Charter Schools: Emergency Management Planning for All Settings

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

According to the National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC), the charter school concept began in the United States in 1988. Charter schools are considered public schools of choice with distinct educational goals and objectives. As of 2018-19, the number of charter schools in operation has increased to more than 7,400 schools, which serve roughly 3 million students in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The NCSRC released A Synthesis of Research on Charter School Facilities in October 2020, which provides basic information on charter schools. Though part of the larger public school system, charter schools typically do not operate in school buildings and are not always mandated to follow the same rules and regulations for school districts, which can make planning efforts for funding, facilities, and emergency management difficult to navigate. Charter schools typically receive per pupil public funding based on student enrollment, but the way they use this funding to acquire, maintain, and operate their facilities varies.

All schools are responsible for keeping students and staff safe at all times; thus, emergency management planning is critical in communities. As outlined in the *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (*School Guide*) and *The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (*District Guide*), multidisciplinary planning teams — composed of charter school personnel, charter school operators, and community partners — can develop a comprehensive EOP customized to the needs of the students, the staff, and the community that the charter school comprises. Planning principles support the development of a comprehensive school EOP that addresses a range of threats and hazards; has leadership support; uses data; addresses the entire charter school community; and plans for potential incidents before, during, and after an incident.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide considerations for charter school operators, administrators, and safety planning teams and their community partners to think about in their emergency management planning efforts. The fact sheet presents points to consider when developing an emergency operations plan (EOP), methods of engaging the community and promoting partnerships in emergency management planning, and resources. Charter schools are susceptible to a wide range of threats and hazards. These emergencies vary and include

- *Natural hazards*, such as tornadoes, hurricanes, and wildfires;
- *Technological hazards*, such as explosions, accidental release of hazardous materials, and power failure;
- *Biological hazards*, such as pandemics, infectious diseases, or contaminated food outbreaks; and
- *Adversarial, incidental, and human-caused threats*, such as criminal threats or actions, gang violence, and cyberattacks.
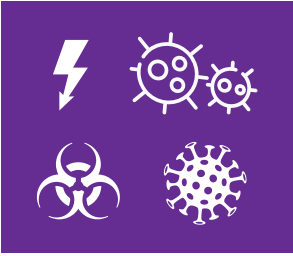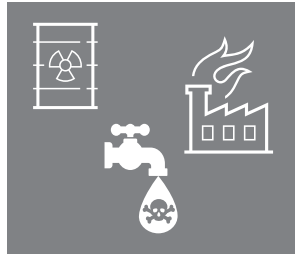
Charter school administrators and safety planning teams and their partners must therefore know the types of emergencies and disasters that could occur in their area because planning must be specific to the types of emergency situations or natural disasters prone to the area surrounding the charter school.

The NCSRC's Natural Disaster Preparation and Response: A Toolkit for Charter Schools reports that charter schools "may face additional obstacles that need explicit attention and efforts." While charter schools are granted autonomy to design and implement their models, programs, instructional strategies, budgets, and policies based on the founders' creation, they are not always created on equal footing with their counterparts. For example, charter schools may not be designated as governmental entities, which may limit funding opportunities and funding structures and could affect access to funding in the event of emergency situations.

Emergency Operations Plan Development in Charter Schools

Emergencies are unpredictable; they can occur at any time, whether before, during, or after school hours, or anywhere; they can occur near a charter school and yet still greatly impact the charter school community. An EOP can help charter schools prepare for the variety of threats and hazards that may impact their community. The *School Guide* and *District Guide* highlight the six-step planning process as a recommended approach for EOP development and

implementation because it succinctly describes each of the processes that charter schools need to consider in their emergency management planning and who must be involved. The following are summaries of each of the six steps.

1 **Form a Collaborative Planning Team**

Step 1: Form a Collaborative Planning Team

Charter schools identify the core planning team members who will use their collective expertise to inform the development, implementation, and refinement of the school EOP. Charter schools should consider diversity when forming the planning teams and include personnel from within the school building, such as administrators, educators, facilities managers, transportation directors, school health staff, and food services personnel, among others. Charter school core planning team members should also include representatives from the local community, such as from the law enforcement agency; the fire department; and other public service agencies with expertise contributing to school safety, security, emergency management, and preparedness.

Tip #1: Form Community Relationships

The local community may overlook the charter schools if they do not make themselves known, so it is incumbent on the charter school operators to engage this community in their planning efforts. To do so, charter school operators can invite these community partners into their schools for events and reciprocate by attending training and events with these organizations.

A few considerations to keep in mind when forming planning teams are that they should be small enough to allow for close collaboration but include a representative sample of the charter school community, including students and families. Another consideration is for charter schools to create memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with school districts, particularly those within close proximity to share resources and planning efforts. For example, MOUs between charter schools and school districts can allow for the sharing of resources, such as planning staff to work toward shared goals.

Step 2: Understand the Situation

2 Understand the Situation

The core planning team identifies, analyzes, and compares all possible threats and hazards that the charter school community could face. To do this, the planning team gathers trend and historical data from a variety of sources, including the school community as well as input from local, regional, state, and Federal agencies. Other sources of information include assessments, such as culture and climate assessments, capacity assessments, behavioral threat assessments, and site assessments.

It is important to know the threats and hazards that the charter school is at risk of and vulnerable to. For example, planning teams can use SITE ASSESS, which is a free, mobile application for schools to examine the safety, security, emergency preparedness, and accessibility of buildings and grounds. This secure tool can help site assessment teams identify potential threats and hazards, as well as anything that would hinder access in the event of an emergency.

Once the core planning team has a comprehensive list of threats and hazards, it must evaluate the risk and vulnerabilities. For example, if the planning team finds that the charter school is located within a building that also houses a chemical laboratory, the team must rank the probability, magnitude, warning, and duration of the biological hazard of toxic materials present in a school laboratory and then assign the risk priority level. This activity can be completed by assigning a numerical value to each category and using a risk assessment, which will help the planning team prioritize threats and hazards.

Step 3: Determine Goals and Objectives

3 Determine Goals and Objectives

The core planning team determines which threats and hazards it will address in the plan. For example, the planning team may choose to address only those threats and hazards with a high risk ranking. Then the planning team develops broad goals and specific, measurable objectives to achieve the goals for each of the threats and hazards. In this stage, planning teams will also identify the cross-cutting emergency management functions that apply to multiple threats and hazards. This could include evacuation, lockdown, shelter-in-place, family reunification, and continuity of operations (COOP).

Step 4: Plan Development (Identifying Courses of Action)

4 Plan Development (Identifying Courses of Action)

The core planning team assigns the courses of action required to accomplish the goals and objectives for before, during, and after potential emergencies and addresses the who, what, when, where, why, and how. Courses of action will help outline the specific roles and responsibilities of the core planning team, which will ideally develop them using scenario-based planning. These scenarios will help determine how much time is needed to respond to the threat or hazard and identify decision points for charter school leaders that match the appropriate operational functions (i.e., shelter-in-place versus evacuations or when multiple functions occur concurrently). For example, within a COOP Annex, charter school planning teams must ensure that essential functions continue during an emergency and its immediate aftermath. Essential functions include business services such as payroll and purchasing, internal and external communication, computer and systems support, facilities maintenance, safety and security, and continuity of teaching and learning. The planning team could consider the following when developing its goals, objectives, and courses of action in a COOP Annex:

- How to design the COOP Annex so that it can be activated at any time and sustained for up to 30 days;

- How the COOP Annex will set priorities for re-establishing essential functions, such as accessing important documentation, restoring school operations, and maintaining the safety and well-being of students and the learning environment; and
- How the COOP Annex will ensure that students receive applicable related services in the event of a prolonged closure.

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Plan Preparation, Review, and Approval

Step 5: Plan Preparation, Review, and Approval

In this stage, the core planning team develops a draft plan, reviews the plan, obtains official approval, and shares the plan with the community of stakeholders. Stakeholders must have the opportunity to provide insight and critical feedback to the plan before the school's leadership approves it. One important consideration for charter schools is to ensure that they and their stakeholders all have a thorough understanding of the terminology used in emergency management planning. According to the NCSRC's Natural Disaster Preparation and Response: A Toolkit for Charter Schools, "Precise language that has a common understanding across the school community is important for implementing an effective and actionable emergency management plan." For example, the *School Guide* and *District Guide* discuss the five National Preparedness System mission areas of prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery, which should be defined and be given context around the related timelines of before, during, and after disaster events. It is also important to ensure that the draft plan has a section that defines vocabulary and identifies acronyms for all stakeholders, especially those not familiar with the terminology. Planning teams can also look to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Incident Management System to ensure that their approach and draft plan align with the standardized approaches, terminology, and processes used in emergency management.

Once the plan is approved, all stakeholders must know the plan and be provided opportunities to practice it. While not all sections of the plan need to be shared publicly, the parts that involve the critical community of stakeholders must be shared with them. In addition, it is important to ensure that community members with limited English proficiency or other functional and access needs have access to the EOP, as well; ensure that the plan and any communication about the plan are translated into the language of those in and around the community.

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Plan Implementation and Maintenance

Step 6: Plan Implementation and Maintenance

Once the planning team and school's leadership approves the plan, stakeholders must be thoroughly trained. Training should include participating at meetings, walking through sites such as evacuation sites and reunification and triage areas, and practicing the plan. EOPs are not static, but, instead, they must be maintained and revised as needed. Emergency exercises, such as tabletop exercises and planning drills, must be conducted with school staff, students, families, and other service providers.

Certain events will also provide new information that can be used to inform the EOP and allow charter schools to review and update their plans or sections of their plans after actual emergencies have occurred. Additional factors that may require a plan review or update are changes in the school and surrounding community, changes in threats and hazards, or the emergence of new threats and hazards over time. Assessments will likely generate new information that should be considered on an ongoing basis by the core planning team.

Engaging Students and the Community and Promoting Partnerships in Emergency Management Planning

As previously stated, emergency management planning is not only crucial for all schools, but the planning should also be very specific to each charter school and the surrounding community. Charter school operators can enlist help from an important stakeholder in their communities by engaging and preparing youth volunteers alongside the core planning team

Tip #2: Engage the Community

In addition to using the six-step planning process for EOP development and implementation, it is important to note that one of the most valuable resources in emergency management planning for charter schools is engagement with the community, partners within the community itself, and students and parents.

in safeguarding schools. Charter school leaders can engage their students as active thought partners by embedding emergency management planning as part of their curriculum. For example, Teen Community Emergency Response Team (Teen CERT) helps integrate students into school safety programs where they acquire leadership and other skills needed to address emergency preparedness in their schools and communities and serve as a voice to their peers. Teen CERT participants can be trained to conduct light search and rescue, set up medical treatment areas, and assist first responders. Charter schools can start their own Teen CERT programs with free Federal resources. In return, making these connections with the first responders in the charter school community will go a long way in the planning process when charter schools need input and assistance from first responders.

According to an NCSRC report, How Charter Schools Can Leverage Community Assets Through Partnerships, charter school operators need to build partnerships with the community around them, including businesses, first responders, universities, other schools, and organizations, and make themselves known to those in the community. Establishing these types of partnerships before an emergency occurs can be mutually beneficial to all parties because a charter school facility might eventually be used as a shelter in the event of emergencies. Charter schools are designed for the unique needs of their communities, which gives charter school leaders the ability to cultivate unique relationships with their students and families. Building

quality partnerships that are mutually beneficial to the whole school community helps build the overall success of the charter school, especially when it comes to meeting needs. Thus, creating partnerships can also benefit students by helping them learn valuable work-based skills and opportunities for career and technical education in emergency management planning that will serve the students, families, and communities in the long run.

Resources

Further Reading — REMS TA Center

- Building Blocks to School Safety: A Toolkit for K-12 Schools and School Districts for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans, Publication
- The Planning Process At a Glance, Web Page
- Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Practice and Validate Emergency Operations Plans, Fact Sheet
- Building Youth Preparedness and School Safety Capacity by Integrating Educational Initiatives, Fact Sheet
- EOP Interactive Tools, Web Page
- Topic-Specific Resources to Support Your Emergency Management Planning, Web Page
- REMS TA Center Tool Box, Web Page

Training Opportunities — REMS TA Center

- Developing Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) K-12 101, Online Course
- School EOP Planning 101: Creating High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans That Address All Threats, Hazards, Settings, and Times, Webinar
- Developing Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) K-12 101, Virtual Training by Request
- Developing Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) K-12 101, Live Training by Request
- Exploring the REMS TA Center At a Glance: Safety, Security, Emergency Management, and Preparedness Services and Supports for Education Agencies, Webinar

Further Reading — Charter School Preparedness

- National Charter School Resource Center, Website (U.S. Department of Education)
- A Synthesis of Research on Charter School Facilities, Research Report (U.S. Department of Education, National Charter School Resource Center)
- Natural Disaster Preparation and Response: A Toolkit for Charter Schools, Publication, (National Charter School Resource Center, U.S. Department of Education)

- National Incident Management System, Web Page (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- How Charter Schools Can Leverage Community Assets Through Partnerships, Publication (U.S. Department of Education, National Charter School Resource Center)
- Teen CERT, Web Page (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)

Further Reading — EOP Development

- *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (*School Guide*), Publication (U.S. Departments of Education; Homeland Security, led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency; Justice, led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and Health and Human Services)
- *The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (*District Guide*), Publication (U.S. Departments of Education, Homeland Security, Justice, and Health and Human Services)

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