



## **EMERGENCY EXERCISES: AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO VALIDATE SCHOOL SAFETY PLANS**

Simulations of emergency situations, or emergency exercises, are integral to a sound school safety plan. They offer opportunities for districts and schools to examine and strengthen their capacities for responding to various emergencies. By participating in different types of exercises, schools can then identify the appropriate methods for preventing, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from crises. These exercises also may expose the limitations of existing plans, such as procedural gaps or training needs. By encouraging all response partners (e.g., officials in the public health, mental health, fire and law enforcement communities) to participate, schools and districts can assess the roles, responsibilities, relationships, communication strategies and resources that would be critical should an actual crisis occur.

### **Types of Emergency Exercises**

School districts conduct five main types of emergency exercises for emergency response training and practice. Districts should start with simple exercises (orientations) and work their way toward the most complex (full-scale).

- 1. Orientations** are introductions to a school's or district's crisis or emergency management program. The purpose of an orientation is to familiarize participants with roles, responsibilities, plans, procedures and equipment. Orientations can also resolve questions of coordination and assignment of responsibilities. The inclusion of first responders and school staff facilitates the development of an effective plan.
- 2. Drills** test a specific operation or function of the emergency plan. The goal of a drill is to practice aspects of the response plan and prepare teams and participants for more extensive exercises in the future. Schools generally conduct evacuation, shelter-in-place or lockdown drills with students and staff to demonstrate the steps they should take in an emergency. The procedures as well as the responsibilities of all involved (i.e. students, teachers, staff and emergency personnel) are addressed. These exercises may include local public safety agencies.
- 3. Tabletop exercises** analyze an emergency event in an informal, stress-free environment. They provide participants with an emergency scenario to analyze and increase their awareness of the roles and responsibilities of individuals who need to respond, stabilize, terminate and help others recover from emergencies. They are designed to prompt a constructive discussion about existing emergency response plans as participants identify, investigate and resolve issues.
- 4. Functional exercises** test one or more functions of a school's emergency response plan during an interactive, time-pressured, simulated event. Functional exercises can be conducted in a school district's emergency

operations center. Participants are given directions by controllers and simulators via telephones, radios and televisions, and they must respond appropriately to the incidents that arise. Evaluators candidly critique the exercise and the team's performance.

5. **Full-scale exercises** evaluate the operational capability of emergency management systems in a highly stressful environment that simulates actual conditions. Full-scale exercises test and evaluate most functions of the emergency response-operational plan, including the mobilization of emergency personnel, equipment and resources.

To design and conduct full-scale exercises, districts collaborate with local public safety agencies. Administrators choose a scenario that is most likely to occur in the community and thereby involve all community stakeholders. Facilitators conduct a post-incident critique and develop an after-action report to identify issues for correction.

### **What Are the Benefits of Emergency Exercises?**

Emergency exercises validate existing emergency plans, programs, policies, roles and responsibilities, as well as the training curriculum, by:

- Testing the capabilities of the team;
- Providing a gap analysis to identify deficiencies and problems in the current program;
- Familiarizing participants with plans and procedures through low-stress activities;
- Preparing the team to coordinate with local, state and federal agencies;
- Enhancing collaboration between school districts and public information officers (PIOs); and

- Increasing the confidence of the team while strengthening its ability to respond effectively to an emergency.

Emergency exercises are also cost-effective and brief, often completed in less than one hour. Some schools find it helpful to conduct exercises, such as tabletop drills, during staff meetings. By focusing on different types of hazards, and reinforcing the school's policies and procedures, school staff continuously improve their ability to respond to any type of emergency.

### **What Are the Steps to Developing an Effective Emergency Exercise Program?**

Following is a list of key steps for developing an effective exercise program:

- Create partnerships with local public safety agencies or a consultant.
- Assess the district's or school's needs and identify available resources for an emergency exercise program.
- Define achievable goals and objectives for the exercise program.
- Develop a timeline and implement the exercises in order from the simplest (orientation) to the most complex (full-scale). Determine whom to invite to participate in each type of exercise.
- Provide information to school staff, students and parents about exercises that will be conducted in the district.
- Develop scenarios based on actual vulnerabilities and risks the school district may encounter. Carefully review the proposed scenarios to ensure their appropriateness for the school setting and its students. (For example, full-scale exercises involving law enforcement may frighten younger children.)

- Prepare to drill and discuss all four phases of the emergency management program: mitigation and prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.
- Coordinate with all community stakeholders in the development and implementation of exercises.
- Develop an evaluation tool to measure the effectiveness of the emergency response teams and plans.
- Conduct a debriefing and develop an action plan to respond to the evaluation data.

### Emergency Exercises: A Case Study

The school security director for one ERCM grant project recognized that although the district’s emergency planning activities had significantly improved its preparedness, the district had not tested its plan through an exercise that engaged the school leadership.

The director decided to identify an external ERCM expert to conduct a tabletop exercise. A key goal was to engage school leadership and local police and fire departments in the district’s emergency response plan.

The police department opened the three-hour exercise with a one-hour presentation on the incident command system. This was followed by a two-hour tabletop exercise in which police and fire departments were well represented.

During the tabletop exercise, the assistant superintendent responded to the ERCM expert’s questions with brief assertions that the district had the necessary programs and policies in place. The school crisis team, however, disagreed.

The crisis team explained that they did not have a comprehensive district-level response plan, an emergency notification system to alert parents and the community, or an interagency partnership with public safety agencies. In addition, the school

### AN EFFECTIVE POST-EXERCISE EVALUATION

Although emergency exercises promote understanding and growth, teams benefit most when post-exercise evaluations are conducted immediately after the exercise. All stakeholders from the school district level to the emergency response agency-level should participate in both the exercises and post-exercise evaluations.

- Immediately follows the exercise;
- Includes everyone;
- Engages the director of the exercise;
- Assigns a secretary;
- Includes a discussion of positive and negative outcomes;
- Allows time for participants to discuss their observations;
- Assesses whether the exercise’s goals and objectives were achieved; and
- Creates an after-action report with steps for improvement.

personnel who served as internal responders were not well informed about policies, procedures or programs. The crisis team concluded that the district was not prepared to handle a major emergency, and so informed the assistant superintendent.

The tabletop exercise that followed the discussion validated many of the district’s emergency response procedures but also reinforced the concerns voiced by crisis team members. In particular, the exercise illustrated the importance of practicing emergency responses as teams. The school district and the participating local public safety agencies gained invaluable awareness and training through the exercise.

Afterward, the ERCM expert conducted a one-hour, post-incident critique to explore the ways in which the school district could address the issues

## RESOURCES FOR EMERGENCY EXERCISES

- **Defining Emergency Exercises**

The Center for Health Policy, Columbia University School of Nursing, provides a guide and template for developing a multiagency emergency exercise program. The guide stresses the use of a common terminology across agencies when developing, planning, implementing and evaluating emergency exercises.

<http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/nursing/institutes-centers/chphsr/def-exer.pdf>

- ***Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Federal Preparedness Circular 66: Test, Training and Exercise (TT&E) Program for Continuity of Operations (COOP)***

This information was designed to help coordinate emergency operations across

agencies during a variety of emergencies. Also included is information for conducting emergency exercises that support COOP.

<http://www.wasc.noaa.gov/wrso/oep-coop/fpc66.pdf>

- **IS-139 Exercise Design Course Materials**

FEMA's Independent Study program, the IS-139 Exercise Design course, is part of the Emergency Management Institute's Independent Study program. It addresses components of a viable exercise program, and provides information for developing, implementing and evaluating emergency exercises. The full set of materials is also available for download.

<http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is139.as>

raised during the exercise through the development of an action plan. All stakeholders agreed that they needed to work much more closely together to enhance the school district's crisis and emergency management program. The assistant superintendent stated that the day had opened his eyes as to what was actually going on throughout the district.

### **How Do I Obtain Buy-in From All Stakeholders?**

Obtaining the cooperation of all stakeholders is often challenging but necessary. The case study

demonstrates the power of emergency exercises and post exercise evaluations in fostering open lines of communication among administrators, school staffs, community leaders and first responders. Periodic exercises illuminate potential challenges to the successful creation and execution of an emergency preparedness plan and build consensus among the entire ERCM team. These collaborative exercises and post-exercise evaluations help school districts and their local responders assess, reflect, learn and strengthen school preparedness efforts.

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