

Integrating K-12 Students With Disabilities Into School Emergency Management Planning

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Taking an inclusive and equitable approach to emergency management planning means considering the needs of the most vulnerable populations first. Students with disabilities (SWDs) are entitled to the same emergency services as their nondisabled peers and should be considered and included during emergency management planning. This not only is a best practice and planning principle in the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans \(School Guide\)](#) but also is supported by multiple federal laws, including the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#), the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#), and [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act](#). Taking an equitable approach to emergency management planning does not have to be a daunting or costly task. It simply requires administrators and officials to consider the entire school community, from students and staff members to visitors and volunteers, and then take the appropriate actions to ensure the safety of all.

Plan for Special Needs Through All Three Phases

Providing for SWDs before, during and after an emergency is instrumental in ensuring their safety. As core planning teams address the [National Preparedness System](#) mission areas, they make decisions proactively based on predictions about what emergency incidents can be prevented or avoided, the types of incidents most likely to occur, and the implications of those incidents. School districts and individual schools should make the same proactive decisions simultaneously for their SWDs, considering the implications for their full participation in the school emergency operations plan (EOP) and then determining how best to address each student's needs. The core planning team should consider the variety of disabilities—including visual, communication-related, mobility-related, cognitive, attentional and emotional—to adequately integrate these students and their vulnerabilities into all emergency management planning. Refer to the [Addressing Access and Functional Needs \(AFN\) in School and IHE Emergency Operations Plans Fact Sheet](#)

for more information about incorporating students' and school staff members' special needs into EOPs.

Team up with a disability specialist

When creating a school district core planning team or an individual school core planning team as part of [Step 1](#) of the six-step planning process, administrators should include a disability specialist who can provide guidance on how to meet students' physical and emotional needs. Disability specialists make ideal candidates for a core planning team, not only because they are experts in disability issues, policies and legislation but also because they are experts in supporting their school's SWDs and the services with which they are provided. Core planning teams should be multidisciplinary. At the school district level, they often include administrators; instructional and support staff; food, maintenance, building and grounds staff; community partners; and parents and guardians. At the school level, they often consist of a school district representative, school administrators, school psychologists, related service providers, school nurses, special educators, counselors and general educators,

among others. Disability specialists can inform a core planning team about the extra barriers to mobility and communication that students with special needs may encounter during an emergency. They can also detail how to effectively address specific disabilities and their corresponding characteristics and integrate proper courses of action into the EOP. A disability specialist should be included when developing [functional annexes](#), as the specialist can ensure the needs of SWDs are fully considered. For example, a student who is deaf may require an American Sign Language interpreter to receive and communicate information. The [Communications and Warning Annex](#) in a school EOP should include instructions for how that student should receive information before, during and after an emergency.

Once a school-based disability specialist is incorporated into the school's core planning team, the following steps should be implemented, thereby creating an effective and manageable plan that does not exclude or impede any student's safety.

Identify students' special needs

The core planning team should collect and organize specific data about its SWDs, such as who has a disability, the nature of the disability, and the implications of that disability for safety planning. Most information about students' disabilities is confidential and requires specific authorization for access. The [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#) and [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 \(HIPAA\)](#) are federal laws that mandate and guide the protection of confidential student information. FERPA specifies that "[appropriate officials in cases of health and safety emergencies](#)" may access student records. The team will want to seek consent and authorization for each member prior to gathering and sharing any confidential student information that discloses someone's disability with unauthorized personnel.

Special events such as concerts, talent shows, school elections and graduation ceremonies often bring a variety of people onto a school's campus. The core planning team should also prepare for the fact that visitors and volunteers may also require special consideration in the event of an emergency. There may be adults with mobility issues, for example, who

attend an event in the evening. These needs will not be known in advance the way student needs may be known; thus, the school EOP should be ready to accommodate all disabilities, regardless of whether that accommodation is a current necessity. Similarly, there may be school staff members with special needs who require consideration in emergency management planning. Staff members should have opportunities to anonymously self-disclose an accommodation that might be required in an emergency.

Maintain a confidential roster of students with special needs

The core planning team should create a confidential roster that identifies students who have disabilities and also lists their teachers, classrooms and daily schedules, as well as their potential needs during an emergency. The roster may also include any relevant strategies that have enabled particular students to participate successfully with their peers in general school activities. Because this roster contains confidential student information, it should be labeled as classified, with access limited only to authorized personnel. To ensure that this information is available in the event of an emergency, schools may want to store the list with administrative emergency gear.



Build on current accommodations, modifications and services

To ensure success and safety, the core planning team should build on existing social and academic plans for SWDs. By law, schools must establish an individualized education program (IEP) or 504 plan for each student with a disability if such a plan is required to promote that student's successful inclusion in classroom and non-classroom settings. The [School Guide](#) recommends planning for all settings at all times, including after-school activities and field trips. The IEP or 504 plan details the accommodations, modifications and services that the student uses in any setting, such as assigned seating, early dismissal from classes for timely transitions, and large-print study materials. These accommodations are based on the student's strengths and needs and are selected for their capacity to promote that student's success. Accommodations required during an emergency may include things such as:

- Supervision during transitions; adult one-to-one assigned to student
- Simple instructions in multiple modalities that are practiced in nonemergency situations
- A pre-identified quiet place for a student to self-regulate
- Fidget items
- Access to sanitation/handwashing stations and hand sanitizer
- Self-calming strategies taught in advance
- A peer buddy system
- Access to emergency medications (e.g., an asthma inhaler)
- Access to noise-canceling headphones

Consider ways that the accommodations in a student's IEP or 504 plan should be implemented during an emergency (e.g., how an assigned seating accommodation should be incorporated when planning a shelter-in-place policy) and also whether there are additional accommodations that might be unique to an emergency setting. A student may not need a buddy during regular school activities but might require one during an emergency evacuation.

Caregivers and teachers should also be consulted throughout the six-step planning process, as they have a deeper understanding of the special needs of their children.

Teachers and case managers (the individual assigned to manage a student's IEP process) should be encouraged to discuss emergency procedures with caregivers as part of an IEP meeting or another review to ensure caregiver input. The REMS TA Center hosted a [Webinar](#) on how caregivers and families can inform EOP development that may be useful as part of this process.

Caregivers and teachers should also be consulted throughout the six-step planning process, as they have a deeper understanding of the special needs of their children. Schools may already maintain [emergency go-kits](#) that contain supplies to be used by teachers, administrators and other school staff members during and after an emergency incident. SWDs should be considered in the development of these kits, as there are resources such as noise-canceling headphones, masks, fidget items and food items that could be included. To the greatest extent possible, students themselves should be included and consulted during the emergency planning process. If the school EOP establishes individualized procedures for a student that extend services already in place, the school is more likely to implement them successfully in the event of an emergency.



Teach students with disabilities emergency response strategies

The core planning team should offer emergency response training to SWDs and to the adults responsible for their care. The adults and the students both need to:

- Understand the EOP;
- Learn to communicate with community partners (in case of a separation from their caregivers);
- Be able to communicate specifics about their special needs; and
- Use any necessary tools, such as evacuation equipment and visual aids.

Opportunities to practice the plan in a realistic situation, such as exercises and drills with community partners (e.g., the fire department, emergency medical services, law enforcement, emergency management services, public health officials and mental/behavioral health professionals), should be given periodically, as they effectively help students understand what to expect in emergencies. To the greatest extent possible, drills should be planned and discussed with students in advance rather than be surprises. Teachers can use assistive technology, social stories, picture cards, sensory materials and other tools to teach students about what to expect and how to respond during an emergency. Schools should consider the unique needs of students when designing these drills. For instance, students in motorized wheelchairs will require practice with evacuation routes, and students with autism or sensory integration issues may require extra support dealing with loud noises, bright lights, strong smells, etc. Schools may also wish to include parents and community partners during drills. Caregivers can both support their children and learn the protocol and

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reinforce it at home. Meeting with community partners in nonemergency settings provides opportunities for students and community partners to interact and become comfortable with one another.

Inform and train adults

The core planning team should educate all stakeholders—including school personnel, community partners and parents—about the inclusion of SWDs with disabilities in the school EOP. As part of [Step 6](#) of the planning process, school staff members should be trained on the plan's courses of action—specifically, their responsibilities in meeting the needs of SWDs. Schools should also ensure that caregivers are informed about efforts to keep their children safe at school.

Collaboration and ongoing communication with community partners are essential and facilitate the safe integration of SWDs into all school activities and plans. Following HIPAA and FERPA guidelines, school staff members should not only inform community partners of the students who have disabilities and the nature of their special needs but also include community partners in many of the school's planning activities, such as [exercises and drills](#). Community partners will need to incorporate SWDs into their own agencies' trainings, plans and exercises. Because they are experts in emergency response, they are another resource that might inform the school's team of the most successful methods for supporting SWDs.

More Strategies for Schools

To further enhance the integration of SWDs into school EOPs, planning and response teams should consider the following strategies for before, during and after emergencies:

Before

- Invite community partners to establish relationships with individual SWDs and their teachers. Ask them to conduct special sessions explaining how to support students and staff members with disabilities during an emergency.



- Make sure that if a student has a service animal (e.g., a Seeing Eye dog), the animal is familiar with as many members of the school staff as possible.
- Include short-term accommodations for students with temporary disabilities (such as a broken limb).
- Ensure students who require one-on-one support during an emergency have an assigned adult who is trained on the protocol.
- Consider the unique communication needs and assistive technology of students, and account for them in the EOP.
- Create a buddy system for students with special needs.
- Account for medication management as part of the [Public Health, Medical, and Mental Health Annex](#) in the EOP.

During

Inform students' peers of their special needs during an emergency only to the extent necessary, being careful to respect and ensure confidentiality about the students and their disabilities.

After

Anticipate that students may require unique supports after an event has occurred, especially with transitioning back to a typical school day.

Resources

Further Reading — REMS TA Center

- [Addressing Access and Functional Needs \(AFN\) in School and IHE Emergency Operations Plans \(EOPs\)](#), Fact Sheet

Training Opportunity — REMS TA Center

- [Addressing Access and Functional Needs \(AFN\) in School and Higher Education Emergency Operations Plans \(EOPs\)](#), Webinar
- [Emergency Evacuations: Planning for the Whole School Community](#), Webinar
- [Integrating the Needs of Students and Staff With Disabilities and Other Access and Functional Needs](#), Specialized Training Package

Further Reading — Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Safety for People with Disabilities

- [Emergency Management Research and People With Disabilities: A Resource Guide](#), Resource List (U.S. Department of Education)
- [Office of Disability Integration and Coordination](#), Web page (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [Disability and Health Emergency Preparedness](#), Web page (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [Disaster Safety for People With Disabilities](#), Web page (American Red Cross)
- [Emergency Preparedness and People With Disabilities](#), Web page (American Association on Health and Disability)
- [Saving Lives: Including People With Disabilities in Emergency Planning](#), Report (American Association on Health and Disability)



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PLEASE NOTE: The tools and resources identified in this document are not intended as endorsements and are merely offered as examples that you may consider in your own planning efforts.