

Emergency Response for Schools Checklist

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), there are a number of phases included in the creation of an effective emergency management program. The following checklist identifies those phases along with action steps associated with each.

Mitigation: Mitigation is any sustained action taken to reduce or eliminate long-term risk to life and property from a hazardous event. Mitigation action steps include:

- **Know the school building.** Assess potential hazards on campus by conducting regular safety audits. Be sure to include driveways, parking lots, playgrounds, outside structures and fencing.
- **Know the community.** Work with local emergency management directors to assess surrounding hazards. This includes the identification and assessment of the probability of natural disasters (tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.) and industrial and chemical incidents (water contamination or fuel spills). It is also wise to locate major transportation routes and installations, and address potential hazards related to terrorism.
- **Bring together regional, local and school leaders.** Leadership and support is necessary to ensure that the right people are at the planning table.
- **Make regular school safety and security efforts part of the mitigation process.** Identify what incidents are common within your school and district.
- **Establish clear lines of communication.** Since mitigation requires agencies and organizations to work together and share information, communication among the planning team along with families and the larger community are important to convey a visible message that schools and local governments are working together to ensure public safety.



Preparation: Good planning will facilitate a rapid, coordinated, effective response when a crisis does occur. Preparing a crisis plan includes the following action steps:

- **Set up a planning committee.** Identify those who should be involved in developing a crisis plan, and include training and drills into their orientation. Delegating responsibilities and breaking the process down into manageable steps will help committee members develop a plan.

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- **Identify and involve stakeholders.** Figure out the stakeholders to be involved in developing the crisis management plan (those who are concerned about the safety of the school and the people who will call to assist when a crisis occurs). Ask stakeholders to provide feedback on sections of the plan that pertain to them specifically.
 - During this process, create working relationships with emergency responders to learn how these individuals function and how you will work with them in a crisis. Take the time to learn their vocabulary, command structure and culture.

- **Consider existing efforts.** Investigate all existing plans and analyze the following: How do other agencies' plans integrate with the school's plan? Are there conflicts? Does the comprehensive school safety plan include a crisis plan? What information from the district's crisis plan can be used in the school's crisis plan?
 - If the school recently completed a crisis plan, your efforts may be limited to revising the plan in response to environmental, staff and student changes.

- **Determine what crises the plan will address.** Define what is considered a crisis for your school based on your vulnerabilities, needs and assets.

- **Define roles and responsibilities.** Define what should happen when, and at whose direction. This should involve much of the school staff who will be assigned to one of the following roles: school commander, liaison to emergency responders, student caregivers, security officers, medical staff and spokespeople for the school.
 - If the district has not already appointed a public information officer (PIO), it should do so immediately. Also, work with law enforcement to identify crises that require an outside agency to manage the scene (fire, bomb threat or hostage situation). Then, learn what roles outsiders will play, what responsibilities they will take on and how they will interact with the school staff. It is especially important to also determine who will communicate with families and the community during the incident.

- **Develop methods of communicating with the staff, students, families and the media.** Address how the school will communicate with all individuals who are directly or indirectly involved in a crisis. First, develop a mechanism for notifying students and staff that an incident is occurring and what you will instruct them to do. If students are evacuated from the school building, determine if staff will use cell phones, radios, intercoms or runners to get information to other staff members supervising them. Also be sure to discuss the safest means of communication with law enforcement and emergency responders, as some electronic devices can trigger bombs.
 - Then, plan for how you will communicate with families, community members and the media. Consider writing template letters and press releases in advance so staff will not have to compose them during the confusion and chaos of the event.

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- **Obtain necessary equipment and supplies.** Provide staff with the necessary equipment to respond to a crisis. Consider whether there are enough master keys for emergency responders so that they have complete access to the school. Also, get the phones or radios necessary for communication.
 - It is also wise to obtain contact information for families, maintain a cache of first aid supplies as well as food and water for students during an incident. In addition, prepare response kits for secretaries, nurses and teachers so they have easy access to these supplies.
- **Prepare for emergency response.** When a crisis occurs, quickly determine whether students and staff need to be evacuated from the building, returned to the building or locked down in the building. Plan action steps for each of these scenarios.
- **Create maps and facility information.** In a crisis, emergency responders need to know the layout of the school. Create site maps that include information about classrooms; hallways and stairways; the location of utility shut-offs; and potential staging sites.
- **Develop accountability and student release procedures.** As soon as a crisis is recognized, account for all students, staff and visitors. Emergency responders treat a situation very differently when people are missing. Also, be sure to inform families of release procedures before a crisis occurs. In many situations, families have flocked to the school wanting to collect their children immediately, so a method should be established for tracking student release and ensuring that students are only released to authorized individuals.
- **Practice.** Preparedness includes emergency drills and crisis exercises for students, staff and emergency responders. Often, training and drills identify issues that need to be addressed in the crisis plan and problems with plans for communication and response.
- **Address Liability Issues.** Consideration of liability issues is necessary before crisis planning can be completed and may protect you and your staff from a lawsuit. Situations where a foreseeable danger can pose liability if the school does not make every reasonable effort to intervene or remediate the situation should be rectified. Therefore, a careful assessment of the hazards faced by the school is critical.

Response Action Steps include:

- **Assess the situation and choose the appropriate response.** Determine whether a crisis exists, and if so, the type of crisis, the location and its magnitude. Since your team has practiced the plan, leaders are ready to make the necessary decisions to rectify the situation. After basic protective steps are in place, more information can be gathered to adjust later responses. Prepare to be surprised.
- **Respond within seconds.**

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- **Notify appropriate emergency responders and the school crisis response team.** Have emergency responders on the scene as soon as possible. This applies even if they arrive after the situation has been resolved.
- **Evacuate or lock-down the school, as appropriate.**
- **Triage injuries and provide emergency first aid to those who need it.** Your plan should assign emergency medical services personnel and school staff, with relevant qualifications, to determine who needs emergency first aid. Designate a location for EMS to treat the seriously injured on the scene.
- **Keep supplies nearby and organized.**
- **Trust leadership. To minimize chaos,** trust the internal crisis team members and external emergency responders who have been trained to deal with crises.
- **Communicate accurate and appropriate information.** During a crisis, districts and schools will communicate with the school community as well as the community at large. Use the channels of communication identified in the plan to do so to maximize the likelihood of presenting consistent and accurate information to the public.
 - The crisis team should also communicate regularly to staff members who are managing students. In addition, families need to know that a crisis has occurred and that all possible steps are being taken to see to the safety of their children. Additional details about the assembly and shelter procedures may also be provided, as determined by the plan or those managing the crisis. At some point, families will also need to be notified when and where their children will be released.
- **Activate the student release system.**
- **Allow for flexibility in implementing the crisis plan.**
- **Documentation.** Write down every action taken during a crisis response to provide a record of the implementation of the plan. This is also necessary for recording damage for insurance purposes and for tracking financial expenditures related to the incident.

Recovery: The goal of recovery is to return to learning and restore the infrastructure of the school as quickly as possible. Recovery action steps include:

- **Plan for recovery in the preparedness phase.** Determine the roles and responsibilities of staff and others who will assist in recovery during the planning phase. District-level counselors may want to train school staff to assess the emotional needs of students and colleagues to determine potential intervention needs. It is wise to also review the credentials of service providers and identify those who will be used during recovery.

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- **Assemble the Crisis Intervention Team.** A Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) is comprised of individuals at the district or school level who are involved in the recovery efforts.
- **Return to the “business of learning” as quickly as possible.** The first order of business following a crisis is to return students to learning as quickly as possible.
- **Schools and districts need to keep students, families and the media informed.** Be clear about what steps have been taken to attend to student safety when providing information. Let families and other community members know what support services the school and district is providing or what other community resources are available.
- **Focus on the building, as well as people, during recovery.** Following a crisis, buildings and their grounds may need repairing or repainting/re-landscaping. Conduct a safety audit and determine the parts of the building that can be used and plan for repairing those that are damaged.
- **Provide assessment of the emotional needs of staff, students, families and responders.** Evaluate and determine the emotional needs of all students and staff and identify those who need intervention from a school counselor, social worker, school psychologist or other mental health professional. Also, arrange for appropriate interventions by school or community-based service providers, and identify available services for families who wish to seek treatment for their children or themselves.
- **Provide stress management during class time.** Allow students to talk about what they felt and experienced during a traumatic event. Younger students, who cannot fully express themselves verbally, may benefit from participating in creative activities, such as painting, drawing or writing stories.
- **Conduct daily debriefings for staff, responders and others assisting in the recovery.** Ensure that those providing “psychological first aid” are supported with daily critical incident stress debriefings. This will help the staff cope with their own feelings of vulnerability.
- **Take as much time as needed for the recovery.** After a crisis, the healing process is full of ups and downs and may take months, and even years, to complete.
- **Remember the anniversaries of crises.** Many occasions will remind students, staff and families about crises, and will stimulate feelings and memories about the incident. Staff members should be sensitive to these reactions, and should provide support as necessary.
- **Evaluate.** By evaluating your recovery efforts, you will help prepare for the next crises that may arise. Conduct brief interviews with emergency responders, families, teachers, students and staff. Focus groups may also be helpful in obtaining candid information about recovery efforts. The following may be important to ask:

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- Which classroom-based interventions proved most successful and why?
- Which assessment and referral strategies were the most successful and why?
- What were the most positive aspects of staff debriefing and why?
- Which recovery strategies would you change and why?
- Do other professionals need to be used to help with future crises?
- What additional training is necessary to enable the school and the community at large to prepare for a future crisis?
- What additional equipment is needed to support recovery efforts?
- What other planning actions will facilitate future recovery efforts?

Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)