



Episode 20: After-Action Reviews and Reports

#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: Good morning and welcome to another #REMSontheAir episode. When emergency incidents take place in the school setting, whether an active shooter situation, infectious disease outbreak, or power outage, it is important for school core planning teams to reflect on lessons learned. [00:01:00] This information is truly critical to strengthening, maintaining, and refining school emergency operations plans, but how are the feedback and reflections captured so that the EOP can be improved? The planning team can debrief together after an emergency event or an exercise and create an after-action report that evaluates results, identifies gaps and shortfalls, and documents lessons learned.

I am so happy to be joined today by Anne Gilligan of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Thank you so much, Anne, for accepting the REMS TA Center’s invitation to share today during this #REMSontheAir Podcast episode. If you don’t mind, I’d like to start off by just having you share a little bit about the role that you play in school safety within your state.

Anne Gilligan: Good morning. My role is as the Safe and Healthy [00:02:00] Schools Coordinator, which means that I work on all of the initiatives that contribute towards creating safe and healthy learning environments. So, always starting under the umbrella of emergency management planning, but then bullying prevention and intervention, social competency, and other programs that contribute to creating safe school campuses across the Commonwealth.

Janelle Hughes: Thank you so much for all that you do. And, you know, so many of the elements that you just mentioned are important parts of school safety and the emergency management process and framework. [00:03:00] And I think we both can agree that after-action reviews and reports are also important. They are important opportunities to reflect and to learn and to improve policies and protocols. Can you speak to how you see after-action reports fitting into the big picture of schools’ day-to-day school safety efforts?

Anne Gilligan: Following an exercise or a drill or an incident, there should be a convening, which is an after-action meeting. Our emergency response partners will call it a “hot wash” or a “cold wash.” There are different terms that are used across the emergency management spectrum. But we have an after-action meeting in schools and sit down and discuss [00:04:00]

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the drill, the exercise, or the actual incident. And the information that is gathered and discussed during the after-action meeting is incorporated into the after-action report.

These reports should be reviewed on an ongoing basis to assist in determining areas and needs of improvement, assessing schools' and districts' capacity to respond effectively, and to understand what elements of their response are working well. After-action reports should really be viewed as a prevention tool, as the lessons learned during the after-action discussions can be incorporated into the comprehensive emergency management plan. [00:05:00]

Janelle Hughes: Well, I think that's very powerful what you stated about after-action reviews and reports really serving as a prevention tool. I think that, you know, a lot of conversations around after-action reports are framed in the after aspects of an emergency, so response and recovery. But I'm so happy that you noted that—the role that it plays in prevention as well.

Can you describe any challenges you have faced in working with schools and school districts to develop high-quality after-action reports that can truly help with improving EOPs?

Anne Gilligan: It's not uncommon to hear that school district personnel often do not have the time to schedule and participate in an after-action meeting and then have the additional time to dedicate to work on authoring the report. [00:06:00] Staff often need to move on to responding to the next incident or addressing the variety of student needs that are needing attention. I think that is one of the challenges that we hear fairly frequently from districts.

Janelle Hughes: I can imagine, and I would imagine that there are other stakeholders, both within school districts and schools but outside of the school building and the school district, that might be engaged in that process. So, can you talk a little bit about how community stakeholders and families, for example, should be or can be engaged in after-action report meetings, creation of the report, as well as dissemination?

Anne Gilligan: Emergency responders, such as our partners from police and [00:07:00] fire, excel at conducting after-action meetings and drafting after-action reports. Schools cannot be successful in this process by themselves. Just as we at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education collaborate with our state partners, particularly our Executive Office of Public Safety and Security and our state Department of Fire Services, this work at the local level must start with collaboration among the big three. At the local level, the big three would be school superintendents or charter school leaders and then the local fire and police chiefs. Schools should always include those partners in their meetings and the development of the reports.

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Other partners, such as local boards of health, [00:08:00] can provide key insight and expertise during meetings and inform reports. Boards of health in Massachusetts were invaluable partners to schools during the pandemic.

We know that the variety of community stakeholders and work with families will vary from district to district depending on the size and the makeup of the community, whether it's urban, rural, or suburban. But important outcomes and lessons learned and updates should be provided to families as part of family engagement in this work.

For example, it's not uncommon in our rural areas of the state, such as Western [00:09:00] Mass, for wild animals (bears, coyotes—we had a fisher cat experience) to make their way onto school properties. Should that happen, then schools would need to adjust school entrance, exit, and recess protocols during that day or that week, whatever the extended period of time is, and families would need to be updated and informed of those adjustments made to the school day.

So, while after-action reports may have some confidential information, the lessons learned that then inform updates to a plan should surely be shared with faculty, staff, students, and families, as well as other community stakeholders.

Janelle Hughes: Thank you so much. And you mentioned so many key partners. [00:10:00] And I can imagine that the partners who will play a role in the after-action review and report process may vary depending on whether that after-action review is being conducted following an actual emergency versus an emergency exercise, as well as depending on the type of emergency incident, as you mentioned, thinking about the pandemic and the role of your public health partners.

What kind of supports do you think that schools and districts might need as they work to go from hosting the meeting and developing the after-action reports to actively using those recommended corrective actions or improvements to modify and update their EOPs?

Anne Gilligan: It would be beneficial for each school to have an emergency management planning team that meet regularly, meaning monthly, as well as convening [00:11:00] post-incident. Regularly scheduled meetings will aid school staff in incorporating the meetings into their regular weekly or monthly routines. These teams do need to be trained in the process to establish a uniform understanding of their roles and responsibilities, as well as to increase their knowledge and skills in developing after-action plans. We are considering using our upcoming Bipartisan Safer Communities Act funding that comes from the Federal government to support this type of work at the local level.

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Janelle Hughes: Wow, that is very exciting. And I think you make such a good point regarding meeting regularly and cultivating and sustaining those relationships. [00:12:00] And in thinking about relationships, I know that you work at the state education agency level, so can you talk a little bit about the role that the state education agency plays in helping schools and school districts write and/or use after-action reports? Are there any specific tools or resources, for example, that you point your local education agencies towards for additional support?

Anne Gilligan: Well, as you know, Massachusetts partners with our colleagues at the REMS [TA] Center quite frequently to provide training to our schools and districts. And that training is really the foundation for the local teams, be it a district planning team or building-based planning team or a threat assessment team.

We highly recommend that districts review the REMS site, as well as FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], CISA [Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency], and other [00:13:00] Federal partners' materials, because they demonstrate best practices, not just for after-action planning but across the full emergency management planning spectrum.

And also, school nurses are a great resource. We have wonderful school nurses in Massachusetts, and they are required to document every medical incident that occurs on school grounds. And the processes for creating an after-action report are not dissimilar to completing their required reports post-medical incident. So, they serve as a great resource at the local level, and they could model this process since they're involved in it [00:14:00] daily to support their colleagues at their school or district level in becoming proficient in this process.

Janelle Hughes: Well, first of all, Anne, thank you so much for your reference to the REMS TA Center and your continued support of us. We could not do what we do without partners like you.

And I'm so happy that you mentioned school nurses as well. I agree that they are key partners. We hosted a webinar last year with the National Association of School Nurses and talked about exactly what you just shared and the important role that they can play, not only in supporting response and recovery as you look at different types of threats and hazards but also in actually helping to improve and enhance emergency operations plans. And we have been continuing that role-based webinar series since last year. We'll continue it into this year, really [00:15:00] looking at the role of a variety of partners: transportation directors, facilities managers, community engagement specialists, and the roles that they can play not only in EOP development but also in these after-action reviews and reports.

I think what I—I have another question for you. What is the one thing you wish practitioners in the field of school safety and emergency preparedness knew about after-action reports?

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Anne Gilligan: I hope that they realize that establishing teams for after-action meetings and the subsequent development of the report will be invaluable to the process of creating and maintaining safe schools for faculty, staff, students, and their families. Investing the [00:16:00] time and effort on these processes will be highly beneficial.

And it is also a key opportunity to gather information about students, as well as school facilities that may not have been previously known, and the exercise or the drill, or the incident illuminates that information.

Janelle Hughes: Thinking about that, do you know if any local education agencies in your state have developed after-action reports related to their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures?

Anne Gilligan: Our local education agency spent countless hours in meetings discussing best practices for response during the pandemic. And while I'm not sure if I can speak [00:17:00] specifically to all of them using an after-action template, schools and districts work continually documenting what was successful as well as challenges they faced.

I was in a meeting with a school district emergency management planning team. We had a breakout group and in talking to one of the early education staff, they talked about lessons learned from the pandemic that would develop emergency management planning because they were in school. They had their early education staff in school, and they had K-1 and Head Start programs ongoing early [00:18:00] on. And once it was safe to send students back to school, they were one of the early school districts to send their students back. And while they were following their pandemic protocols, meaning one entrance in the building and one entrance out, this educator said, "Now I understand why we do that in all drills and all emergencies. It makes perfect sense." And she was a big proponent of supporting that and other things that they learned during the adaptations to their school day during the pandemic.

Janelle Hughes: Wow, thank you so much for sharing that story. Are there any other tips or [00:19:00] recommendations that you'd like to share with others in the field about the benefits of after-action reports in improving school EOPs and the overall emergency preparedness capacity of education agencies?

Anne Gilligan: I always use this example. There was a school district that had a substantially separate classroom for their students with autism, and they had a required fire drill, evacuation drill. And post-drill, when they had their after-action meeting, one of the classroom teachers in the program with autism [00:20:00] talked about the fact that these students were affected in different ways by the alarms and the lights that occurred during the drill, and it took them a little bit of time to get students back up about the business of learning because for some students on the autism spectrum, routine is really key and interruption to that routine can be

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very challenging. So, the local fire department started working specifically with this particular classroom coming in and working with the students regularly. It was not a full evacuation drill for the whole school but just for this population. And one of the things they learned that was helpful is when there was going to be [00:21:00] a drill, it was helpful to put headphones on the students to try and ameliorate some of the noise that affected the students during the alarm process and the drilling process, the exercise process. So, for that particular classroom, they always, when they hear the alarm go off to evacuate the building, they always help the students, or the students put their headphones on, and they're able to evacuate the building and then come back into the building and work back into the business of learning much more efficiently than they had prior to this adaptation to the plan.

Janelle Hughes: It's such a powerful example of why after-action reviews and reports are so critical. Because I imagine that it [00:22:00] is through those conversations that you know some of the gaps in terms of ensuring that the access and functional needs of all students and staff are accounted for, can be revealed, and those improvements can be then integrated into the EOP and considered and used in future emergency incidents and/or during exercises.

I'm so happy that you shared that example, and I'm so grateful for your time today, Anne, and again for all that you do to support us for school safety within your state but also within our country. We truly appreciate you and are so happy to have had you join today's *#REMSontheAir Podcast* episode.

Anne Gilligan: Thank you very much. And thank you for asking me to join you.