

## **National Preparedness Month – September 2008:**

### **SECURE SCHOOLS:**

#### **Emergency Preparedness for Educational Facilities**

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

Schools have a unique role in disaster preparedness, with an important dual responsibility. They must develop emergency plans and take the appropriate actions during a disaster, when children are in school. They must also function as emergency shelters when called upon. Schools often face a difficult decision: During an emergency situation, is it safer to cancel school and send students home, or should the children be kept inside the school building? The answer will always vary, depending upon the situation at hand.

#### **Deciding Whether to Stay or Go**

In an emergency, schools tend to differ in deciding whether or not to cancel school. Administrators will make this decision based on the type and severity of the emergency situation. Although education is important, the administration's first priority is the safety of its students. Administrators should have different policies in effect for delayed openings and early closings, based on the safety of roadways or the expected arrival of storms. An important question: If there are delayed openings or early closings, what will happen to children who have no one to pick them up? Transportation must be arranged in situations like these. If there is any risk that a child might be harmed or injured by going outside, it may be necessary to keep all children inside the school.

#### **Evacuating with Students**

Evacuations—especially fire evacuations—are well planned for by the school system. In most states, schools are required by law to conduct regular fire evacuation drills. However, other emergencies, such as gas leaks, sinkholes, and criminal activity, may also require evacuation of schools. In case of evacuation, students and faculty should adhere to the following guidelines:

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1. Evacuate the building and immediately head to predetermined meeting spots.
2. Call 911 to report the emergency. Teachers can then use their class lists to make sure that all students are present and safe.
3. Groups should move at least 60 feet away from the building in any emergency situation, and should be prepared to move further away if necessary.
4. Students should be taught that, even in an emergency, they must not run across streets with traffic or block fire lanes and entrances that emergency responders may need to access.

### **Sheltering-In-Place with Students**

In certain situations, it will be necessary to keep children indoors. This is usually the best option if children are already at school when an emergency occurs with no prior warning. Rather than risk sending children home, many schools will opt to “shelter-in-place” or lockdown, meaning they will wait indoors until the emergency has subsided. There are certain guidelines that teachers and administrators can follow in preparing for and dealing with these situations:

**1. Roll Call.** When first deciding to shelter-in-place, each teacher should take a careful roll call of the students in his or her class. It can take time for teachers to account for every student, since children may be out of the classroom to use the bathroom or drinking fountain, or to go to the nurse’s office. This is why it is important for teachers to always keep a detailed log in the classroom each time a child has to leave, so that they can be easily located in an emergency.

**2. Emergency Procedures.** Aim to continue lessons as usual, if at all possible. This will help keep students’ minds off the emergency, reducing stress and panic. Depending on the situation and its severity, it may be necessary to move students to rooms on the inside of the building (in a hurricane or thunderstorm), in the basement (in a tornado), or on the highest floor (in a flood). Students should be moved in shifts from their classrooms to other parts of the school building, and should be kept together in classroom groups, with their teacher as a leader.

**3. Warning Bells.** Specific warning bells or intercom signals should accompany each type of emergency. Some schools use different bells, others use color codes or verbal warnings communicated from the main office through the intercom system. Regardless of the type of warning a school uses, it is absolutely necessary that there be different warning signals for evacuation and for sheltering-in-place, so that they will not be confused by faculty and students. Just as schools hold regular fire drills, they should also hold regular shelter-in-place drills to make certain that the students will recognize the different warning signals.

### **Successes and Challenges**

While most school districts have taken federally recommended steps to plan and prepare for emergencies, many plans now in place *do not* include recommended practices. For example, nearly all plans address hazards such as natural disasters, intruders, and bombs, but few address pandemic influenza or radiological hazards. Also, while half of all school districts update their emergency plans on a yearly basis, an estimated ten percent of them have *never* updated their plans. Many school district administrators say that, although they have not experienced challenges in communicating with students about emergency preparedness, they *have* faced difficulties in communicating and coordinating with first responders and parents.

In an estimated thirty-nine percent of school districts with emergency management plans, officials experienced a lack of partnerships, limited time or funding to discuss planning with first responders, or a lack of interoperability between equipment used by school districts and first responders. About half of the officials in the 27 school districts interviewed reported difficulty in ensuring that parents received consistent information from the district during an emergency. Some of these officials also described problems in communicating emergency-related information to parents limited in English language proficiency.

### **Information is Available**

A great deal of work has gone into developing policies that outline how educational facilities can best prepare an effective emergency management plan. Yet considering the importance of the topic, it seems that much work still needs to be done. Fortunately, there exists a wealth of available resources on best practice findings regarding emergency preparedness: Extensive studies have been undertaken, the results have been published, and much of this data is available online.

The National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities (NCEF), which provides information on planning, funding, building, improving and maintaining safety in high-performance schools, posts a webpage entitled *Disaster Preparedness and Response for Schools and Universities*. This resource provides a list of links, books, and journal articles that address building or retrofitting schools to withstand natural disasters and terrorism, developing emergency preparedness plans, and using school buildings to shelter community members during emergencies. Visit <http://www.edfacilities.org/rl/disaster.cfm>

### **Resources:**

**The Educational Facilities Disaster and Crisis Management Guidebook**  
<http://www.ncef.org/pubs/edfacilities-disaster-management-guidebook-2007.pdf>

Developed by the Florida Department of Education in January 2007, this guide provides direction for disaster preparedness planning and management for a variety of situations affecting school districts and community colleges. The book is intended for facility managers, and is organized around four phases of emergency management: preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. The dual issues of schools as emergency shelters and their prompt return to an educational function are covered. Thirty-eight references are included, as is an

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appendix advising on sheltering, mental health, debris removal, family preparedness, and other related topics.

**US Department of Education and Department of Homeland Security's  
School Preparedness Checklist**

<http://www.osba.org/hotopics/crismgmt/checklst.htm>

This school preparedness checklist was developed in a cooperative effort of the US Department of Education, Department of Homeland Security, and other federal agencies. It is divided into four categories: Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery. Each category has the appropriate steps for schools to follow.

**About The Authors**

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