School Emergency Management Planning: Overview

PURPOSE
Provides an overview of core principles of emergency management planning for schools.

SUMMARY
School administrators should work with local emergency responders to develop emergency management plans (EMP). A comprehensive EMP should account for possible hazards that could impact the school and should incorporate the prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation phases of emergency management. Because schools are integral parts of their communities, their EMPs should be coordinated with the local emergency management community.

DESCRIPTION
Pre-incident emergency management planning is essential to prepare for the diverse threats that confront schools. An EMP can help a school identify and address hazards, train and prepare staff for emergencies, coordinate procedures with emergency responders, and expedite recovery efforts. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school districts that receive federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools funding are required to have an EMP in place for responding to violent or traumatic incidents. In addition, following several prominent incidents in the late 1990s, many states have enacted laws that require schools to conduct emergency management planning. Most schools today have some form of EMP. However, these plans are frequently incomplete, out-of-date, not practiced, or not coordinated with local emergency responders.

This Best Practice series provides school administrators and emergency responders with methods, illustrations, and resources to develop and improve a school EMP. The series is tailored to assist administrators in developing emergency plans for individual schools. Many of these concepts are also relevant at the school district level. These Best Practices do not constitute an exhaustive list of emergency management planning concepts; they should be viewed as supplemental resources when designing a comprehensive, all-hazards school EMP.

This Best Practice overview introduces the topic of emergency management planning for schools. This document consists of six sections:

- All-Hazards Planning
- The National Incident Management System
- Phases of Emergency Management
- Community Collaboration
- Challenges of School Emergency Management Planning
About this Series of Best Practices

All-Hazards Planning
Schools are vulnerable to a variety of hazards that can impact students, faculty, staff, visitors, the school building, and the surrounding community. Schools that develop an all-hazards EMP will be better prepared to prevent, respond to, recover from, and mitigate these incidents. An all-hazards EMP should be flexible enough to guide response to any type of incident that could occur at school. The following examples list some categories of hazards that school administrators should be prepared for.

Biological
School administrators should be prepared for biological hazards that could occur in a school setting. Biological hazards can include bodily fluid spills, contaminated food, and infectious diseases. School administrators also should be aware of how certain medical conditions of students, faculty, and staff (such as diabetes, asthma, or allergies) may become a complicating factor during an incident.

Community
School administrators should understand that threats to a school can originate from within the school or from the surrounding community. Infrastructure near the school may pose a risk because a disaster at an external site could impact the school. Some community features that school administrators should be aware of include airports, dams, hazardous material storage sites, military installations, prisons, and railroads.

Environmental
School administrators should identify potential environmental features that may become hazards during an incident at school. Some examples of environmental features that could create hazards include bookshelves, portable room dividers, suspended ceiling and light fixtures, trophy cases, and un-reinforced masonry. Environmental features may pose a risk due to poor building design, improper maintenance, or unsafe practices.

Natural
School administrators should prepare for naturally occurring incidents that might pose a threat to their schools. School administrators should be aware of what types of weather patterns typically impact their area and prepare appropriately. Natural hazards can include droughts, earthquakes, floods, heat waves, hurricanes, snow/ice storms, tornados, and tsunamis.

School administrators also should consider using National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Public Alert Radios to detect severe weather. For additional information on incorporating NOAA Public Alert Radios into school emergency management plans, please refer to the LLIS.gov Lesson Learned document: Emergency Communications: Incorporating National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Public Alert Radios into School Emergency Management Plans.

Preparing for Pandemic Influenza
For additional information on planning for pandemic influenza, please see the US Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools’ Pandemic Flu: A Planning Guide for Educators. Additional resources can also be found on the Lessons Learned Information Sharing (LLIS.gov) resource page on Pandemic Influenza.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita
Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated school systems across Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, and Alabama in August and September 2005. Over 1,000 public and private schools were closed after the storms, leaving approximately 372,000 students initially unable to attend school.

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Technological
School administrators should prepare for hazards that might arise from technological equipment in the school. Some technological hazards that schools could face include electrical fires and power outages. School administrators also should consider where the school’s computer servers are and whether school files will be available if operations are moved to another facility in the aftermath of a disaster.

Terrorism
School administrators should prepare for the possibility that their schools will be directly or indirectly impacted by terrorism. This need was demonstrated by the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, which necessitated the evacuation of eight schools in close proximity to the site. Although schools in the United States have not been directly targeted by terrorism, schools have been targeted by terrorists in several other countries, including Algeria, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkey.

Violence
School administrators should prepare for the possibility that their schools will be impacted by violence such as assault, bullying, gang violence, and riots. Some factors contributing to violence include the school’s social climate and crime rates.

The media, parents, and school boards have increasingly requested that schools develop emergency plans for dealing with school shooting incidents. Though school shootings are rare compared to other forms of school violence, school administrators should understand that there are a range of circumstances that may lead to school shootings, including bullying, gang violence, personal disputes, and targeted violence by students or intruders. School EMPs should reflect these different precursors to violence.

The National Incident Management System
The National Incident Management System (NIMS) is the United States’ system for managing domestic incidents. Mandated by Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD-5), NIMS standardizes the methods for planning and responding to all hazards. It enables community organizations to coordinate the management of incidents with emergency responders at all levels using a standardized set of concepts, principles, and terminology.

Implementation of NIMS by a school will assist in the coordination of a school EMP with local

Beslan Hostage Crisis
The largest school terrorist attack occurred on September 1, 2004, in the Russian Republic of Northern Ossetia-Alania. During the incident, approximately 30 terrorists seized Beslan Middle School Number One and took around 1,200 civilians hostage. More than 300 civilians died in the incident, almost half of them children.

Incidents of Targeted Violence
The US Secret Service and the US Department of Education define incidents of targeted violence as “school shootings and other school-based attacks where the school was deliberately selected as the location for the attack and was not simply a random site of opportunity.” For additional information on incidents of targeted violence, please refer to the US Department of Education and Secret Service’s The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States.

NIMS Compliance Guidance
ERCM Helpful Hints: The National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Schools Frequently Asked Questions and FY 2006 NIMS: Compliance Activities for Schools contains helpful information on implementing NIMS into public schools. It is produced by the US Department of Education’s Emergency Response and Crisis Management (ERCM) Technical Assistance Center.
response plans. This will provide for a more effective transfer of authority, acquisition of resources, and better communications during an emergency. Additionally, NIMS compliance will enable schools and local emergency response agencies to jointly manage incidents regardless of their causes, sizes, locations, or complexities.

All school administrators should consider adopting NIMS. Schools and districts that receive federal emergency preparedness grants are required to comply with NIMS requirements; those that do not receive these grants are not required to adopt NIMS. However, school safety experts strongly encourage all schools to become NIMS compliant for the reasons aforementioned.

This Best Practice series is based on NIMS concepts and principles and uses NIMS terminology. However, this series does not directly address NIMS compliance. Information on adopting the NIMS into schools can be obtained by contacting the National Integration Center Incident Management Systems Division.

**Phases of Emergency Management**

Safety experts agree that a school EMP is most effective when it is based on NIMS. NIMS is widely utilized by the public safety and emergency management communities and includes the following phases of emergency management: prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. Emergency management planning based on this five-phase model enables administrators to account for all aspects of school safety.

**Prevention**

A comprehensive EMP includes polices that address school hazards through prevention. Prevention focuses on steps that schools should take to decrease the likelihood that an incident will occur. Some common prevention actions include:

- Conducting a school safety audit;
- Establishing visitor registration procedures;
- Fencing hazardous areas;
- Implementing anti-bullying, anger management, and conflict resolution programs; and
- Securing loose bookshelves.

**Preparedness**

Emergency management planning requires that administrators prepare their schools by identifying school and community resources that could be utilized in response to an incident. Schools also should prepare by coordinating their emergency management planning with local emergency response agencies. Some common preparedness actions include:

- Coordinating school emergency management plans with those of state and local agencies;
- Developing and exercising emergency communications plans;
- Establishing memoranda of understanding with community partners;
- Establishing a media staging area;

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**Emergency Management Checklist**

In May 2003, the Department of Education released *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*. This guide reviews emergency planning and provides checklists for each of the five phases of emergency management.
- Establishing procedures for volunteer registries and mechanisms for donations;
- Identifying and planning for special needs populations;
- Organizing training sessions and conducting drills;
- Outlining roles and duties under an incident command system; and
- Pre-negotiating contracts for emergency services or supplies.

**Response**

Effective incident response requires that schools develop procedures for minimizing damage, protecting lives, and accelerating recovery. Response protocols need to be developed before an incident occurs because there will be no time to create them during an emergency. Some common response actions include:

- Activating student release and parental re-unification procedures;
- Activating lockdown, evacuation, cancellation of classes, reverse evacuation, and shelter-in-place protocols;
- Establishing an incident command post;
- Implementing communication protocols; and
- Initiating continuity of operations activities.

**Recovery**

Proper preparation and effective response to incidents can minimize the time required for recovery. School administrators should focus on restoring a school to normal operating status as soon as possible following an incident. Recovery may include the following components:

- Acknowledging anniversaries of significant incidents;
- Activating community resources such as emergency shelters;
- Establishing memorial sites;
- Implementing continuity of operations plans;
- Locating displaced students and school personnel;
- Outlining short- and long-term counseling needs for students and school personnel;
- Recovering academically from setbacks related to lost instruction time;
- Recovering the operation of systems, including human resources and financial operations;
- The physical, psychological, and emotional healing of students and staff; and
- Recovering from physical damage to facilities.

**Mitigation**

Mitigation focuses on steps that schools take to reduce the loss of life and damage related to events that cannot be prevented. These activities may occur before, during, or after an incident. Some common mitigation measures include:

- Efforts to educate school faculty and staff members, students, and parents on emergency procedures;

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For additional information on continuity of operations plans, please refer to the *Municipality, Department, and Business Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) Template*.

Establishing Memorial Sites

Physical memorials are not always necessary or appropriate. In some cases, such as suicides, school safety experts recommend against constructing physical memorials, as they may increase the risk of copycat suicides.
- Structural retrofitting;
- Use of metal detectors and security cameras; and
- Writing an after-action report.

The five phases of emergency management planning are interconnected; tasks performed in any one phase will impact the other phases. For example, efforts to recover from one disaster may improve prevention, preparedness, response, and mitigation efforts for future incidents.

**Community Collaboration**
School administrators should include representatives from the local emergency management community in the process of developing a school EMP. School safety experts agree that an EMP that is developed without the assistance of emergency response agencies, community leaders, and other stakeholders will be less effective during an incident at school. Some community members school administrations should consider include:

- Community service organization representatives; (such as the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army);
- Emergency response agency representatives (including fire, emergency medical services, and law enforcement);
- Local and state emergency management agency representatives;
- Managers of facilities that would receive evacuated students and school personnel;
- Media representatives;
- Mental health agency representatives;
- Public health system representatives;
- Transportation agency representatives; and
- Business leaders.

For additional information on the need for involving emergency responders in crisis planning, please see the [LLIS.gov Lessons Learned document: School Safety: Involving Emergency Response Agencies in Crisis Planning](#).

**Local Business Partners**
School administrators should consider establishing a memorandum of understanding with local business leaders to provide equipment and other services following an incident at a school. For additional information on working with local business partners, please see the [LLIS.gov Lessons Learned document: Emergency Management: Developing Memoranda of Understanding with Local Businesses](#).

**Mutual-aid Agreements**
Administrators should consider developing mutual-aid agreements with local emergency management agencies and other schools to provide additional resources during incidents at their schools. A mutual-aid agreement is a formal agreement between agencies to provide assistance when an incident exceeds the capabilities and resources of any one jurisdiction. These agreements can help ensure that response protocols are coordinated, needed resources are readily available, and that all legal responsibility issues are addressed prior to an actual emergency.

**Sister School Agreements**
The Minnesota Department of Education has developed a [Sister School Agreement Template](#) to help schools in the state to establish mutual-aid agreements for the temporary exchange of certain personnel, materials, and equipment in the event of a community-wide emergency.
There is no universally accepted mutual-aid agreement format, nor are there standards for the types or quantities of agreements that a given agency or jurisdiction should have. However, some common aspects of a mutual-aid agreement include:

- **Purpose and Scope:** This section outlines the purpose of the mutual-aid agreement and enumerates the participating entities.
- **Roles and Responsibilities:** This section establishes the roles of the participants in school incident management. For example, the mutual-aid agreement can establish which partners are going to be responsible for crowd and traffic control, student reunification issues, etc.
- **Guidelines, Procedures, Protocols:** This section outlines common protocols and procedures to enhance response and recovery efforts. The mutual-aid agreement can require that parties use common systems and terminology for standardized emergency management, dispatch procedures, request procedures, and communication procedures.

School administrators also should consider what resources they can provide to the local community during an emergency. During a community disaster, schools are often utilized as shelters, vaccination centers, and sites to distribute food and other goods. Schools may also be asked to provide school buses to assist in a mass evacuation. School administrators should work with community partners to determine in advance how the school may assist in a community emergency. A mutual-aid agreement can clarify the demands the school and the emergency management agencies may place on each other.

For additional information on establishing mutual-aid agreements, please see the LLIS.gov Best Practice document: [Mutual Aid Agreements: Overview](#).

**Challenges of School Emergency Management Planning**

Many schools’ EMPs are left undeveloped or unrevised despite the fact that there has been an increased demand for more emergency management planning from parents, school boards, and public officials. This may be due to several factors, some of which include reactive behavior, time constraints, and limited funds.

**Reactive Behavior**

School administrators may believe that a disaster will not happen at their schools and adopt an “it won’t happen here” attitude. As a result, change in safety planning is often dictated by a tragic incident, rather than anticipatory planning. However, safety experts agree that school administrators should be proactive, rather than reactive, when addressing school emergency management planning.

**Time Constraints**

One of the largest difficulties for school administrators and staff is that they have limited time to devote to emergency management planning. The day-to-day operation of a school and education of students consumes the majority of available time, leaving little for developing or updating an EMP. Efforts to take time to work on emergency planning or practice drills are often met with resistance. However, emergency management planning is vital to school safety, and school administrators should work to convince stakeholders, including parents and school boards, of the need to devote sufficient time to developing an EMP.

**Limited Funding**

School emergency management planning may be limited by available funds. Budget cuts can leave school systems with decreased money and staff to commit to emergency
planning. As a result, many schools may not have resources to commit to maintaining comprehensive EMPs.

Experts encourage schools to seek federal grants as alternate funding sources. One potential source of funding is the US Department of Education’s Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools. This grant provides funds to school districts to strengthen and improve emergency management plans at the district and school building level.

**About This Series of Best Practices**

This series of Best Practices provides information that schools and districts can utilize to develop and maintain a comprehensive, all-hazards EMP. The series addresses six elements of effective emergency management planning for schools:

- Hazard Vulnerability Assessments
- Incident Management Teams
- Mitigation Plans
- Emergency Operations Plans
- Training, Exercises, and Drills
- Incident Recovery

**Definitions and Terminology**

NIMS provides a standardized vocabulary to facilitate coordination and communication among emergency responders. School administrators should also familiarize themselves with NIMS-standard terminology and utilize it in their emergency management planning. This will enable better communication between the school and emergency responders and avoid confusion during an incident at school.

The following terms are based on NIMS-standard terminology (as defined by the [NIMS Glossary of Terms](#)) and will be regularly used throughout these Best Practice documents:

**Command Staff:** “In an incident management organization, the Command Staff consists of the Incident Command and the special staff positions of Public Information Officer, Safety Officer, Liaison Officer, and other positions as required, who report directly to the Incident Commander. They may have an assistant or assistants, as needed.”

**Emergency:** “Absent a Presidentially declared emergency, any incident(s), human-caused or natural, that requires responsive action to protect life or property.”

**Emergency Operations Plan (EOP):** “The ‘steady-state’ plan maintained by various jurisdictional levels for responding to a wide variety of potential hazards.”

**Emergency Response Provider:** "Includes Federal, state, local, and tribal emergency public safety, law enforcement, emergency response, emergency medical (including hospital emergency facilities), and related personnel, agencies, and authorities.”

**Evacuation:** "Organized, phased, and supervised withdrawal, dispersal, or removal of civilians from dangerous or potentially dangerous areas, and their reception and care in safe areas.”

**General Staff:** “A group of incident management personnel organized according to function and reporting to the Incident Commander. The General Staff normally consists of the Operations Section Chief, Planning Section Chief, Logistics Section Chief, and Finance/Administration Section Chief.”
**Hazard:** “Something that is potentially dangerous or harmful, often the root cause of an unwanted outcome.”

**Incident:** "An occurrence or event, natural or human-caused, that requires an emergency response to protect life or property.”

**Incident Action Plan:** "An oral or written plan containing general objectives reflecting the overall strategy for managing an incident. It may include the identification of operational resources and assignments. It may also include attachments that provide direction and important information for management of the incident during one or more operational periods.”

**Incident Command System (ICS):** "A standardized on-scene emergency management construct specifically designed to provide for the adoption of an integrated organizational structure that reflects the complexity and demands of single or multiple incidents, without being hindered by jurisdictional boundaries.”

**Incident Commander (IC):** "The individual responsible for all incident activities, including the development of strategies and tactics and the ordering and the release of resources. The IC has overall authority and responsibility for conducting incident operations and is responsible for the management of all incident operations at the incident site.”

**Incident Management Team (IMT):** "The IC and appropriate Command and General Staff personnel assigned to an incident.”

**Jurisdiction:** "A range or sphere of authority. Public agencies have jurisdiction at an incident related to their legal responsibilities and authority. Jurisdictional authority at an incident can be political or geographical (e.g. city, county, tribal, State, or Federal boundary lines) or functional (e.g. law enforcement, public health).”

**Logistics Section:** “The section responsible for providing facilities, services, and material support for the incident.”

**Mitigation:** "The activities designed to reduce or eliminate risks to persons or property or to lessen the actual or potential effects or consequences of an incident.”

**Mutual-Aid Agreement:** "Written agreement between agencies and/or jurisdictions that they will assist one another on request, by furnishing personnel, equipment, and/or expertise in a specified manner.”

**National Incident Management System:** "A system mandated by HSPD-5 that provides a consistent nationwide approach for Federal, State, local, and tribal governments; the private sector; and nongovernmental organizations to work effectively and efficiently together to prepare for, respond to, and recover from domestic incidents, regardless of cause, size, or complexity. To provide for interoperability and compatibility among Federal, State, local, and tribal capabilities, the NIMS includes a core set of concepts, principles, and terminology.”

**Operations Section:** “The section responsible for all tactical incident operations. In ICS, it normally includes subordinate branches, divisions, and/or groups.”
Planning Section: “Responsible for the collection, evaluation, and dissemination of operational information related to the incident and for the preparation and documentation of the IAP. This section also maintains information on the current and forecasted situation and on the status of resources assigned to the incident.”

Preparedness: “The range of deliberate, critical tasks and activities necessary to build, sustain, and improve the operational capability to prevent, protect against, respond to, and recover from domestic incidents.”

Prevention: “Actions to avoid an incident or to intervene to stop an incident from occurring.”

Public Information Officer: “A member of the Command Staff responsible for interfacing with the public and media or with other agencies with incident-related information requirements.”

Recovery Plan: "A plan developed by a State, local, or tribal jurisdiction with assistance from responding Federal agencies to restore the affected area.”

Response: “Activities that address the short-term, direct effects of an incident. Response includes immediate actions to save lives, protect property, and meet basic human needs. Response also includes the execution of emergency operations plans and of mitigation activities designed to limit the loss of life, personal injury, property damage, and other unfavorable outcomes.”

RESOURCES

References


**Links**


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