



## Episode 25: Timeless School Safety Strategies

**#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 looking forward to hosting another episode of the #REMSontheAir Podcast. My name is Janelle Hughes, and for those of you may be new to the podcast, I serve as Project Director for the REMS TA Center. Today, I am joined by my [00:01:00] lovely colleague, Amanda Everett, our Director of Training and Engagement.

**Amanda Everett:** I'm so glad to be here, Janelle. In today's episode of #REMSontheAir, we will be discussing timeless school safety strategies. We will share key strategies and explore their importance for maintaining a safe and secure school environment. In this episode, we'll also hear from a special guest, Steve Harris, who is the current Special Projects Advisor at the University of Georgia.

Steve has over 28 years of experience in both K-12 and higher education safety, security, and emergency management. And he has also served as a K-12 security administrator, a police officer, an instructor with the Georgia Peace Officer Standards & Training Council, and an adjunct instructor for the National Center for Biomedical Research and Training / Academy of Counter-Terrorist Education at Louisiana State University.

**Janelle Hughes:** I love Steve, and I am so looking forward to this discussion today. [00:02:00] The strategies we'll discuss today are really relevant for all school staff all year round.

**Amanda Everett:** Absolutely. Before we jump into school safety strategies, let's talk a little bit about why it's important to have a set of foundational safety and emergency management practices that are maintained on an ongoing basis.

**Janelle Hughes:** One of the reasons why it's imperative to implement school safety basics is so that everyone in the school, as well as community partners, are on the same page about school safety, security, preparedness, and emergency management policies and procedures. And with ongoing training and communication on established policies, school staff members are better able to follow procedures before, during, and after an emergency, as well as take those everyday steps to help ensure a safe learning environment.

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**Amanda Everett:** That's so true, Janelle. It's so important in the field of school emergency [00:03:00] management to ensure that we reduce any confusion around school safety policies and ensure that everyone is using the same language and frames of reference.

**Janelle Hughes:** You're right, and it can be confusing. And another key reason why it's important to focus on school safety essentials, as well as to revisit and enforce them on an ongoing basis, is because staff turnover exists. That's something that we all know. It's really not enough to have a team that was trained during the last school year since we know that members of the team will come and go. All staff should be trained regularly, and new school staff should thoroughly understand those safety strategies that we will walk through today.

**Amanda Everett:** That's right. Additionally, when we talk about reducing confusion, we also want to acknowledge that there is so much out there about school safety and that the field is always evolving. There are constantly new strategies being proposed and new terminology and new technology to consider. It's good to [00:04:00] know that there is a series of tried-and-true strategies that schools can always come back to and that can underlie other strategies that schools may consider.

**Janelle Hughes:** Good point, Amanda. So, now that we have talked through some of the benefits of having a core set of school safety strategies, let's talk more now about what they are and how they can continue to help schools ensure the safety of the whole school community.

So, the first timeless school safety strategy is creating and actively maintaining a comprehensive, high-quality emergency operations plan, or EOP. And you'll hear the REMS TA Center talk about EOPs quite a bit. An EOP details a school's or a school district's approach to preparing for a wide range of threats and hazards that may impact the school or the school district. A quality EOP really acts as a roadmap [00:05:00] with goals, objectives, and courses of action that will guide a school or school district before, during, and after an emergency.

**Amanda Everett:** Yes, EOPs should reflect considerations for how the school or school district will prevent, protect against, mitigate the impacts of, respond to, and recover from an emergency. EOPs should be created and maintained by a multidisciplinary planning team and customized based on the unique needs and characteristics of each school or school district.

**Janelle Hughes:** And that customization is so important. And while EOPs vary in format and content, the federally authored publication, the *Guide for Developing High-Quality School EOPs*, which we refer to as the *School Guide*, recommends a six-step planning process for creating and maintaining EOPs. In this process, Step 2 involves identifying which threats and hazards the school or school district will [00:06:00] address within the EOP, which is achieved by conducting

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assessments and using the data from those assessments to make decisions about which threats and hazards to prepare for.

**Amanda Everett:** Thanks, Janelle. One mistake that schools and school districts can make when it comes to school safety is focusing narrowly on preparing for one type of threat or hazard and exhausting school safety resources in doing so. Let's shift and hear from Steve Harris now on his perspective about how schools and school districts can shift to an all-threats and all-hazards approach and customize their EOP.

**Steve Harris (Recorded):** You know, throughout my career, I've always sought to kind of be inclusive of all different types of threats and hazards that may befall a campus's jurisdiction. And you're looking, you know, through what has happened historically, you're looking through local emergency operations plans, hazard mitigation plans—a lot of different things that have already—threatened hazard vulnerability assessments—have already been conducted—to determine what [00:07:00] has historically impacted that campus or that school. And then that's where you guide a lot of your efforts to develop on those plans to make sure that you have that and address it appropriately.

**Janelle Hughes:** So, echoing what Steve said, schools and school districts can customize their EOP and prepare thereby for a range of threats and hazards by assessing those potential risks as well as those known vulnerabilities.

**Amanda Everett:** Absolutely. Another timeless school safety strategy that we want to highlight today is visitor management systems.

Schools should have a system for tracking and vetting visitors and either granting or denying access to the school grounds. The systems that schools use vary from written logs and manually checking visitor identification, to digital tools that scan visitor identification and cross check it with information in local, state, or national criminal databases.

Visitors are typically given some sort of identification [00:08:00] badge, and their whereabouts are monitored while they are at the school. Regardless of how a school manages visitors, this is a key safety strategy that can successfully prevent human-caused threats.

**Janelle Hughes:** And we know that effective visitor management systems can help schools manage different emergency management functions. For example, if a school needs to evacuate for any reason or account for all persons after an emergency, accurate visitor management systems can help ensure that everyone is accounted for no matter the threat or hazard.

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**Amanda Everett:** So true. Another foundational school safety strategy is delivering ongoing training for all school staff on safety policies and procedures, like we touched on earlier. Training is so important because even with the highest-quality EOPs, schools can be seriously impacted by threats and hazards when school staff members are not well-trained on school safety [00:09:00] policies and procedures. Let's hear again from Steve who reminds us of the importance of training in an example about visitor management.

**Steve Harris (Recorded):** A lot of times during site assessments, when we're out at schools, we'll observe that the practice may not exactly match the policy. What I mean by that is the policy may say that everyone—parents, delivery personnel, you know, maintenance people from the district or wherever—must sign in, then receive a visitor's badge and lanyard, and then go about whatever business they need to go about in the school. But sometimes, we see that there are exceptions, or someone says, "Oh, I'm just going in for 5 minutes" or "I'm just delivering this package," whatever it is. And, you know, what we've seen with past incidents and people sometimes getting in schools unvetted that we need to make sure this is an 100% process, and it needs to be done with the utmost attention to safety and security in mind.

**Janelle Hughes:** Steve shared a great example that reminds us of the importance [00:10:00] of ongoing training so that everyone is aware of and also follows those established protocols. Staff members should clearly understand the school's and school district's safety policies, as well as their roles and responsibilities before, during, and after a potential emergency.

Comprehensive EOPs should contain a training schedule that outlines who will receive a training and on which topics, when they will receive it, and how often.

**Amanda Everett:** Excellent point, Janelle. Training is key to creating a schoolwide culture of preparedness, where everyone understands his or her role in maintaining a safe environment.

The last foundational school safety strategy that we'll discuss today is creating and maintaining relationships with a range of partners. Relationships are foundational to school safety and emergency management efforts, and strong relationships can greatly enhance the other strategies we've discussed today, like training and [00:11:00] collaborative EOP development. Having established relationships can also improve incidence response time, resource management, recovery processes, and reporting systems, just to name a few examples.

**Janelle Hughes:** Thanks, Amanda. Really great examples. So, let's hear from Steve again about some of the types of relationships that schools should work to develop and strengthen.

**Steve Harris (Recorded):** You know, relationships internally with your emergency planning teams, but also externally with your local first responders, law enforcement, emergency management, fire, public health, EMS. And also, particularly the K-12 campus, that trusted

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adult concept, making sure you have that with your students. And this could be anybody. This could be an administrator, an SRO [school resource officer], a custodian, cafeteria worker, bus driver, whoever, working to make sure that they have those relationships with the students such that the student feels that they can provide [00:12:00] information to those individuals on a safety concern or a student that may have a behavioral concern or, you know, something that they feel they need to report, a student—maybe a threat to themselves or a threat to others.

**Amanda Everett:** Steve shared several great examples of relationships, both internal and external, including the relationships that school staff members have with students. Steve’s example of a student feeling safe to report a threat to a staff member clearly illustrates the value of relationships to school safety.

**Janelle Hughes:** I agree, and relationship building’s really the backbone of school safety in so many ways. All the school safety strategies that we’ve discussed in this episode can provide a starting point for a solid foundation of school safety, security, preparedness, and emergency management. Thank you so much for tuning in today.

Remember to follow us on social media [00:13:00] and to bookmark the *#REMSontheAir* hashtag. Communicate with us via social media using that hashtag if you are addressing similar topics. And if you have any questions related to our discussion today or just want to learn more, send us your questions by email or give us a call at 1-855-781-7367.

**Amanda Everett:** Don’t forget that you can also email us at any time at [info@remstacenter.org](mailto:info@remstacenter.org) to join our mailing list, where you’ll get up-to-date information on webinars, Web chats, and other virtual opportunities to learn and share. Access additional *#REMSontheAir* Podcast episodes and share this one with your colleagues by visiting the REMS TA Center’s podcast page and clicking the share tab that appears along the left side of your screen.