

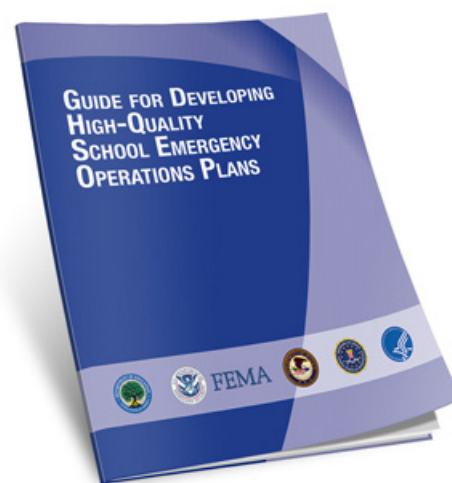
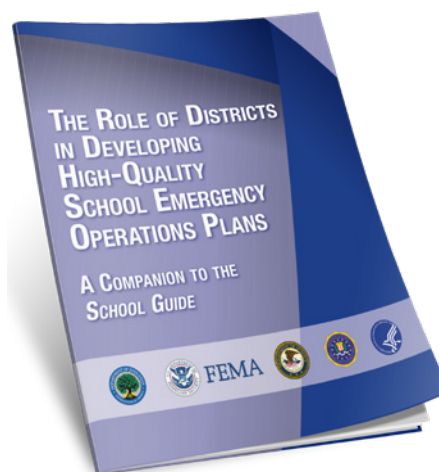
Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Practice and Validate Emergency Operations Plans

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Simulations of emergency situations, or emergency exercises, are an integral part of school and higher education preparedness efforts and high-quality emergency operations plans (EOPs). They offer opportunities to practice courses of action outlined in the EOP and to examine and strengthen capacities for mitigating, responding to, and recovering from various hazards and threats. Exercising the plan is one task within Step 6: Plan Implementation and Maintenance of the six-step planning process that is outlined in the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#), the [Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education](#), and [The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#). Step 6 allows members of the whole school/campus community to practice the plan and helps to ensure that they will be able to act more effectively before, during, and after an emergency. Planned activities such as tabletop exercises, drills, and functional and full-scale exercises provide opportunities to practice with community partners, identify gaps and weaknesses in the EOP, and find strengths in the EOP.

By participating in different types of exercises, education agencies can identify the appropriate methods to address the five National Preparedness System mission areas: [protection](#), [prevention](#), [mitigation](#), [response](#), and [recovery](#). These exercises may also expose the limitations of existing EOPs, such as procedural gaps or training needs. By encouraging community partners such as families and caregivers, fire officials, emergency medical services personnel,

law enforcement officers, local public health officials, and mental/behavioral health practitioners to participate, schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education can assess the roles, responsibilities, relationships, communication strategies, and resources that would be critical should an actual incident occur.



Types of Emergency Exercises

There are several types of emergency exercises for emergency response training and practice. It is recommended that education agencies start with simple exercises (orientations and tabletop exercises) and work their way toward the most complex (full-scale exercises).

- **Orientations** are introductions to a school or higher education EOP. The purpose of an orientation is to familiarize participants with roles, responsibilities, plans, procedures, and equipment. Orientations can also resolve questions of coordination and assignment of responsibilities. The inclusion of both school-based personnel and community partners facilitates the development of an effective EOP.
- **Tabletop exercises** analyze an emergency event in an informal, stress-free environment. They provide participants with an emergency scenario to analyze, and they increase participants' awareness of the roles and responsibilities of individuals who need to respond, stabilize, terminate, and help others recover from emergencies. Tabletop exercises are designed to prompt a constructive discussion about existing EOPs as participants identify, investigate, and resolve issues.
- **Drills** test a specific operation or function of the EOP. The goal of a drill is to practice aspects of the EOP and prepare planning teams and members of the whole school/campus community for more extensive exercises in the future. Schools and institutions of higher education generally conduct evacuation, shelter-in place, and/or lockdown drills with students and staff to demonstrate the steps they should take in an emergency. Some states have requirements or mandates related to conducting drills. The procedures, as well as the responsibilities of all involved (i.e., students, faculty/teachers, staff), are addressed. These exercises may include community partners.
- **Functional exercises** test one or more functions of an EOP during an interactive, time-pressured, simulated event. Functional exercises can be conducted in a school district's or campus's emergency operations center. Participants are given directions by controllers and simulators via

telephones, radios, and televisions, and they must respond appropriately to the hazards and threats that arise. Evaluators candidly critique the exercise and the team's performance.

- **Full-scale exercises** evaluate the operational capability of emergency management systems in a highly stressful environment that simulates actual conditions. Full-scale exercises test and evaluate most functions of the EOP, including the mobilization of emergency personnel, equipment, and resources. To design and conduct full-scale exercises, school districts and institutions of higher education should collaborate with community partners, such as local public safety agencies. Administrators choose a scenario that is most likely to occur in the community and thereby involve all community stakeholders. Facilitators conduct a post-incident critique and develop an after-action report to identify issues for correction.

Benefits of Emergency Exercises

Emergency exercises validate existing emergency plans, programs, policies, roles, responsibilities, and the training curriculum by

- Testing the capabilities of the whole school/campus community;
- Providing a gap analysis to identify deficiencies and problems in the current program;
- Familiarizing participants with plans and procedures through low-stress activities;
- Preparing the planning team to coordinate with local, state, and Federal agencies;
- Enhancing collaboration among school districts, public information officers, and other community partners; and
- Increasing the confidence of the planning team and whole school/campus community while strengthening their ability to respond effectively to an emergency.

Emergency exercises are also cost-effective and brief, often completed in less than 1 hour. Some education agencies find it helpful to conduct exercises, such as tabletop drills, during staff meetings. By focusing on different types of hazards and threats, and reinforcing policies and procedures, staff members continuously improve their ability to respond to any type of emergency.



Developing an Effective Emergency Exercise Program

The following is a list of key steps for developing an effective exercise program:

- Create partnerships with local public safety agencies or a consultant.
- Assess the school district's, school's, or campus's needs, and identify available resources for an emergency exercise program. Define achievable goals and objectives for the exercise program.
- Develop a timeline, and implement the exercises in order, from the simplest (orientation) to the most complex (full scale). Determine whom to invite to participate in each type of exercise.
- Provide information to school staff, students, families, and other applicable stakeholders about exercises that will be conducted in the school district or on campus.
- Develop scenarios based on actual vulnerabilities, risks, hazards, and threats the school may encounter. Carefully review the proposed scenarios to ensure their appropriateness for the school setting and the students. (For example, full-scale exercises involving law enforcement may frighten younger children.)
- Prepare to drill and discuss the five preparedness mission areas of the emergency management program: protection, prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery.
- Coordinate with all community stakeholders in the development and implementation of exercises.
- Develop an evaluation tool to measure the effectiveness of the implementation of the EOP.

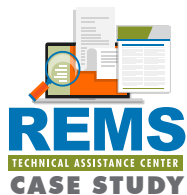
- Conduct a debriefing, and develop an action plan to respond to the evaluation data.

An Effective Post-Exercise Evaluation

Although emergency exercises promote understanding and growth, school/campus communities and their planning teams benefit most when post-exercise evaluations are conducted immediately after the exercise. All stakeholders, from the administrative level to the emergency response agency level, should participate in both the exercises and the post-exercise evaluations. A post-exercise evaluation

- Immediately follows the exercise;
- Includes everyone;
- Engages the director of the exercise;
- Assigns a secretary;
- Includes a discussion of positive and negative outcomes;
- Allows time for participants to discuss their observations;
- Assesses whether the exercise's goals and objectives were achieved; and
- Creates an after-action report with steps for improvement.

Following exercises, planning teams should use insight from the discussions, evaluation, and after-action report to inform updates to the EOP. Reviews should be a recurring activity. Planning teams should establish a process and timeline for conducting exercises and reviewing and revising the plan. Many education agencies review their plans annually. In no case should any part of a plan go for more than 2 years without being reviewed and revised.



SOUTH CAROLINA Emergency Exercises: A Case Study

The South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) is a Grants to States for School Emergency Management (GSEM) Grant Program grantee and partners with the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) to provide training and technical assistance (TA) to local education agencies (LEAs) on conducting emergency exercises and drills as a component of developing and implementing high-quality EOPs. The partnership was established around 2013 and has been mutually beneficial by increasing awareness about both agencies' training and TA offerings and services as they strive to expand outreach and overall preparedness in their state.

Maximizing the Use of Tabletop Exercises

The SCDE and SLED have found conducting tabletop exercises with schools to be the most productive when community partners participate in the exercise so that they can collaborate and coordinate their efforts.

After each exercise, the partners conduct a debriefing session with the LEA based on the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program. The focus of the debriefing is on improvement planning. Then the school, district, or both are led through the development of an after-action report to reflect on what went well and what aspects of the EOP may require improvement. The SCDE instructs the education agency on evaluating its own exercises, and improvement of the EOP can strengthen buy-in and sustainability. The SCDE described this discussion-based and action-oriented approach as being the most successful due to its low stress, involvement of stakeholders, and improvement-planning focus.

Utilizing State Partners

The partnership between the SCDE and SLED has also been beneficial in collecting data points for what training topics are needed. The partnership leads to discovery, implementation of planning, and then training. The determined needs influence the training and support the SCDE offers through the GSEM Grant Program. The partners often see an

increase in outreach following an incident, but word of mouth about the GSEM partnership is improving buy-in before an emergency. The SCDE also provides resources and training to LEAs. They are working on establishing a system of support that allows the SCDE to guide LEAs to resources from the agency or its community partners that they will need before, during, and after an emergency.

Hosting Monthly Meetings With School Safety Directors

One of the most successful TA activities implemented by the SCDE under the GSEM grant is hosting monthly meetings with school safety directors from across the state. Meeting virtually is a way for safety directors, statewide, to share what is going on in their districts, provide peer assistance, and build a bridge to districts that may sometimes experience challenges with accessing support, such as rural districts because of their remote location. The SCDE convenes these meetings to provide school safety directors with professional development opportunities about emergency management planning topics and to showcase guest speakers on key issues in school safety. Recent topics have included bus safety and transportation, recognition of gang activity, and TikTok challenges.

Celebrating LEA Capacity Building Through the Use of Exercises

Finally, the partners described one school district that has undergone a complete transformation in its exercise process. Following a train derailment emergency in its community, the school district initially requested that SLED lead it through a tabletop exercise. Over time, the school district requested subsequent TA with more complex exercises, including full-scale exercises. After each exercise, the district reviewed, changed, and updated its practices, policies, and procedures, as necessary. When a recent incident occurred on one of the district's school campuses, it knew how to respond because of its preparedness efforts. While the incident was upsetting, the district's level of preparedness aided recovery.

Obtaining Stakeholder Buy-In

Obtaining the cooperation of all stakeholders is often challenging but necessary. A few ideas for establishing buy-in include

- **Collect and Present Data**

Collecting data on incidents occurring at education agencies of similar size and focus or incidents occurring in your area can make a compelling argument for prioritizing exercises and drills in your own organization. Data could also be collected more informally in the form of observations, Google Alerts, or staff recommendations, for example. Secondary to data collection is how the data are presented. Presentation is often based on your organization's preferences and how it communicates best, but options include emails, newsletters, in-person or virtual presentations, and memos. Both data collection and presentation can help make a convincing case for planning and conducting drills and exercises.

- **Create Surveys**

Surveys can be used to gain a pulse on how those involved with your organization are feeling in regard to preparedness. Gauge whether enough information has been shared or whether staff is feeling overwhelmed with information overload. Use the results of the survey when discussing with

leadership next steps with drills and exercises and involving and engaging staff.

- **Reference Resources**

For some, referencing research and resources from experts in the field provides the evidence needed to create the desired buy-in. Look for resources at the community, state, and national levels. In addition to providing resources, many of these organizations also provide training options, which may be a beneficial complement to your education agency's drill and exercise practices.

- **Conduct Emergency Exercises and Post-Exercise Evaluations**

Conducting exercises and performing post-exercise evaluations are powerful and often essential to fostering open lines of communication among administrators, staff, community leaders, and first responders. Periodic exercises illuminate potential challenges to the successful creation and execution of an EOP and build consensus among the entire planning team and the whole school/campus community. These collaborative exercises and post-exercise evaluations help schools and their local responders assess, reflect, learn, and strengthen preparedness efforts.



Resources for Emergency Exercises

Tabletop Exercises

[Campus Resilience Program Exercise Starter Kits \(ESKs\)](#), U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Academic Engagement (*Higher Education and K-12*) Includes a set of scalable documents aimed to test existing emergency plans, protocols, and procedures, while also strengthening preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities. Scenarios for institutions of higher education include active shooter incidents, cyber breaches, earthquakes, hazardous materials releases, hurricanes, improvised explosive devices, and tornados. Scenarios for K-12 consist of active shooter incidents kits for three school levels: elementary, middle, and high schools.

[Campus Resilience Program Tabletop Exercise Series](#), U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Academic Engagement (*Higher Education*) Offers tailored events that challenge participants with multifaceted scenarios that test and strengthen their institution's capabilities and range in duration from half a day to 2 days. The National Seminar and Tabletop Exercise includes workshop sessions, resources, a complex tabletop exercise, and an after-action review session; the Regional Tabletop Exercises include a tabletop exercise; and the Leadership Tabletop Exercises highlight the role of campus leadership in managing emergency incidents.

Drills

[Great ShakeOut Earthquake Drills: K-12 Schools and Districts](#), Southern California Earthquake Center (*K-12*) Offers drill planning resources, education science

resources, and presentations for leading drills. The presentations may be used for online or in-person drills; include instructions, notes, optional slides and activities, and options for narrating drills; and are customized for grades K-4 and grades 5-12.

[Great ShakeOut Earthquake Drills: Colleges and Universities](#), Southern California Earthquake Center (*Higher Education*)

Offers guidelines and resources for administrators, faculty, and instructors, as well as presentations for drill leaders to use online or in person. The presentations include instructions, notes, optional slides and activities, and options for narrating drills.

Materials and Tools

[Exercise and Preparedness Tools](#), U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency (*Higher Education and K-12*)

Includes toolkits, starter kits, and best practice and resource guides that can be adapted to meet school and campus needs.

Information and Resources

[Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program](#), U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency (*Higher Education and K-12*)

Provides standardized templates that exercise program managers can use to develop, execute, and evaluate exercises that address the priorities established by an education agency's leaders.





RESOURCE HIGHLIGHTS

Emergency Exercises Package (K-12)

Contains materials for planning and conducting tabletop exercises for two scenarios: a power outage and an infectious disease outbreak.

Tool Box (Higher Education and K-12)

Offers a number of exercise planning materials from state and local practitioners, including tabletop exercises, full-scale exercises, observation forms, drill checklists, and after-action reports.

Modifying Education Agency Exercises and Drills in Response to the Pandemic Fact Sheet (K-12)

Provides information about conducting exercises and drills during the COVID-19 pandemic, including recommendations for modifying plans and key considerations when modifying school-based exercises.

School EOP Planning 101: Modifying Exercises and Drills in Response to the Pandemic Webinar (K-12)

Details more information on incorporating protective health measures into exercise planning.

Using a Six-Step Planning Process and Scenario-Based Planning to Support Emergency Operations Plan Development Resources Web Page (Higher Education and K-12)

Recommends that emergency management planning teams at education agencies use a six-step planning process to create, revise, and refine EOPs, with Step 6 including training, exercising, reviewing, revising, and maintaining the plan.



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