



## Episode 16: Evacuation Planning

**#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded):** [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

**Janelle Hughes:** Hello and welcome back. We are excited to host another #REMSontheAir Podcast. My name is Janelle Hughes, Project Director for the REMS TA Center. Today I'm joined by my colleague, Alison Curtis, Director of Information and Product Management.

**Alison Curtis:** Thanks, Janelle. In today's episode of [00:01:00] #REMSontheAir, we'll be discussing evacuations in the context of emergency management.

It is so important for schools and school districts to create comprehensive Evacuation Annexes as a part of their emergency operations plans, or EOPs. There are several types of threats and hazards that could potentially prompt activation of the Evacuation Annex, including natural hazards, active shooter incidents, hazardous material spills, power failures, and so much more.

**Janelle Hughes:** You are so right, Alison. I am really looking forward to diving into this conversation, and I'm so happy that we also have Sue Graves, a safety coordinator with the Lincoln County School District in Oregon, to join us to discuss this topic. Welcome, Sue.

**Sue Graves:** Thank you. It's great to be here, too.

**Janelle Hughes:** Well, we are going to have a conversation today about emergency evacuations in the school [00:02:00] setting, and I think the first question that I'd like to get started with is: Who are the most important school personnel to provide input on evacuation planning?

**Sue Graves:** In terms of school personnel, it's really important to have the people that really work in that school, that lead that school, involved in the planning because they know the flow of things, and they know what's worked in the past and what might need to be adjusted. So, it could be your school administration. If some of your key office staff help with accounting for personnel once they get out to the assembly areas and accounting for students, that—they would be great people to include too. You have some facilities or custodial personnel—they could be great additions to the planning team. They know your building inside and out. Any safety or security personnel from the school or even from the school district, if they are available, could be helpful.

But I think it's important to think about your special [00:03:00] populations. If you have special ed staff who could be involved. If you have an infant, toddler, or preschool program, they

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have—might have some special needs with evacuations that they could provide input on. Any health or medical staff. And then, of course, your transportation or bus company staff. They would be critical to have, especially when you're thinking about off-campus evacuations.

**Alison Curtis:** Sue, what about community partners?

**Sue Graves:** For your community partners, they are also important to have involved in your evacuation. Those could include your fire department, police department, city or county emergency managers.

If you have—when we think about evacuations, sometimes we think about fire drills—you know, that kind of thing—but evacuations are so much broader than that. They could include a bomb threat that would require an evacuation or perhaps a part of the roof that has collapsed [00:04:00] due to rain or excessive snow or something. So many reasons that you could have to evacuate. So, including others involved when you're thinking about different hazards or threats that your school or district may be susceptible to would be really good.

Even your public works department staff, from the city or county where you are, because they may be involved in blocking roads so that buses can get through. And so, community partners are very critical to have involved in your planning.

**Alison Curtis:** Absolutely. And we also know that training stakeholders on the plan is an important activity. Do you have any tips on training students and staff on evacuation?

**Sue Graves:** Yeah, training is so important. And I think sometimes we get in a rut—get in a rut, excuse me—in terms of just training students and staff on “here's the protocol; here's what we're [00:05:00] going to do.” And that's really important: to learn the protocol and how to evacuate and where to evacuate. But it's equally important to understand the why: why are we doing this?

And the reason why is because as students and staff understand the evacuation and the why of it, it will increase their buy-in and ownership. And it will empower them to really make decisions so that if they're not in their normal environment (maybe they're walking down the hall or they're in the restroom when a fire alarm goes off or when an announcement comes over the public address system about evacuation—the need to evacuate) then they will have that understanding and be able to have really good decision making for evacuating in an appropriate way. So, understanding the how and the why is both important.

And then I think also practicing at different times of the day, different days of the week, and in different settings. And [00:06:00] sometimes it's easy to schedule your evacuation drills, you know, during homeroom or fourth period, ev—you know, each Tuesday, every—you know, the

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first Tuesday of each month, that kind of thing, to where it's just an easy—an easy thing to do. But it's not great practice then because then we don't get to use our minds and make decisions about how do we do this in different times of the day or settings. And so, it's really good to practice at different times.

**Janelle Hughes:** Thank you so much for mentioning that, Sue, because it really is important to think about all settings and all times when thinking about any of those functional annexes that a school might need to activate. Can you talk a little bit about what schools should look out for when drilling on evacuation?

**Sue Graves:** Well, I think they need to think about the different type of evacuations. So, sometimes we have to evacuate the whole school. Sometimes we have to just evacuate a [00:07:00] classroom and that can be called a room clear. So, if there's a student having a seizure or a medical emergency of some kind, we need to evacuate that classroom to really think about psychological safety of the other students, and we don't want to traumatize them.

And so, a lot of times when we're thinking about evacuations, we think about physical safety, which is very appropriate. But we also need to think about psychological safety. So, how is the blare of the fire alarm going to affect someone who—or a population who's been through a wildfire and just the trauma that that creates? Or do we have students who need a special evacuation plan because the light from those fire alarms can really mess with them, and they need an accommodation for that? Or maybe they need to have a special evacuation plan that would accommodate an access or functional need. [00:08:00] And so—we actually have some students in our school district who have an allergy to the cold. And so, we have special plans for how are we going to evacuate them, and where are we going to quickly bring them so that they can be safe.

So, we're thinking about psychological safety and physical safety and then making those special evacuation plans to really meet the needs of the whole school community. So, those are some of the—some of the tips I would say.

Also—you know, also you might have some students who have—or staff—who have some medications, and we want to make sure that we bring those out with us when we evacuate. And so there's go-kits to consider. What all do we need to have in our go-kit so that we always evacuate with this go-kit? Who's going to evacuate with it? What needs to be in it so that we can really meet the needs of everyone?

**Alison Curtis:** Great considerations, Sue. It is so important to plan for the needs of the entire school community. A bit earlier you mentioned [00:09:00] off-campus evacuations. And so, I'm wondering what should schools consider when selecting an off-campus evacuation site?

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**Sue Graves:** We'd like to consider: Are there some places near the campus where we could do a walking evacuation? And then are there some places away from the campus where we might do a bus evacuation if we're able—if we're able to do that?

And so, the near-campus sites as well as the away-from-campus sites and kind of the pre-planning and figuring those out ahead of time is so important because when there is an evacuation that requires an off-campus evacuation, we have to make really quick decisions in these type of emergencies and situations.

And so—and the reason why is because—a lot of reasons. We have to prepare, possibly, you know, how do we get enough bus drivers and buses? *Are* there enough? Can we get the drivers back in time to do an [00:10:00] off-campus, *away*-from-campus bus evacuation? So really thinking through that and planning through that ahead of time. And if we can't, then where can we walk to? And can we—are the roads going to be available? Are they going to be clogged by parents rushing to the school, parents and guardians, or another situation that causes the road to be clogged or blocked? And so really doing that pre-planning of those sites is important.

For your off-campus sites, you also have to think about family reunification and is the site adequate. When hundreds, potentially, of parents are coming to retrieve their kids, is there enough place for really securing the students, as well as a separate place for the families to wait and then to be reunited? So those are all things to consider.

I think sometimes we like to think, “oh, there's a neighboring school; we'll just use our neighboring school.” And there are situations when that can be really effective, but there are also [00:11:00] situations when, if you were to remove one whole population of a school and evacuate to another school, then the parents of the receiving school, they might be worried about what's going on and rush to school also to get their kids when that was totally unnecessary, and it really complicates the whole reunification process. So really thinking through those pros and cons about where could we do an off-campus evacuation ahead of time. And those are really important things to do.

I think the other thing to really think through is, do we want to make those off-site campus evacuation locations known ahead of time? Do we want to pre-publicize them? And, you know, one good reason to really think about not pre-publicizing them is that if it's an active shooter situation or a threat type of situation, even a bomb [00:12:00] threat situation, and you're evacuating to an off-campus site, if those are pre-published, and there is a bad actor, it could become a secondary target for them where they know, “oh, they're going to take all the students and staff to this church or this community center or this park; I'm also going to do something there.” So, really think about that ahead of time but do have written agreements in place with wherever those off-campus sites are so that you can quickly make those decisions and get things going and into action.

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**Janelle Hughes:** You mentioned so many important points just now, Sue, one being the importance of continually developing and refining those memoranda of agreement and understanding, but also just, in general, those efforts to continually update the plan, including the Evacuation Annex. What recommendations would you offer to education agency partners working to [00:13:00] refine their Evacuation Annex?

**Sue Graves:** I think it's important to—once you identify your off-campus locations, and even for on-campus locations, whenever there's an evacuation, if you can have some sample messages already developed, you know, the communications that you're going to have to quickly send out to your parents and guardians and community. If they can already be developed with just a few little things that will need to be modified to make it specific for that situation and translate it into whatever languages are appropriate for your school or school district, it's going to make everything go much quicker and much smoother because people are going to want information and clear information quickly.

And so if those sample messages are ready to go, it will make everything go a lot smoother. And then really think about the hazards and threats that are specific for your unique [00:14:00] school and population and then test your plans. As you're strengthening and working to refine your evacuation plan, test your plans against just—even just one given hazard.

You could get everybody, your whole group, around a table and play the “what if” game and challenge your plans by asking some questions. Like you might say: OK, so if we have to evacuate, and we're not sure how long we're going to have to be outside in the assembly area, what are we going to do about basic needs? What if people need to go to the restroom? Or what if it's really cold out? Or what if it's really hot out or raining? How long are we going to keep people out there before we move them to an off-campus site or somewhere else? And so, thinking about how we're going to meet basic needs. You might ask other questions about, well, if we do a walking evacuation, how are we going to stop parents and guardians from retrieving—trying to retrieve their children while you're walking to the assembly area?

Because, you know, parents and [00:15:00] guardians, when there's an emergency, we can become Papa bears and Mama bears, and, you know, we want our kids to be safe. And, of course, the school wants our students and staff to be safe too, but how are we going to stop parents from retrieving them in the middle of that walk to the assembly area? What if high school students decide to leave on their own if they have their own car or decide to walk? How are we going to deal with that? Do we have some students in elementary school who typically wander off or run off, and how are we going to corral them and keep them safe also as we're walking to an assembly area? So those are a lot of things that we can really work on to refine our plans.

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What are we going to do after the evacuation? How do we do a family reunification? How are our communications going to work? And are we expecting support from the district office and from their resources? What is available? How do we access that support? What if multiple schools are having to evacuate [00:16:00] at the same time? Can we still get the level of support that we expect? And if not, what are our capabilities to meet those needs?

So just really thinking through those hazards and threats that are specific and unique to your particular schools and then adjusting your plans accordingly.

**Janelle Hughes:** Thank you so much, Sue. I think you illuminated not only the importance of continually refining an Evacuation Annex but also other annexes that you've mentioned, including family reunification, communications and warning, and just highlighting how those cross-cutting functions really relate to each other and the importance of planning for them all.

**Sue Graves:** I think another thing that's important to plan for is how are you going to account for all students and staff and visitors when you do get to the assembly area?

I know that some of the lessons that we've learned on that is that we used to have, [00:17:00] you know, paper. We used to have a list on paper of everyone who would sign in, all of the visitors to the school and when they would come to the office. And then we moved to this electronic system, where they sign in online once they get into the school. And when we get out to the assembly area, we found that when we would try to account for everybody, Wi-Fi didn't work at the assembly area. Cell service didn't work at all in the assembly areas. And so, we really didn't have access to the information that we needed. We also found that when we would do our family reunifications when we had evacuated, we wanted to rely on our electronic lists and, again, Wi-Fi and cell challenges prevented that, so we learned that we have to have a printed list in our go-kit of everyone that we can release students to in an emergency. Parents and guardians, whoever is on your emergency release contact list, [00:18:00] they have to be printed.

Otherwise, we really weren't able to access those—that information and release them to the right people. So, really figure out what is going to work for you for how you're going to account for everyone and how you're going to know who you can release them to in a family reunification situation because those are the kinds of situations where potentially a noncustodial parent or someone wishing to do harm might try to, in the commotion that can often happen in these situations, get to a student that they shouldn't get to. We need to prevent that, really work to prevent that. And being able to have those lists of who we can release them to is really important.

**Janelle Hughes:** Thank you so much for sharing that. I think the information-sharing aspect of that is so important, as well as thinking about another emergency management function,

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accounting for all persons. Are there any other valuable lessons learned that [00:19:00] you'd like to share in the context of evacuation?

**Sue Graves:** Yeah, another one is that when we do our drills and when we practice, whether it's a school evacuation or a classroom evacuation, like a room clear, or if we need to evacuate the playground because of a situation, a dangerous situation out there—and we often call that a reverse evacuation—or a bus evacuation because of something going on the school bus, we just really need to practice in a way and prepare students and staff in a way that they're set up for success because we want their practice to be right. We want them to do it right.

If they practice and they're doing it wrong and then we wait for another month or so before we do it again, we've just taught them the wrong way to do it. We've kind of helped them learn with their muscle memory the wrong way. So, we really need to practice. My son's baseball coach always used to say, "Practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect." [00:20:00] And that really stuck with me because it's true. Because what happens is we do learn this muscle memory and so then when we're in a high-stress situation, we need to overcome those natural stress responses of that fight or freeze or flight. And so, however we practice, then our brain goes back to that practice to help us make those decisions and do those responses. So, we really want that practice to be well. So, if we do a drill at our school, and really clearly there were some things that were wrong, we will just redo it right then. We will do a quick correction, a lesson education, teaching the right way to do it, and then we will just go and do it again. And I know that takes time, but it's just so important that we practice it the right way.

**Janelle Hughes:** That's so true regarding practice. And thank you so much for sharing that very important point and key takeaway. We so appreciate you, Sue, and all that you do. [00:21:00]

**Sue Graves:** Thank you so much. It's been great being with you today.

**Janelle Hughes:** Great to have you.

Thank you so much for tuning in today, listeners. Tweet us using the #REMSontheAir hashtag if you are addressing similar topics. If you have any questions related to our discussion today or just want to learn more, please send us your questions via email or call us at 1-855-781-REMS or 7367 to pose any questions that can be featured possibly in future podcast episodes as well. And don't forget that you can also email us at [info@remstacenter.org](mailto:info@remstacenter.org). You can join our mailing list by doing so, where you'll get up-to-date information on webinars, Web chats, and other virtual opportunities to learn and share.

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