



Collaboration and Community Partnerships: Strategies for Effective School and Higher Ed Emergency Operations Plan Development

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

An effective response to a school, campus, or community emergency requires a thoughtful and coordinated interagency plan to preserve and protect life, as those with both experience and expertise can confirm. Schools and institutions of higher education (IHEs) can prepare for these emergencies by developing an emergency operations plan (EOP). The [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans \(School Guide\)](#), [The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans \(District Guide\)](#), and the [Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education \(IHE Guide\)](#) all cite “Creating and revising a model EOP is done by following a collaborative process.” Collaboration is considered a planning basic or principle because it ensures that key community partners and members of the whole school/campus community contribute their expertise to the EOP and ensure that it is comprehensive. Additionally, the formation of a collaborative planning team is [Step 1](#) of the federally recommended six-step planning process featured in the *School Guide*, *District Guide*, and *IHE Guide*. This fact sheet presents strategies and tips for initiating and managing the core and ad-hoc planning teams, as well as strengthening partnerships for effective EOP development.

Initiate Multi-Disciplinary Teams

Involvement of key community stakeholders is central to success in developing and implementing a comprehensive EOP. However, creating and maintaining an engaged and productive collaboration can be challenging. Identifying and selecting members for collaboration is just an initial step. Establishing operational procedures that maximize meaningful member contribution is every bit as important to successful collaboration as having the “right” players at the table.

School districts should develop [policies and procedures](#) that guide K-12 schools on the activity of forming a school core planning team.

Identify Potential Collaborators

A high-quality plan is supported by a collaborative process that includes multiple perspectives. The appropriate combination of organizations and individuals at the collaboration table will vary depending on the threats and hazards that the community faces, the presence and capacity of community partners, and the potential collaborators availability to participate. First responders (e.g., law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical services [EMS]) are critical participants in any setting. However, collaboration stakeholders may come from a broad range of community agencies. Core and ad-hoc planning teams should be multidisciplinary and include representation from various stakeholder groups in the community that may be involved before, during, or after an emergency. A complete list of potential

collaborators may be found in the REMS TA Center's checklists for [K-12 school](#), [school district](#), and [IHE](#) planning and response teams.

While staff from community partners should serve on the school core planning team, agency heads, managers, regional entity representatives, and other senior staff should serve on the district core planning team. IHEs should consider and determine which level of personnel and roles will be on the core and ad-hoc planning teams based on their needs, locality, and state. Additionally, at least one member of the school district core planning team should serve on each K-12 school core planning team.

Local Community Partners With a Responsibility in School/Campus Emergency Management and With Information on the Community

- Emergency management
- Law enforcement
- Fire
- EMS
- Public health
- Mental/behavioral health
- Youth-serving organizations
- Nonpublic and public schools

Form the Core and Ad-Hoc Planning Teams

The formation of the core and ad-hoc planning teams and initial selection of members occurs in [Step 1](#) of the six-step planning process. Each school, school district, and IHE should have a core planning team with members who are physically or virtually present at planning meetings. Additionally, each entity may have an ad-hoc planning team, which is composed of partners who contribute their expertise from time to time on specific matters and/or provide relevant resources, but are not regularly in contact with members of the planning team. Examples of ad-hoc planning team members include a representative from the local Federal Bureau of Investigation office, local American Red Cross chapter, state education agency, or state department of health.

Joint leadership of the planning team by multiple individuals from within the education agency and from community partners who assume responsibility and authority of EOP development is often effective because it relies on the need for expertise from different agencies and the need for cooperation. The leaders do not have to be high-level administrators. For example, a designee with more focused, relevant experience may be more effective in this role. However, support from upper-level administrators is key to successful collaboration. In some circumstances direct involvement of agency leaders may be important to ensuring and building this support, particularly in the initiation phase. Conducting joint activities preceding or early into the planning process may facilitate collaboration.

Team Initiation Tips

- Form core and ad-hoc planning teams
- Utilize data from capacity assessments to identify members' skills
- Establish group leaders
- Plan and participate in joint team activities
- Present coordination activities to other stakeholders

Build Team Relationships

Experience has shown that fostering informal interactions among team partners can be effective in improving understanding of one another. In fact, veterans of collaboration in community settings often affirm that success is all about relationships and building understanding and supportive interpersonal relations in the team. Encouraging personal communication is an important tool for building these relationships. In the beginning, it may be best to make personal invitations to prospective members. Opportunities for personal interaction outside formal meetings can be created. For example, education agencies may invite community partners to attend working lunch sessions or a special event to distribute preparedness brochures and meet the school/campus community. These activities will pay off in increased familiarity among partners as the planning process proceeds.

Manage the Team

Effectively managing collaboration throughout the six-step planning process can be a challenge. Planning teams should use techniques that increase understanding of the cultures and procedures of other organizations that are on the team. While forming personal relationships is important to working together, understanding the constraints and opportunities (e.g., time, funding, and personnel) in other organizations is important to developing the authority, decisionmaking, and work procedures that are crucial to specific planning of joint activities. It is important for the team to have a clear purpose and common framework that move the team ahead, as well as effective communication and efficient meetings that respect the time and effort of all collaborators.

Form a Common Framework

As the planning team engages in the six-step planning process, it is important that education agencies and community partners develop an understanding of one another's organizational missions and roles. This understanding is fundamental to developing shared procedures built on the capacity and constraints in diverse organizations. For example, schools and IHEs often operate according to an academic calendar and daily schedule that differ from a typical business or government calendar and daily schedule. Establishing a common understanding about different planning team members' availability and schedules will help to facilitate effective planning and collaboration. One technique recommended is to "shadow" a first responder or administrator to obtain a first-hand understanding of job responsibilities. Joint training and practice events are also valuable. Even simple tabletop exercises can be an effective strategy in helping people understand respective roles.

The planning team should agree on a structure for collaborative implementation. By establishing a common framework, team members will also be able to communicate more effectively with one another. One common framework that is particularly effective in the context of school/campus emergency management is the NIMS. Developed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, NIMS is a standardized approach used by Federal, state, and local agencies — including education agencies — for protecting

against, mitigating, responding to, and recovering from threats and hazards that impact the community. One important component of NIMS is the ICS, which clearly defines the command structure used in an emergency. Education agency personnel need to be trained in NIMS and their role in ICS in order to more effectively work with the responders in their communities.

Framework Tips

- Learn each others' vocabulary, command structure, and culture
- Respect confidentiality of team members
- Build rapport with team members
- "Shadow" another professional
- Establish a common set of terms and definitions
- Train on [National Incident Management System](#) (NIMS) and Incident Command System (ICS)
- Provide copies of ICS, contact information, and EOP to all members
- Ask questions

Understanding of procedures also can be furthered through sharing information. Education agencies can provide community partners with copies of their ICS assignments, relevant contact information, and EOPs as this helps both in preparing for and responding to an emergency. ICS, which is the hierarchical leadership team structure within NIMS, is the structure first responders utilize in implementing incident management teams. When clarification is needed, it is important to ask key leaders directly to not make assumptions and to hold information sessions as necessary. An organizational chart depicting education agency and community partners can facilitate a better understanding of the other groups' roles. This level of joint activity is important because it goes beyond shared objectives to understanding the work procedures that must be merged in real-response situations.

Communicate Continuously and Effectively

Continuous and effective communication requires leadership and an organized communication structure that respects limited time and resources. Emergency management collaboration should include face-to-

face meetings, but (as discussed below) meeting time is often scarce, and it cannot be the only source of regular communication. Time constraints, infectious diseases, or geographical distance may require communication through e-mails, videoconference meetings, conference calls, or other methods. The communication system should be clearly organized to create channels that provide information and documents, including event announcements (e.g., conference calls, meetings, trainings), to the persons that will use and need access to them. Communication is most effective when it is organized to get relevant information to stakeholders. Too much information can reduce attentiveness. Flexibility, knowledge, and willingness to use alternative communication methods are important. The more consistent the contact between agencies, there is greater likelihood that lasting partnerships will be formed.

Meet Routinely as a Team

Meetings are a critical point of interaction in collaborations, particularly in early stages before the collaboration develops a consistent communication cycle. Since they are a focal point for decisionmaking, it is important that meetings be efficient and productive. Initial priorities must include clear organization of leadership and administrative responsibility (e.g., chairperson(s), secretary, communications support) and initiation of meeting schedules and collective responsibilities.

Meetings need to be well planned and executed with a specific start and end time, a clear agenda, and a meeting facilitator assigned to ensure the agenda is followed and time usage is maximized. Minutes of the meeting also should be taken and distributed for those who could not attend and to serve as a historical record. The number of goals and objectives to be accomplished can seem overwhelming. It is important to identify and prioritize two or three initial goals for each meeting and to ensure that resolution is reached at the designated time. It is also important to be sure that assigned tasks are equally divided among agencies. If specific information is to be gathered before the next meeting, this task should be clearly assigned.

As a focal point of collaboration activity, meetings should be seen as an opportunity to build

Meeting Agenda Tips

- Have a specific start and end time
- Start with a clear agenda
- Assign meeting facilitator
- Take and distribute meeting minutes
- Prioritize two to three goals or objectives
- Form subcommittees if needed
- Identify agenda items for subsequent meetings
- Follow through on unfinished business

relationships. When scheduling face-to-face meetings, education personnel can offer to host the meeting at their site. This allows community partners to become familiar with the layout and visitor screening procedures, while getting the chance to meet the incident management team and staff. It also provides them with an understanding of routines and the unique structure found on-site at education agencies. Similarly, it can be just as important to rotate meeting sites to those of the community partners' primary offices. Meetings should be regularly scheduled or scheduled well in advance to allow ample time to place on calendars and avoid competing obligations.

Also, with the convenience of technology, planning teams can now meet virtually. This is especially important to consider in the case of a [pandemic](#) of infectious disease outbreak, to ensure continuity of emergency management planning. It is recommended that a [secure videoconference platform](#) is utilized if meeting virtually. Additionally, members should be encouraged but not required to enable their video camera to build rapport and become familiar with team members.

Before a meeting ends, agenda items for the next meeting should be identified. Follow-through on unfinished business is critical to ensure all stakeholders feel as if their time is worthwhile and progress is being made. Overall, one of the most important rules for continued buy-in and sustainability of collaboration is having productive meetings where all members are engaged. Progress and the long-term adjustment of roles on a team can take time, so it is important to have patience throughout the EOP development process.

Meeting Location Tips

- Hold face-to-face and/or video-enabled meetings
- Rotate meeting sites
- Schedule regular meeting times
- Rotate meeting schedules to accommodate members' schedules if necessary
- Schedule in advance
- Utilize a [secure video conference platform](#)

Strengthen the Partnership

It is important to strengthen the collaborative partnership and to institutionalize working relationships in a way that can be sustained. These ideas focus on promoting shared opportunities for learning to work together (e.g., trainings, exercises, or drills) and for creating working relationships that are recognized and supported in the collaborating organizations.

Institutionalize Roles

Research on sustaining innovative collaborations emphasizes the importance of institutionalizing roles and procedures. For future sustainability, adding these expectations to formal job descriptions is crucial. This formalization occurs at two levels: agency and individual. Having both job and agency descriptions mitigates the negative impact and disruption often felt with high staff turnover, as it is embedded within

the roles and responsibilities of a particular position or agency. Another positive outcome of writing collaborative duties into a job or agency description is that it often will become part of the overall performance evaluation, which adds a higher level of responsibility and accountability to carry out the collaborative duties.

Developing shared procedures and expectations about how to work together effectively provides a learning opportunity and strengthens collaboration. When community partners and school/campus personnel come to understand how the collaborative roles they learn and practice will help them protect students and staff and work effectively together to maintain safety, the fruits of EOP development will be sustained.

Collaborate on Training

Holding cross-trainings in which first responders train school/campus personnel, and vice versa, is an effective and efficient collaborative activity. It is a good use of limited time that avoids "reinventing the wheel." Cross-training builds and reinforces respect, rapport, and responsibility as participants learn about each other's roles, perspectives, training backgrounds, organizational structure, and skills. It is important to select effective trainers who are open to new ideas, model collaboration, and are able to elicit shared orientations while avoiding "turf" issues. Selecting training sites with the proper equipment and venue to meet training and practice needs is also important to a successful training. Trainings should always be evaluated to ensure responsiveness, relevance, and a positive experience across diverse audiences.



Training Tips

- Choose collaborative and effective trainers from each group
- Promote openness to new ideas from group members
- Select training sites carefully
- Share training objectives with participants
- Create flexible training schedule
- Focus training on shared interests
- Secure buy-in on training needs
- Incorporate several relevant activities
- Deliver content effectively
- Evaluate completed training sessions

Developing a shared training agenda is central to establishing a common vision and direction. For example, education agencies need to become familiar with NIMS, utilized by all first responder agencies. First responders can help conduct NIMS training for school and campus staff. Many NIMS and ICS courses are also available online, free of charge through the Federal Emergency Management Agency's [Emergency Management Institute](#). Once trained on NIMS and ICS, education agency personnel are better prepared to communicate with community partners during their initial collaborative conversations, and time does not need to be spent in meetings learning the basic concepts. In return, education agencies can provide

Exercise Tips

- Coordinate with community partners in the development and implementation of exercises
- Provide information to staff, students, families, etc., about exercises that will be conducted
- Review the proposed scenarios to ensure their appropriateness for students
- Evaluate the exercise to measure the effectiveness of EOP implementation
- Conduct a debrief and develop an after-action report

training to community partners on the specific cultural needs of their community and how to work with students with disabilities.

Coordinate Exercises and Drills

When appropriate, tabletop exercises, simulations, or drills can be a helpful learning tool, especially when school/campus personnel and first responders are participating in the exercise together and learning as the experience unfolds. Allowing community partners to use a campus for drills and training activities on Saturdays or when not in session can be a powerful learning tool.

Summary

Taking the time to identify key community partners, build strong personal networks, and develop understanding of each other's roles are important first steps to effective collaboration. Organizing productive and efficient meetings, communicating continuously and effectively, and being actively involved in shared activities are important to building on collective understanding and developing concrete work procedures. Successful implementation of these strategies through rapport, mutual respect, and the completion of assigned tasks will help to enhance the preparedness capacity of schools and IHEs and ensure quality emergency management collaboration with community partners.

Educators cannot develop, maintain, and implement EOPs alone. The willingness of community partners to collaborate with schools and IHEs — and all groups being open to learning about one another's perspectives, operational structures, and expertise — is critical. However, true collaboration is incomplete until it moves to the operational level within collaborating agencies and organizations. When roles are institutionalized to bring together the complementary capabilities and expertise of agencies that typically work separately, collaborations to instill the safety and wellbeing of faculty and staff will succeed and last.

Resources

Further Reading – REMS TA Center

- [Collaborating With K-12 Administrators: Engaging Leadership in School Emergency Operations Plans](#), Fact Sheet
- [Families and Caregivers as Partners in School Emergency Management](#), Fact Sheet
- [Implementing the National Incident Management System \(NIMS\): Practitioner-Oriented Strategies for Education Agencies](#), Fact Sheet

Training Opportunities – REMS TA Center

- [The Role of K-12 Transportation Directors in School Safety Efforts](#), Webinar
- [The Role of Teachers in School Safety Efforts](#), Webinar
- [The Role of School Facility Managers in School Safety Efforts](#), Webinar
- [Understanding the Role of Information Technology Specialists in Supporting School Safety Before, During, and After an Emergency](#), Webinar
- [Understanding the Role of Community Engagement Specialists in Supporting School Safety Before, During, and After an Emergency](#), Webinar
- [Understanding the Role of School Psychologists in Supporting School Safety Before, During, and After an Emergency](#), Webinar
- [Understanding the Role of School Nurses in Supporting School Safety Before, During, and After an Emergency](#), Webinar
- [Understanding the Roles of School Resource Officers Module](#), Specialized Training Package
- [Developing Memoranda of Understanding \(MOUs\) for Enhancing Emergency Preparedness in the School Setting](#), Online Course

Further Reading – Collaboration

- [Secure Video Conferencing for Schools](#), Web Page (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Cybersecurity and Information Security Agency)
- [Building Cultures of Preparedness: Report for the Emergency Management Higher Education Community](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [Defining the Value of Campus Emergency Management Programs to Communities](#), Publication (National Center for Campus Public Safety)
- [Data-Sharing Tool Kit for Communities: How to Leverage Community Relationships While Protecting Student Privacy](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Education)

Further Reading – EOP Development

- [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#), 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](#), Publication (U.S. Departments of Education; Homeland Security; Justice; and Health and Human Services)
- [Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education](#), 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)



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