

K-12 Students as Partners in School Emergency Management

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER



Comprehensive school emergency management planning requires input and collaboration from multidisciplinary stakeholders that represent the whole school community. The involvement of those who are affected by and help carry out the school emergency operations plan (EOP) can help ensure buy-in and the quality of the plan, as well as build the preparedness capacity of the school. Students are often an overlooked stakeholder group and yet represent a large population within the school setting. They can serve as both a resource and key partner by participating in activities before, during, and after an emergency and contributing to EOP development. This fact sheet provides school core planning teams and school safety leaders with strategies for engaging students in school emergency management planning efforts while still safeguarding their well-being.

Activities for Before, During, and After an Emergency

Having a prepared school community means to engage in and have the capacity for mitigation, prevention, protection, response, and recovery (the five [National Preparedness System mission areas](#)) for all hazards and all threats in all settings and at all times. Students play an integral role in that work being a large subset of the school community that is present at school, afterschool programs, extracurricular activities, athletic events, transportation to/from school, field trips, and the online setting. They are also positioned to influence their peers, offer expertise in technology, and leverage involvement and

support from their families, caregivers, and community. Students can help strengthen, activate, and implement EOPs at their school before, during, and after a potential emergency while reaping a meaningful connection to school safety.

Before an Emergency

Schools can develop or integrate [youth preparedness initiatives](#) into educational activities during the school day or with afterschool, extracurricular clubs, such as the [Teen Community Education Response Team \(CERT\)](#) and [Youth Preparedness Council](#). By offering real-world projects in students' academic work, schools can provide an opportunity to bridge personal connection and meaning to the acquisition of safety, security, and emergency management skills that

Teen CERT provides youth with training and certification in emergency response. Students gain skills in light search and rescue, fire safety, team organization, incident command, and disaster medical operations, which may be used in exercises and actual emergencies. Teen CERT programs can be offered as a semester-long class, through afterschool programs or extracurricular clubs, or as individual modules and lessons for high school students.

students can use every day. There are other ways that students can engage in preparedness at their school without participating in a training program or educational activity:

- Assist with school beautification and repair projects that are linked to [Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design](#) principles.
- Help to set up and promote anonymous reporting options, such as tiplines.
- Participate in conflict resolution and peer mediation programs.
- Develop sample press briefings in collaboration with English and communication teachers.
- Compile, help to maintain current inventories of, and raise funds for first aid supplies and [emergency “go-kits,”](#) portable emergency supply kits that contain a stockpile of essential emergency supplies for a recommended 72-hour period.
- Create materials, like signs for traffic control and posters to aid in family reunification.
- Play a key leadership role in suicide, substance misuse, bullying, opioid, and violence prevention and awareness programs.
- Organize public awareness campaigns about a threat, hazard, or planning topic.
- Model the [Incident Command System](#) and safety leadership to peers.
- Create nonstructural mitigation objects, like secure room dividers or library bookshelves in woodworking or shop classes.
- Help to promote the acceptance of mental health recovery interventions.
- Alert staff to safety issues or to disenfranchised or emotionally struggling peers whose needs otherwise may go undetected.

During an Emergency

It is possible for students to experience a feeling of helplessness during an emergency. Schools can help alleviate this by involving students in emergency management planning, empowering them to take specific action, communicating student expectations, and providing opportunities for students to practice their role. It is particularly important to ensure that students are properly trained. This will create another



resource within the school, especially when staff resources are extremely limited. Trained students can then help execute the school EOP and provide on-site assistance in preassigned functions during an emergency before first responders arrive. Examples of activities that may be suitable for students with adequate training, supervision, and parental consent include:

- Assist in setting up the medical triage, command post, and staging areas.
- Serve as “runners” between the student assembly area and the family check-in and verification area.
- Assist the liaison officer with directing response agencies to additional resources and information.
- Assist school staff and law enforcement to preserve the crime scene.
- Deliver basic first aid.
- Assist school staff with crowd control.
- Help set up the family reunification site.
- Serve as scribes to document the sequence and time charting of decisions by the Incident Commander or other key positions in the Incident Command System.
- Relay appropriate and accurate information to parents, caregivers, and siblings.
- Assist teachers with student accountability procedures.

After an Emergency

Recovery often begins during an emergency and, depending on the incident, can continue long after an emergency ends (hours, days, weeks, and years). Students can help restore the school to a safe and supportive environment and return the school community to a sense of “normalcy.” The two types of recovery that students can particularly be involved with are physical and structural recovery (repairing the physical damage) and health, social, emotional, and behavioral recovery (healing and mending the emotional damage). Below are examples of such activities for students, on condition that they are not interacting with individuals who may pose a threat to themselves or others:

- Assist with conducting damage assessments once the setting is deemed safe by officials.
- Participate in mental health interventions, such as Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools.
- Promote wellness and stress management programs.
- Disseminate information to peers and families on common traumatic stress responses at school and at home.
- Engage in activities to repair infrastructure, such as woodshop classes to build new book and trophy cases, shop classes to assist in welding, or student groups to replant damaged landscaping.
- Help spread awareness to their families and their peer groups of the normal range of emotional reactions to tragic events, as well as the symptoms of traumatic stress.
- Take a leadership role in campus beautification projects.
- Engage community groups in securing donations for repair.

Student Contributions to EOP Development

Each step outlined in the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) provides unique opportunities to engage students. This six-step planning process is flexible, can be used by any education agency to create a customized EOP, and is also found within [The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#). Most, if not all, of the opportunities for students to engage in this planning process will be completed before an emergency. Some of these efforts may be renewed and completed annually or again after an incident.

Step 1: Form a Collaborative Planning Team

Serve on the core planning team. Ideally, the core planning team includes a student representative to serve and represent the interests of students throughout the planning process. Students are often extremely receptive to leadership roles; an invitation to serve on the core planning team is likely to be well received.

Step 2: Understand the Situation

Assist in supervised site assessments. Students possess unique knowledge of the school building(s) and grounds and can help examine their safety, security, accessibility, and emergency preparedness. It is recommended that access to key information, such as the location of gas shutoff valves, keys to chemical storage, or codes for communication systems, is limited. The REMS TA Center offers a free mobile application, [SITE ASSESS](#), for conducting site assessments at school buildings and grounds.



Participate in the [school culture and climate assessment](#). Students also have first-hand knowledge of the social structure of the school setting. Ideally, students will be asked to respond to a survey created for students where they can articulate their perceptions of their safety at school. Collecting feedback from students, staff, and parents is important to understand the school climate. Students can also help administer culture and climate surveys and promote participation amongst their peers and families.

Complete a capacity assessment. Examining the skills and capabilities of students and staff can help planning teams understand the resources that exist within the school. Students may be certified or have been trained in first aid, search and rescue, etc., and may be assigned a role or responsibility in the plan accordingly.

**[Step 3: Determine Goals and Objectives;](#)
[Step 4: Plan Development \(Identifying Courses of Action\)](#) and [Step 5: Plan Preparation, Review, and Approval](#)**

Provide input on policies. Select students may provide input into the school's policies on threats, hazards, and functions. Examples include [anniversaries and memorials](#), communications and warning, [responsible use and Internet safety](#), and continuity of teaching and learning.

Help draft aspects of the EOP. Students may be able to provide insight on how to communicate to students and their families more effectively using social media and other technology. This information could be used to enhance the Communications and Warning Annex. Students may also have suggestions for increasing the efficiency of evacuations and updating the courses of action in the Evacuation Annex.

[Step 6: Plan Implementation and Maintenance](#)

Actively participate in [exercises](#). The more that students practice the plan, the more effectively they will be able to act. Students can engage in role-play responsibilities during drills, develop scenarios for tabletop exercises, and serve as "victims" or assist with moulage during full-scale exercises. It is important that exercises are [trauma-informed](#) so that students are not triggered.



Receive training. Potential training topics include CPR and basic first aid, the Incident Command System structure; warning signs of suicide, bullying, active shooters, opioids, etc.; and cyber safety best practices and cybersecurity trends. Additionally, students can help organize the logistics for training. This training may also be a part of [educational initiatives that integrate youth preparedness](#).

Participate in [after-action reviews](#). After an emergency or exercise, students can give input from the student body perspective. Their feedback on the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps should be documented in an [after-action report](#), which can then be used to revise the school EOP.

Special Considerations for Student Involvement

It is important for schools to ensure the safety of students before, during, and after an emergency, regardless of their role or age. Students who participate in school emergency management planning and other preparedness activities may be at a higher risk of injury or harm, either physically or emotionally due to the situation. To prevent this from occurring, schools can implement the following safeguards:

- **Obtain parental approval.** Gather approval in written form for activities beyond low-level participation in regularly scheduled drills.

- **Consult general counsel.** Ensure you are fulfilling legal obligations and reducing risk.
- **Carefully select activities.** Decrease liability by selecting appropriate activities while considering all aspects of the role.
- **Train students.** Prevent injuries by ensuring that students have all the information needed to carry out procedures according to their role.
- **Utilize trauma-informed practices.** Ensure that trauma, retraumatization, and secondary trauma is prevented through the adoption of trauma-informed policies, procedures, and practices. Staff should be trained on an ongoing basis so that they can realize trauma and its impact, recognize signs and symptoms of trauma, respond by integrating trauma knowledge, and resist retraumatization of individuals.
- **Limit student access to sensitive information.** Ensure that students cannot obtain information that may be used to cause harm and that they are not placed in decision-making roles.

The benefits of involving students in EOP development and other safety activities far exceed the potential liabilities. Students gain skills and knowledge, experience collaboration first-hand, and actively bring together other members of the school community for a common mission of preparedness.

Conclusion

Students are a ready and able resource within school communities for enhancing their preparedness capacity. Their participation not only impacts the school and their academic experience but also their families, community, and future. While schools must consider many important concerns when involving students, there are still ways to responsibly incorporate students in emergency management planning activities before, during, and after an emergency. Schools have a special opportunity to develop prepared youth, individuals, and families while simultaneously providing leadership opportunities that develop students' relationship with emergency management.

Resources

Further Reading — REMS TA Center

- [Building Youth Preparedness and School Safety Capacity by Integrating Educational Initiatives](#), Fact Sheet

Training Opportunity — REMS TA Center

- [The Role of Students in School Safety Efforts](#), Webinar



Further Reading – Student Engagement and Preparedness

- [Ready Kids](#), Website (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [First Aid for Severe Trauma™](#), Web Page (U.S. Department of Homeland Security; American Red Cross; and National Center for Disaster Medicine and Public Health)
- [CPR in Schools](#), Web Page (American Heart Association)
- [Teaching Kids About Emergency Preparedness](#), Website (American Red Cross)
- [Straight-A Safety Toolkits](#), Publication (Safe and Sound Schools)
- [Building Codes Activity Book](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [Building Student Resilience Toolkit](#), Downloadable Training Package (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments)

Further Reading – Student Awareness of Threats

- [StopBullying.gov: Kids](#), Web Page (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- [Operation Prevention: School Resources](#), Web Page (U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Agency)
- [Blue Campaign: Student and Community Leaders](#), Web Page (U.S. Department of Homeland Security)
- [Dating Matters Toolkit: Strategies to Promote Healthy Teen Relationships](#), Website (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [NetSmartz](#), Website (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children)
- [KidSmartz](#), Website (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children)
- [Student Activism](#), Web Page (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)



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