EMERGENCY PLANNING TIPS FOR SCHOOLS

Each school year, administrators schedule monthly fire drills for their students and staff. To minimize the consequent interruption of classes and the school-wide schedule, administrators commonly schedule these drills during regular class periods on days when there are no assemblies. Additionally, fire drills are typically planned to occur on the warmest day of the month without precipitation. This fire drill schedule may be convenient for students and staff, but it does not adequately prepare them for an emergency.

When an emergency occurs, Murphy's Law will not consider "plan A" and "plan B." The weather may not be sunny and warm. Students and staff may not be following a typical day's schedule. Planning a fire drill for when it's most convenient is a thoughtful idea; but, emergencies that may occur at your school will never be convenient, and how your school practices for potential emergencies is how they will respond to actual emergencies.

HOW YOUR SCHOOL PRACTICES FOR POTENTIAL EMERGENCIES IS HOW THEY WILL RESPOND TO ACTUAL EMERGENCIES



WHAT KIND OF SCHOOL ARE YOU?

Are you a school with a tall book of emergency plans that sit on a shelf and never get practiced? Are you a school that has no formal plans but practices different scenarios? Or, are you a school whose students and staff are prepared to think on their own during an emergency? You can't plan for every possible emergency; but, practicing several scenarios is better than not practicing at all or only practicing when it's convenient.

How to Bridge the Gap

Some schools have emergency plans but don't effectively communicate them to their students and staff, or they don't practice those plans. This example illustrates a gap in the school's emergency planning process. Bridging this gap is important. It is also important to understand that doing so may require a culture change within your school.

Students may have to adjust to having different types of drills throughout the year, and teachers may need to become accustomed to using their administrative time to participate in emergency drills and exercises. For this culture change to occur, students and staff must take it as seriously as the administrators.

The Emergency Planning Team

Emergency planning takes a village. Start the process by creating an emergency planning team. This team should include a variety of staff members who have different daily job responsibilities. The role each team member will play during an emergency should be similar to the job functions they perform each day. For example, administrators can plan schedules or new sites for parent reunification, and teachers can guide students to their designated shelters. Nurses can evaluate injuries, and counselors can assess students' emotional states/needs. Additionally, custodians can advise on building systems that may become factors during an emergency. It is important that each team member understands their role and feels comfortable carrying it out during an emergency. All team members and their respective functions will be helpful and may even be critical during an emergency.

Once established, the emergency planning team should meet on a consistent basis: weekly or monthly. Ideally, your school should also have an Emergency Response Team to assist with building evacuations, school lock downs and parent reunification.

The All-Hazards Approach

Use an all-hazards approach when creating your emergency plan. All-hazards does not mean plan for every possible scenario; but, to create a plan that will work for several scenarios. For example, instead of having "fire drills" specifically, plan and practice "evacuation drills." How many fires has your school encountered in the past ten years? More than likely, it hasn't been many. Evacuation drills are useful in preparing schools for multiple emergencies including fires, bomb threats, active shooters, gas leaks, etc.

**CREATE A PLAN
THAT WILL WORK
FOR SEVERAL
SCENARIOS**

Training Exercises

Training begins with your school's staff. First, familiarize them with current policies. Consider taking an hour or two during a half-day to present and discuss your school's current emergency program. After covering the plans and procedures, take the remaining time to get people thinking about what they would do given a particular situation. One way to do this is through a tabletop exercise. To conduct a tabletop exercise, gather a small group of staff members, give them a situation to think through and see what they come up with for a plan. To enhance the exercise, consider giving them multiple scenarios along with a few hidden challenges for them to overcome (the principal is on vacation, the fire alarm does not work, etc.). Tabletops allow you to test your plan and make necessary modifications while in a controlled environment.

A more advanced exercise is a full-scale exercise, where all parts of your plan are physically moving. During a full-scale exercise, local emergency responders should respond to the simulated emergency as if it were a real emergency. Your staff should be carrying out their roles as well while other actors are creating chaos. A full-scale exercise allows you to test not just your plans, but also the people involved and entrusted to carry them out.

The purpose of any training exercise is not to make your staff feel vulnerable. The purpose is to find the vulnerabilities within your school's emergency plan, allowing you to make changes and better prepare your school for an emergency.

Tips for Training Exercises

Consider the following tips to enhance your training exercises.

Keep them realistic: Exercises can vary in intensity. Whether your school uses tabletop exercises or full-scale exercises, it's important that the example/simulated scenarios are realistic.

Know your roles: You may consider hosting a full-scale exercise which will create the most realistic scene for testing your existing emergency plan. However, if your teachers do not know their roles during an emergency, you cannot accurately evaluate your plan during testing.

Know your experts: Before your full-scale exercise, have local emergency responders meet with your staff and discuss similar scenarios to the one you will be using for your exercise. Full-scale exercises are more productive when prepared for in advance.

Know your terms: Another system to implement is the National Incident Management System (NIMS) from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Emergency responders are familiar with NIMS. They use it on a daily basis. If your school becomes familiar with NIMS, terms like "Incident Commander" and "Public Information Officer" will not be foreign to them. NIMS courses can be completed online. The courses are free; and, they will help your team learn how to manage an emergency and work with different agencies during an emergency.

SUMMARY

Nobody likes talking about active shooters in schools or mass casualty school bus accidents. The reality though, is that your school could be next; and more than likely, your emergency will not be in your control. Do not let that scare you. Instead, let it motivate you to prepare your school as fully as possible. Change your culture. Connect your emergency plans with the people you will rely on to carry them out. Challenge your students and staff, practice realistic evacuation drills, and make them inconvenient.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

I Love You Guys Foundation | Standard Response Protocol | http://iloveguys.org/srp_operational_guidance.html

REMS | Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools | <http://rem.ed.gov/ToolBox.aspx>

FEMA | Multi-hazard Emergency Planning for Schools | <https://training.fema.gov/programs/emischool/el361toolkit/siteindex.htm>

FEMA | National Incident Management System | <https://www.fema.gov/national-incident-management-system>