# Timeless School Safety Strategies

## READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Schools are not traditional emergency response organizations, but when a school-based emergency occurs, school personnel must respond immediately. Therefore, schools, along with their partners, must develop comprehensive EOPs, just in case. More importantly, schools must create prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery practices as part of the school community's customary habits.

In order to assist schools and their community partners in their planning efforts, several Federal agencies jointly produced the _Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (School Guide)_ in 2013. The _School Guide_ recommends schools undertake emergency management planning within the context of district, local, regional, state, tribal, and Federal agency emergency planning. The _School Guide_ sets forth planning principles and sequential steps that schools can take to develop emergency operations plans (EOPs), which are critical to preventing emergencies from happening, reducing the impact (should a disaster occur), responding effectively, and facilitating rapid recovery efforts while continuing to protect the whole school community. In addition, a follow-on district emergency planning resource, _The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (District Guide)_, complements the earlier _School Guide_. The _School Guide_ and the _District Guide_ are excellent resources to assist school and district emergency planning teams in their efforts to create, assess, or update their EOPs.

### Overview of 10 Timeless School Safety Strategies

The 10 strategies outlined in this fact sheet are unique because they are foundational and timeless and serve as the building blocks for a comprehensive school safety program. These timeless strategies directly support the prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery practices as outlined in the _School Guide_ and the _District Guide_ in support of school emergency preparedness efforts. Although you will likely recognize many of these proven strategies from previous REMS TA Center training courses or publications, it is important to embrace these strategies from a fresh perspective as you work to implement them in your school environment:

1. Partner with your local first responder agencies.
2. Focus on "all hazards" emergency planning in all places.
3. Conduct site assessments.
4. Improve overall visitor management strategies.
5. Revisit EOPs and procedures.
6. Conduct trainings for all faculty and staff.
7. Improve how you conduct exercises.
8. Establish a behavioral threat assessment and management team and have student reporting methods.
9. Conduct emergency and safety equipment checks and tests.
10. Create a culture of safety.

## 1 Partner With Your Local First Responder Agencies

It is critical for schools to plan collaboratively, train, conduct exercises, and conduct after- action meetings with your local first responders. Local first responders may include law enforcement, fire, emergency medical services (EMS), emergency management, and 911 Center personnel and possibly other agencies that may be specific to your local jurisdiction. Building and sustaining relationships is more important than ever due to the extreme staffing turnover that has occurred over the past few years, both in the school environment and within first responder organizations. As a result, many individuals who might respond to your schools may not have copies of school EOPs, access to building-related critical response information (e.g., floor plans, utility shut-off locations), or know your school administrators or staff. (View the REMS TA Center's Collaboration and Community Partnerships: Strategies for Effective School and Higher Ed Emergency Operations Plan Development fact sheet for information on the partners who schools may call on for support.)

- Below are a few examples of different ways that schools and local first responder agencies can work together to build relationships (or sustain existing ones), garner trust, and inspire confidence in their emergency preparedness levels:
- Invite first responder agencies to participate on your school or district core planning team.
- Ask first responder representatives to join your school staff and faculty during pre-planning or an all-school staff meeting and provide a school tour.
- Host a safety day at your school with local first responders to promote a variety of safety-related programs and initiatives and to receive possible required training (e.g., cardiopulmonary resuscitation/automated exterior defibrillator [AED] certification).
- Have first responders participate in annual school site assessments and share critical building response information.

- Ask law enforcement to conduct random walk-throughs of your school and/or use the parking lot to write reports in their patrol vehicles (particularly important if a school resource officer is not based at the school).
- Invite law enforcement to conduct a law-related education class for students or ask fire/EMS personnel to conduct a fire safety presentation or STOP THE BLEED® training.
- Partner with first responder agencies to observe and/or participate when you conduct emergency drills and exercises.
- Consider partnering with your local 911 Center on having the ability to quickly share your school's surveillance camera video during a school emergency.
- Ensure that after-action meetings occur with your school and first responder agencies after exercises and real events to capture strengths and challenges for improvement.

Schools and first responders may wish to coordinate on the use of school buildings on holidays, weekends, or other times when the buildings are not occupied for training purposes. This allows first responders to become more familiar with your building, the opportunity to train on important response procedures, and to build confidence and trust.

## 2   Focus on "All Hazards" Emergency Planning in All Places

A comprehensive school emergency planning process must consider a wide range of possible threats and hazards ("all hazards" approach) that may impact the school or district, addressing safety needs before, during, and after an incident. This all hazards collaborative emergency planning approach identifies those threats and hazards that are most likely to impact (or ones that have historically impacted) your area. This emergency planning approach is explained in greater detail in the *School Guide and the District Guide.*

It's challenging at times for schools not to overfocus on a national disaster or violent incident that has impacted another school. Often, community pressure or other stakeholders may influence the school to focus more time, effort, and resources on one threat or hazard that may have a lower probability to occur than others. Remember that over planning for one threat or hazard event may leave your school or district underprepared for threats and hazards that happen more frequently at your school, the community, or region.

Additionally, remember to plan collaboratively for emergencies that may not occur in your building or during normal hours. A few examples might include

- after school hours
- school bus routes and field trips
- special events
- athletic events
- summer school
- district office (school board meetings)
- transportation facility
- other school-owned facilities (e.g., storage buildings)
- School facilities or other venues (rented during non-school hours)

## 3   Conduct Site Assessments

A site assessment examines the safety, security, accessibility, and emergency preparedness of your school buildings and grounds. Site assessments are recognized in the *School Guide* and *District Guide* as vehicles for the continual collection of information, and they may be conducted while walking around school grounds and facilities. They should be conducted on at least an annual basis, although they may be completed at different times. This process is important in order to appropriately assess your school site and EOP in collaboration with local first responders and school facilities personnel. Site assessments are just one component of school safety.

### REMS TA Center's Site Assessment Tool

SITE ASSESS is a free, secure mobile application that many schools use to make site assessments easier and more efficient by producing comprehensive reports with multiple data sharing options (Word, Excel, and the App).

One school district tried a unique perspective to give "fresh eyes" to their school site assessments. The district asked school administrators and their facility personnel to conduct a site assessment at a different school in the district and not at their "home" school. This allowed for school site administrators to assist other schools in their district with a different perspective and improved consistency in regard to emergency preparedness procedures and protocols across the district.

It should be noted that your school will be positioned in a more proactive stance by conducting site assessments collaboratively with local first responders where short-term and long-term strategies, often at little or no cost, can be identified. When an incident does happen at your school or an incident occurs outside your area that garners national attention, the school does not have to be reactive, because the school has taken a systematic and collaborative approach to identify improvements by utilizing the site assessment process. The use of this process will often make the school appear to be more organized and prepared for emergencies through the lens of the community.

## 4 Improve Overall Visitor Management Strategies

Hundreds of students, staff, and visitors likely enter and exit though your school's main entrance each day. Most of these individuals have a legitimate purpose and reason to gain access to the school; however, it only takes one person with an ill intent to enter the school through an unlocked door, a propped door, or without being properly vetted as a visitor to dismantle our well-intentioned visitor management process.

Ideally, each school should consider how a visitor might approach your campus to gain legitimate vehicular and pedestrian access to the building. Below are a few questions that may help guide the evaluation of your school's campus:

- Is wayfinding signage present on your school's pathways and roads?
- Is signage present to direct visitors to check in at the main office?

- Is signage present in languages other than English if you have other languages that are spoken in our community?
- Do you have designated visitor parking spaces within view of the main office?
- Is the main office door easily identified by visitors through the use of signage or distinct approach pathways?
- Is the vegetative ground cover low growing and tree canopies trimmed appropriately to promote good natural surveillance of the visitor parking lot and other areas?
- Do you have an appropriate and thorough visitor check-in process?
- Is door propping an unacceptable practice in your building?

All staff should realize the importance of keeping all exterior doors closed and locked at all times to limit unauthorized access from the outside. If all school faculty and staff can develop and sustain this culture of safety and security in regard to understanding that just one propped door, even if it is only propped for a few minutes, can defeat the entire visitor management and access control system, you may see less exterior door issues.

## 5 Revisit Emergency Operations Plans and Procedures

When was the last update to your school or district EOP? Do you update your EOP in collaboration with your local first responders? Do you include emergency procedures for hazards, threats, and other emergencies that are most likely to impact your area? (View the REMS TA Center's Emergency Operations Plan Maintenance: Reviewing, Updating, and Strengthening Plans fact sheet.)

Ideally, your school or school district core planning teams should be updating their EOP on an annual basis in a collaborative fashion. It was highlighted earlier in this fact sheet regarding the importance of coordinating and communicating with your local first responders about your school EOP. Other important questions to think about might include

- Do all school staff have responsibilities during emergencies?
- How do staff receive information about emergency procedures?
- Does your plan include several "back-ups" for individuals tasked with critical responsibilities?
- Does your school regularly discuss or train staff on your emergency plans and procedures?
- Does your school consistently debrief with staff and/or first responders after an emergency incident in order to promote improvement?
- Is critical school and building-related information (e.g., floor plans, utility shut offs) shared with local first responders?

Assembling your school core planning team to update your school EOP is not always the most exciting event, but its importance cannot be discounted. The relationships that result from conducting these annual (or more) reviews and updates of your plan build trust and confidence among all participants. Consider planning your school core planning team's meeting as a lunch meeting or host the meeting at one of the team member's place of work. For example, the local emergency manager may wish to host a meeting in the city or county Emergency Operations Center to allow

participants to tour the facility and to better understand how it operates and coordinates with the district during an emergency.

## 6 Conduct Training for All Faculty and Staff

Emergency preparedness, safety, and security-related training should be conducted for administrators, teachers, school emergency response team members (crisis team), cafeteria staff, custodians, bus drivers, substitute teachers, office staff, and district personnel every year. Emergency procedures, plans, policies, and personnel changes are updated every year, resulting in a greater need for a comprehensive training program to be present. Also, schools should consider the information that students and their parents may need to know about your emergency procedures (e.g., emergency notification methods, procedures for parents/guardians during a lockdown) and how this information can be effectively communicated to the greater school community.

For example, one school experienced a "lessons learned" moment by not originally including all of their staff in their emergency training efforts. Specifically, this school had not previously involved its custodians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and other support staff in their threat assessment training, which provided specific information on recognizing student behaviors of concern, reporting procedures, and the value of trusted adult relationships. Once the school began to involve their support staff more in all of their emergency preparedness training, including recognizing student behaviors of concern, the administrative team realized the value of the previously excluded staff in that this group already had many existing trusted adult relationships with students. More students were able to receive appropriate interventions and resources because the newly trained support staff were now able to provide reliable, consistent, and

timely information to administrators regarding student safety issues.

Check with your local first responder agencies, your state school safety center, your state department of education, and the REMS TA Center for possible training opportunities for your school or school district.

## 7 — Improve How You Conduct Exercises

Many states have mandates regarding the specific types of drills that must be conducted and the frequency of the drills to be conducted in schools; however, there is often flexibility as to how these drills and exercises are coordinated as long as the appropriate drills are conducted on schedule throughout the school year.

Be sure that you are conducting all types of drills that are appropriate for the threats and hazards in your area. Evacuation, severe weather sheltering, lockdown, and reverse evacuation drills are common drills that should be practiced. The REMS TA Center's Emergency Exercises Training Package can be used to identify gaps and weaknesses. This training package includes detailed instructions for using the package; supplemental resources on emergency exercises; fact sheets sharing best practices for conducting emergency exercises and developing after-action reports; and four tabletop exercises that each include a facilitator podcast, participant guide, and resource list for scenarios involving infectious disease, power outage, flood, and cybersecurity incidents that impact education agencies. Remember, safety should always be a priority and having local first responders assist and observe with drills and exercises should be a common practice. Furthermore, all exercises should conclude with an after-action review and report, as outlined in the REMS TA Center's After-Action Reports: Capturing Lessons Learned and Identifying Areas of Improvement fact sheet.

Examples of additional ways to improve or vary your emergency drills may include the following:

- Vary the times of the day that you conduct drills that might be inconvenient and not expected (e.g., class change, lunch, arrival, dismissal).
- Practice activating the Incident Command System during each drill.
- Make it a procedure to check the visitor's log or other system during drills for accountability.
- Block exits during evacuations to encourage staff to consider alternative exits.
- Carry out the school emergency evacuation kit during each evacuation drill.
- Challenge staff during drills where key administrative staff may not be available and back-up personnel may need to take charge.
- Communicate clearly with parents and guardians during each drill as to your expectations of them should the event be a real emergency.

## 8 — Establish a Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management Team and Have Student Reporting Methods

School-based behavioral threat assessment and management teams have been a hot topic of discussion over the past few years due to an increasing number of reported safety, disciplinary, and threatening behavior

concerns in our school communities. Many states have required schools to create multi-disciplinary behavioral threat assessment and management teams comprised of a school administrator, mental health professional, counselor, and other key school and community resources. This team should be trained to assess and investigate potential safety concerns, threats, and/ or threatening behaviors; to provide appropriate resources; and to prevent acts of violence from disrupting the school community.

Students, teachers, school staff, parents and guardians, and other members of the school community must have methods to report tips about student threats or behaviors that warrant concern. Best practices include establishing several mechanisms (e.g., text, Website, app) that allow members of the school community the ability to report a tip or a concern with an option to report anonymously. Coordination on this process and the best tip method suited for your school community should be discussed with the stakeholder groups who you wish to receive tips from prior to implementation. This discussion should include the best tip line marketing method, 24/7 monitoring, and training for the school community.

There are a number of free school behavioral threat assessment and management resources available that highlight best practices in this area, including the School Behavioral Threat Assessments: An Introduction training offered by the REMS TA Center. The training, offered virtually or in person, highlights key aspects of school behavioral threat assessments that need to be considered when deciding which behavioral threat assessment features are most appropriate for the district, school, and/or local community. In addition, participants will receive guidance on how to develop a multi-disciplinary behavioral threat assessment team and conduct a meeting.



## 9 Conduct Emergency and Safety Equipment Checks and Tests

Our nation's schools are stocked with large numbers of safety, security, communication, and medical equipment that should be checked on a frequent basis. These safety and security items often play a key role in the prevention and response to all emergencies, so it is important to make sure that each item is fully operational. Schools should develop a checklist of all of their safety equipment, communication devices, first aid kits, medical equipment, emergency evacuation kits, and other items. This checklist should include specific staff assignments that highlight the need to either check, inventory, or replace batteries or other products (e.g., AED pads) that may have expiration dates for each piece of emergency or safety-related equipment.

This problem was recently highlighted at one school district where many of their nurses resigned to accept other positions outside the district. In this particular district, the school nurses were assigned to conduct monthly checks on the AED devices located in each school to ensure the units were up to date and operational. Due to the nurse staffing turnover, these key assignments were not known to the newly hired nurses, and several AEDs in the school buildings were discovered to have expired pads and batteries. This example shows the value of a comprehensive safety equipment checklist with staff assignments and documenting the frequency of actual checks during the year.

The REMS TA Center's Emergency "Go-Kits" for K-12 Schools fact sheet provides aspects to consider when creating emergency supply kits and suggested contents for administration and classroom kits. A list of items that schools may wish to include on their checklists is included below. This is not an exhaustive list and some items not included may be specific to your state or local area:

- First aid kits
- STOP THE BLEED® Kits
- fire extinguishers
- Fire alarm systems
- Knox Box wall mounted safes
- AEDs

- Two-way radios
- Panic alarm devices
- Public address systems (two-way tests)
- Public address outdoor speakers
- NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) weather radios (should receive weekly routine tests)
- Carbon monoxide detectors (as applicable)
- Surveillance cameras
- Surveillance camera monitors
- Emergency evacuation chairs
- Elevator emergency call buttons (as applicable)
- Emergency evacuation kits (office)
- Classroom emergency kits
- Emergency hallway lighting
- Outdoor lighting
- Flashlights (if not included in specific kits)

## 10 Create a Culture of Safety

The *School Guide* defines school climate as a "range of campus conditions, including safety, relationships and engagement, and the environment, that may influence student learning and well-being." In general terms, if students feel connected to their school and safe in their school environment, then they are likely to be more successful academically and socially.

Since all schools are unique and different, each school should create its own narrative regarding safety. If all staff are trained, feel empowered and supported, and truly embrace the safety and emergency preparedness strategies mentioned in this fact sheet, then students and parents will likely feel more confident that school staff can handle emergencies. This will positively impact the school environment as it will be perceived as safer and more secure by the students and the larger school community. Of course, this all sounds very simple and straightforward; however, creating this positive culture should involve everyone in the community, and it often takes substantial time and effort to be successful. Involve the whole school community in measuring school climate and culture through the use of related assessments. The REMS TA

Center offers a number of resources, including fact sheets on School Culture and Climate Assessments and Student Perceptions of Safety and Their Impact on Creating a Safe School Environment.

## 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
- Collaboration and Community Partnerships: Strategies for Effective School and Higher Ed Emergency Operations Plan Development, Fact Sheet
- Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design: Enhancing the Security of Your K-12 School Using an All-Hazards Approach, Fact Sheet
- EOP Interactive Tools, Mobile and Web Applications
- Emergency Operations Plan Maintenance: Reviewing, Updating, and Strengthening Plans, Fact Sheet
- K-12 School Planning and Response Teams: Developing and Enhancing the School Emergency Operations Plan, Checklist
- School District Planning and Response Teams: Developing and Enhancing the School Emergency Operations Plan, Checklist
- Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Practice and Validate Emergency Operations Plans, Fact Sheet
- After-Action Reports: Capturing Lessons Learned and Identifying Areas of Improvement, Fact Sheet
- Emergency "Go-Kits" for K-12 Schools, Fact Sheet
- School Culture and Climate Assessments, Fact Sheet
- Planning for Emergency Incidents That Can Happen in All Settings and During All Times, Web Page

### Training Opportunities — REMS TA Center

- Developing Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) K-12 101, Live and Virtual Trainings by Request

- [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](#), Online Course
- [Assessing Your School Site](#), Online Course
- [Forming a School Behavioral Threat Assessment Team](#), Webinar
- [School Behavioral Threat Assessments: An Introduction](#), Live and Virtual Trainings by Request
- [Understanding Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)](#), Specialized Training Package
- [Emergency Exercises Training Package](#), Specialized Training Package
- [Overview of the Six Step Planning Process](#), Specialized Training Package
- [Developing and Enhancing Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) With Your Community Partners](#), Specialized Training Package
- [School EOPs In-Depth: Planning for Large Events](#), Online Course

## Further Reading — Behavioral Threat Assessment and Anonymous Reporting

- [Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence](#) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center)

- [School Tip Line Toolkit: A Blueprint for Implementation and Sustainability](#) (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice)
- [Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting: A Toolkit for Strengthening K-12 Reporting Programs](#) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency; and U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Secret Service)

## Further Reading — Site Assessments

- [Using Environmental Design to Prevent School Violence](#), Web Page (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [K-12 School Security Guide Product Suite](#), Web Page (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency)

## Further Reading — Exercises and Training

- [Campus Resilience Program Exercise Starter Kits](#) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security)
- [CISA Tabletop Exercise Packages](#) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency)
- [IS-100.C: Introduction to the Incident Command System Online Course](#) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Emergency Management Institute)

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