

The Three R's and Emergency Preparedness: Contingency Planning for Our Schools by Edward V. Badolato and Dr. James Miskel, December 1999

Schools at all levels - from kindergarten through college -- have a special place in our society. They educate our children, our most precious resource. Schools also have very special responsibilities. Our children spend much of their time in classrooms or other school buildings, on school grounds, and in school vehicles. As parents, grandparents of other relatives of students, we all have stakes in the schools and their preparedness for emergencies.

The decade of the 1990's has witnessed tremendous changes in the emergency preparedness requirements for our nation's schools. One of the biggest changes is the increasing frequency with which emergencies strike school systems. School systems (faculty, students, administrators and parents) have had to manage a record number of natural disasters -- earthquakes in California, tropical storms in Florida, and more recently, extensive flooding in the Midwest. Schools systems are no more immune than any other part of society to hazards like chemical spills or the release of toxic pollutants into the air that seem to occur with increasing frequency throughout the country. In addition to these external crises, school systems have also had to manage unparalleled internal security challenges. So serious are these internal security challenges that many schools have had to install metal detectors, hire uniformed guards and reschedule sporting events to the afternoons when the risk of violence is lower. School systems have also been frequently called upon to provide shelter services to families and individuals evacuated from nearby communities.

Like it or not, schools have to prepare for these emergencies, in addition to all of the other social and educational challenges that they must be prepared for. Every school--indeed virtually every organization of comparable size--needs a complete, competent, and effective emergency management plan. But merely possessing a plan is not an end in itself. The objective is to develop the capability to respond effectively during emergencies to protect the students and staff and to facilitate the prompt resumption of classes after the emergencies have passed. This objective can be achieved only through a credible planning process.

One of this nation's great leaders and a superb military planner, Secretary of State and General George C. Marshall, once stated, "The plan is nothing, but planning is everything." Having a plan on the shelf is worthwhile-- assuming the plan is current and complete. But understanding the concepts that the plan reflects and developing a meaningful emergency planning process are even more important.

The Emergency Planning Process. The emergency planning process should be thought of as a cycle of planning activity which includes the four essential steps of identifying the threats, developing a plan, testing/evaluating the plan, and refining/revising the plan.

STEP ONE: Analyze the Threat and Potential Hazards. The first step in the emergency planning process is to develop a clear statement of the potential threats or hazards that the school system could face. Most such threats are common knowledge, such as known regional hazards from severe weather or earthquakes. For example, school officials in Oklahoma already know that tornadoes are one of the emergencies that they are most likely to encounter, and they plan accordingly. The severity and probability of threats and hazards should be quantified so that each threat can be ranked by its order of importance. Obviously, the idea is to accord high priority in the planning process to the hazards that are most likely to occur. Hazards that occur infrequently, but that could have catastrophic effects on the school system--least likely, but most dangerous--should also be accorded priority attention.

Man-made emergencies, such a chemical spill on a nearby highway or a toxic release from a local plant, often require responses that are significantly different than the responses to a natural disaster like a tornado or flood. In environmental emergencies, one of the most important steps in a school's emergency response program is rapidly obtaining accurate information about the exact nature of the toxic material, whereas in floods the nature of the hazard is ordinarily well understood. For this reason, school officials may find that it makes sense to distinguish between man-made emergencies and natural disasters in the emergency plan.

A TYPICAL SCHOOL "HAZARD" LIST

NATURAL DISASTERS:

Earthquakes
Hurricanes
Floods
Tornadoes
Severe Storms
Transportation Accidents

MAN-MADE EMERGENCIES:

Hazardous Material Spills
Urban Riots and Disturbances
Bomb Threats& Arson
Terrorism
Vandalism
Security Problems

STEP TWO is Development of the Plan Itself. One of the most important elements of the plan is the description of the decision-making process that will be followed during emergencies, particularly for emergencies that could affect more than one school in the system. The following are ten key areas that must be addressed in the plan.

1. Delineation of School Legal Authorities
2. Roles and Responsibilities of the various components in the school system, including the designation of an "emergency operations center" in the school itself or at another level of the school system and administrative responsibilities.
3. Staffing of emergency management teams.

4. Communications, Alert, and Notification procedures and routines.
5. Transportation Support
6. Facilities Management
7. External Assistance from other agencies, including specialized assistance for hazardous materials incidents.
8. Public Affairs
9. Immediate Response Actions such as the protection of vital records, the shutdown of in-school laboratory, engineering plant, computer equipment, and the coordination of staff activity during the emergency.
10. Short-Term Recovery Actions regarding facilities, repairs, restoration of communications and computer networks, assessments of damage and the development of budgets to expedite long-term recovery.

The Primary Uses of a School Emergency Plan. Basically, emergency plans document the "who, what, where, when" of emergency response. The emergency plan provides a single reference source for information crucial to an effective response, as well as preparatory training. Among other things, the ideal plan will:

- Document the school and school system's legal authorities and responsibilities;
- Provide guidelines for teachers and in-school administrators to follow during emergencies;
- Identify the key emergency responders in each school and in the school system as a whole;
- Describe the communications, alert, and notification systems which will be used to inform the key emergency officials and responders that an emergency is occurring;
- Document the critical procedures that a school will use to respond to an emergency;
- Specify the methods that should be followed in communicating the situation to the parents and public during an emergency;
- Indicate how organizations outside the school system are expected to provide support during and immediately after the emergency.

The Importance of the School Emergency Management Team. The development of an emergency plan should be a team effort. As we have learned from both our Armed Forces and from our most successful economic competitors (i.e., Japanese industries), team efforts often yield longer lasting results than individualistic approaches to problem solving. Emergency preparedness is an area where the team approach is well worth the extra effort.

The team approach distributes the workload among the organizational entities and individuals that will be most affected by an emergency, or those that will have an important role in the emergency response. This team approach does more than open the planning process up to the broadest range of inputs; it enables the participants to invest themselves personally in the planning process. The participants may then become the plan's most effective advocates in the broader community.

Planning team members should represent the following functional areas: Executive (at the County or Municipality level for system-wide plans, an assistant principal or principal at the individual school level); Administrative Staff (communications, procurement, food service at the district or school levels); Nursing/Medical; Security; Transportation; and Facility Management/ Maintenance. An important function that few individual schools are equipped to deal with is Public Affairs. Poorly organized crisis communications with the media and the public during an emergency can complicate the response and have negative effects on a school system's post-disaster relations with the community. Thus the planning effort should involve the in-school or district officials with the most experience in public affairs.

After the plan is reasonably mature, organizations like the Parent-Teachers' Association and the student government should be involved. The PTA and student organizations usually have constructive insights to offer about the plan. The PTA and student groups can also play important roles in acquainting students and their families about their responsibilities under the emergency plan. This can reduce the potential for confusion during an emergency and avoid creating false expectations in the community.

STEP THREE in the Emergency Planning Process is Testing and Evaluation. Exercises can be used to periodically evaluate the plan, train new officials and staff, acquaint the PTA and student groups with the plan, and to identify areas where refinements are necessary.

Testing and Exercising the Plan. Outside of an actual disaster, the most effective way to test an emergency plan is through a drill, simulation, or exercise. Simulations and exercises have been used with great success by a wide variety of organizations. Hospitals, for example, are required as part of the accreditation process to conduct periodic emergency drills. The military and many industries have also found exercises to be an effective, low cost way of identifying areas where emergency plans need to be improved, where new equipment is needed, or where further dialogue is necessary between the school system and other agencies such as the state emergency management agency or the local fire department.

If properly designed, exercises can be extremely useful training devices. Also, informal "tabletop" exercises are a good way to quickly acquaint new school system officials, student government and PTA leaders with the plan and the emergency responsibilities they are inheriting. Exercises can even be designed to serve as strategic planning sessions to facilitate the development of the plan itself.

STEP FOUR is the Refinement and Revision of the Plan. Revision of a plan is a constant process to necessarily reflect "lessons learned" from exercises and from actual emergencies. The revision process is useful to have in place so that periodic reviews and updates can take place.

When completed, the plan will be ready for executive approval and distribution. Formal approval of the plan by appropriate school officials is critical to top level support and acceptance of the emergency management procedures contained in the plan. Distribution of the completed plan should be made to every interested party that could be involved in a school emergency. Additional copies should be prepared so that they could be provided to external agencies and individuals on an as-needed basis during training or actual emergencies.

Summary: Our school systems are constantly being challenged to meet a wide range of emergencies, and across the U.S., educational facilities at all levels must be involved in the emergency planning process. Competent, complete and effective emergency management planning for our schools demands that those responsible have an understanding of the emergency planning process and its key component--the school emergency plan. Bringing this about requires teamwork, organization, and above all, the participation of the entire school community.

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