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EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IN NONTRADITIONAL SCHOOL SETTINGS

Many nontraditional schools across the United States, such as storefront schools, rural schools, and alternative education facilities, face challenges in creating and implementing comprehensive emergency management plans. Some of these challenges are limited resources, geographic location of the school, a local belief that emergencies will not happen, and a perception of being overlooked by the community because the schools are not viewed as a traditional school setting. For most people, the label "traditional school" conjures images of a brick and mortar building, a conventional daily school schedule, mainstream students, public funding and oversight, and an urban or midsize town setting.

The face of education has changed significantly in recent years. Virtual classrooms, schools within correctional facilities, classrooms and independent schools located within business buildings, home schools, districts with significant populations of non-English speaking students, schools for students with special needs, alternative schools, charter schools, and magnet education programs all challenge the notion of what "school" means.

All students have a right to a safe and supportive learning environment. School safety and emergency management are issues that must be prioritized regardless of whether a school is viewed as traditional or not. Similarly, all students have the right to equal access to learning facilities, regardless of their ability, their geographic location, the education choices their parents have made for them, or whether

they reside within the juvenile justice system. Equally important, the potential for emergencies to impact nontraditional schools is as great as it is in conventional education settings. In some cases, due to geographic locations resulting in longer response time by emergency services, the unique medical and communication needs of some students with disabilities, and the independent nature of many nontraditional schools, the impact of an emergency in these schools may be far greater.

Nontraditional schools often benefit from having highly engaged parents, a strong sense of connection between the school and the community, and a history of independence that can be effectively channeled toward safety initiatives. In many nontraditional school settings, parents have higher expectations regarding the safety of their children. In some cases, their children live 24 hours a day on the school campus, or the school represents a safe haven from the dangers of crime- and gang-infested neighborhoods. For many others, the decision to place their child in a nontraditional setting is heavily driven by the perception that such schools are safer than conventional education settings.

Similarities Between Traditional and Nontraditional School Settings

Regardless of the differences in locations or student populations, all schools need to take an "all-hazards" approach to emergency management planning by:

- Conducting regular drills and exercises;
- Overcoming the challenges of engaging and communicating with parents regarding emergency procedures; and
- Reaching out to local emergency service providers.

In many regards, there are more similarities than differences in school safety and emergency management issues between traditional and nontraditional schools: limited funding, logistical challenges of parent-student reunification, the need to develop effective partnerships, and having the ultimate responsibility for providing student care.

Unique Considerations for Different Types of Nontraditional School Settings

Charter Schools

Most charter schools are held to the same safety expectations by their governing boards as by those in traditional schools.[1] Charter schools often benefit from higher staff-to-student ratios and affiliations with foundations and private donors who value early intervention and prevention programs. These schools typically have specific benchmarks for academic

achievement or school climate to reach within a three-to-five year period. Many charter school administrators use the safety mandates required of traditional schools for guiding, and sometimes exceeding, expectations for emergency planning, conducting required drills, and carrying out vulnerability assessments. Todd Ziebarth, senior policy analyst of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, points out that such schools typically receive between 75 and 85 percent of the funding conventional schools receive. Similarly, they receive no direct support for facilities maintenance, nor do they have bonding capabilities. As a result, charter schools must use a greater percentage of their operational budget and innovative funding strategies to address hazard mitigation efforts. Charter schools should:

- Put particular emphasis on communicating about and celebrating any school safety and emergency management issues with parents because perceptions of enhanced safety are often one of the primary reasons parents enroll their children in charter schools.
- Develop resource-sharing Mutual Aid Agreements with public school districts.

1 Amy Stuart, et al, *Beyond the Rhetoric of Charter School Reform: A Study of Ten California School Districts* (Los Angeles: UCLA Charter School Study, 1998).

- Recognize that typically there is no central coordinating office, such as a public school district office, and thus they must operate more independently and may have a difficult time engaging emergency response agencies in preparedness exercises.
- Ensure infectious disease surveillance procedures are coordinated with the city and/or county public health department, as well as with neighboring schools.

Rural Schools

Rural schools often represent the single most important community resource. Almost all segments of the local population have a personal connection to the school whether by employment, enrollment of family members, or attendance of events held on campus. In essence, the school *is* the community, and any emergency in the facility has broad and, in many cases, profound long-term impacts on the emotional well-being of all its members.

Denying the potential for school emergencies is often the most significant hurdle to overcome in rural communities. While not often acknowledged as such, denial is often more of an issue than is a lack of resources. In rural areas, a common core belief is that communities are safe and immune to acts of violence and large-scale disasters. School boards typically reflect local values and reinforce this core belief, making it difficult for school officials to politically and financially prioritize emergency management initiatives. Compounding this fact is that in many cases, federal and state funding for such initiatives is being increasingly prioritized toward urban jurisdictions that are perceived to have higher levels of vulnerability.

Moreover, many rural areas are also experiencing a net migration loss to urban areas, further constraining already tight education budgets largely dependent on the local tax base and daily enrollment figures.

Many rural communities are resistant to adopting national- or state-level safety protocols or mandates viewed as originally created with urban concerns in mind. Putting a local twist on such initiatives and thinking not in terms of homeland security, but rather hometown safety, may create a subtle but important shift in perception. For those schools that do have emergency plans in place, many can best be described as "15-minute" plans because they are adopted from larger, more established districts that benefit from much shorter emergency response times. Chris Utzinger of the Montana Safe Schools Center believes that "at the most basic level, emergency management teams in rural schools must plan around the question: In what amount of time can we receive what level of assistance?"

Engaging rural emergency service agencies to participate in exercises and drills, and to help design and customize school emergency management plans can be challenging because:

- Volunteers staff many emergency services in rural areas and often cannot leave their paying jobs to engage in planning with schools; and
- Many rural police and fire departments have only a handful of staff, who are obligated to cover vast geographic areas.

Another concern for rural schools is that it is common for significant percentages of the responding agency personnel to have children enrolled in the very schools to which they

are responding, and many of them may feel constrained by their emotional proximity to the school population.

Strategies rural schools may consider in designing, implementing, and sustaining emergency management efforts include:

- *Designating an individual to champion the cause.* Responsibility for emergency management planning often is delegated to one person at the district level, typically the director of student services or the assistant superintendent, who may have difficulty implementing policies at the building level. It is critical to find individuals who will champion the cause at the building level because a mere assignment from the district superintendent may not be enough to cause momentum. This building designee should oversee implementing and practicing the plan, as well as training building staff on the plan.
- *Considering the needs of parents with limited English proficiency.* Some communities in rural areas tend to have large portions of migrant workers with limited or no English proficiency. School safety officials need to ensure key materials are translated and should develop communication procedures to reach parents through employers and/or ensure pre-approval of students being released to other authorized, supervising adults.
- *Taking gang activity into account.* Some rural communities may have significant gang activity because the isolated geographic location may be on major drug trafficking and production routes. While not commonly thought of as a rural issue, and while rates of gang activity in such communities have been declining in the past 10 years, rates in some small towns are increasing.[2] This is particularly true on almost 25 percent of American Indian Reservations, most of them very rural.[3] The rise is also seen in communities with increased methamphetamine usage and production, and in rural areas surrounding urban cities where gang migration is occurring due, in part, to urban law enforcement initiatives.[4] In the prevention-mitigation phase, schools with emerging concerns should initiate anti-gang and graffiti removal programs. Similarly, they should work with law enforcement agencies to determine the level of school vulnerability due to such activity and then develop response and reporting procedures in the preparedness phase. Finally, as with any school, it is important to consider whether off-site evacuation locations and routes cross gang-controlled territory, particularly if there are active members of opposing gangs within the school.
- *Creating mechanisms to channel community support.* Rural communities may have an inherent sense of interdependence in responding to emergencies, and mobilizing this commitment in the prevention-mitigation and

2 Arlen Egley and Christina Ritz, "Highlights of the 2004 National Youth Gang Survey," *OJJDP Fact Sheet. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs* (April 2006).

3 Aline K. Major, Arlen Egley, James C. Howell, Barbara Mendenhall, and Troy Armstrong, "Youth Gangs in Indian Country," *Juvenile Justice Bulletin. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs* (March 2004).

4 Ralph Weisheit and L. Edward Wells, "Youth Gangs in Rural America," *NIJ Journal* 251(2004).

preparedness phases is critical to preventing disorganization in community assistance during the response and recovery phases.

- *Developing multi-district Memorandums of Understanding.* Resources may be limited in the event of a crisis; rural schools should create multi-district mutual aid agreements or Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) to share resources, including support staff, in the event of a localized emergency.

Alternative Schools

For many students, enrollment in an alternative school is an alternative to expulsion or incarceration, and, if not successful, they may face a series of consequences. In an alternative education setting, students' activities must be structured, monitored, purposeful, and safe. Many urban alternative schools for students with behavior disorders are spread across multiple neighborhoods, gang territories, and jurisdictional boundaries. They often operate with only a handful of staff, sometimes no more than one or two teachers. In this sense, the level of independence that may be required in an emergency setting is not unlike that in many rural schools. A critical distinction, however, is that while such urban schools may have significantly higher numbers of at-risk students for which close monitoring is mandated, and while such schools may operate similarly in particularly dangerous neighborhoods, the response time of emergency services is typically only a fraction of what would be encountered in rural schools.

Dissolving misconceptions in the community is an important step during each of the four phases of emergency management for schools: prevention-mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Many community members may view students in alternative schools as threats to the integrity and safety of the community, particularly when such schools have significant percentages of adjudicated youths. For example, a critical step in school emergency management planning involves developing Mutual Aid Agreements with community partners such as community centers, businesses, and faith-based institutions for off-site evacuation locations and the provision of food and supplies. Many partners may be reluctant to work with alternative schools that enroll students who may be perceived as dangerous.

Transportation, evacuation, and release procedures may be particularly challenging for those students who may attend schools in gang territories, may not have adults at home, have child care issues, or who are highly independent based on their life circumstances. Whenever possible, these procedures should be addressed in collaboration with parents and legal guardians. As in traditional school settings, some parents of students in alternative schools are highly engaged in their child's

academic achievement and in the school's safety procedures. Others will rarely participate. The intake procedure provides a key opportunity for schools to communicate with parents regarding release procedures and the school's emergency management plan.

Developing and sustaining meaningful, trusting connections between students and teachers is one of the hallmarks of an effective education institution. This is particularly true in alternative schools when teachers may represent one of the few positive role models for the students. One key to establishing such relationships, according to Joseph Powers of the Orange County Department of Education in California, is: "Meeting the students where they are at [in terms of their life circumstances], then taking them where you need them to be."

Close working relationships with law enforcement agencies that serve to enhance emergency management planning in alternative schools is possible because many students' attendance and academic progress are closely monitored by parole officers or other legally appointed case managers. Similarly, alternative schools for students with behavior problems can provide a critical window into the community from the perspective of law enforcement.

Teachers in alternative schools continually monitor the behavior of students who live in dangerous neighborhoods or who may be current or former gang members. This constant monitoring, combined with a close, trusting student-teacher relationship, may help provide critical information to first responders and other professionals to proactively address impending community violence. Additionally, many law enforcement agencies, particularly those involved in community policing, are willing to be very proactively engaged with students in alternative schools.

Additional strategies alternative schools may use for designing, implementing, and sustaining emergency management plans include the following:

- Create a community outreach plan that includes activities such as park beautification projects, public murals, music festivals, and service learning projects with community groups and prominent public figures to counter the negative impressions some may have of the students.
- Channel students' risk-taking behavior into leadership roles that may be seen as supportive during the response phase. Ensure that such positions are clearly visible (e.g., wearing hats, vests.) to other students, businesses, and the public.
- Establish realistic protocols, reviewed by legal counsel, for relinquishing control of students in emergency situations when parents do not reunite with their children in the designated time frame.

Storefront Schools

According to JoAnn Allen, coordinator of student support services at the Santa Cruz (California) County Office of Education, storefront schools—typically one- to two-room schools that meet in storefront space in area business centers—because of their proximity to public spaces, may be impacted by many more variables beyond their control than a traditional, stand-alone school would be. For example, Allen asked, "If a neighboring bank or liquor store is robbed, will the adjacent school be immediately notified to engage

lockdown procedures?" If the school has a medical emergency or a violent incident occurs, is there a protocol for building- or district-level staff to immediately notify surrounding stores? While traditional schools face similar issues, the frequency, magnitude, and immediate impact of such events are likely to be greater in storefront schools. Many storefront schools operate with only one or two staff members, who must be ready to perform multiple emergency response activities and operate independently for an extended period of time in the event of a large scale disaster.

Strategies storefront schools may use for designing, implementing, and sustaining emergency management procedures include the following:

- Conduct emergency drills and exercises *with* neighboring businesses, first responders, and the students. These events should be conducted during periods that minimize down time so as to reduce potential lost revenues for the businesses.
- Ensure that school entrances and exits take into account the needs of neighboring businesses and that the school's response plans include off-site evacuations.
- Recognize that during a large-scale disaster, storefront schools may not receive assistance from emergency responders in a timely fashion. The creation of district mobile emergency response units should be considered. These units should be pre-supplied and quickly deployed by district administrators. These units can be quickly deployed using a school district vehicle and, in addition to the involvement of staff trained in first aid and/or mental health recovery, may include 72-hour kits, food, water, warm and/or storm resistant clothing, additional first aid supplies and communication devices to augment what the school may have.
- Create student projects that benefit neighboring businesses and raise public awareness of the school, and ensure staff are active members of the business community to enhance program visibility.
- Develop prominent signage to clearly identify the school for emergency responders.
- Develop emergency procedures in collaboration with neighboring businesses and mall security personnel and utilize these personnel as a resource if possible.
- Ensure backup communication systems with the district office that do not rely on the leasing businesses' telecommunications infrastructure.

State- and Regionally Supported Schools for Special Needs Students

Another nontraditional educational environment that may present unique safety and emergency management concerns are schools for deaf and blind students. Teachers and administrators of these schools view their facilities as simply another placement option for students with sensory impairments, and indeed, many of these students complete a great deal of their coursework in conventional, and often neighboring, schools.

Often parents of students in these facilities are highly engaged with the school and, as partners, can support the school in developing emergency procedures, fundraising for additional emergency management supplies and/or mitigation activities, and serving as information liaisons to the surrounding community.

Many schools for deaf and blind students also serve as residential facilities; therefore, the emergency management plans must develop response procedures for incidents during late hours, when staffing levels are lower. Diane Moog, principal of the Montana School for Deaf and Blind, reminds that if off-site evacuations or extended closings of the school occur, the school must have contingency plans for parent reunification and/or student release when families may live across state or several hours away.

Administrators and staff of these schools should work with partners to develop strategies such as the following:

- Provide training to emergency responders and other agencies about communicating with students who have visual, hearing, and mobility impairments.
- Ensure that emergency notification systems and alarms are designed for both visual and auditory signals.
- Involve service providers such as occupational, physical and speech therapists, audiologists, and interpreters in drills and tabletop exercises so they may share their expertise and knowledge.
- Utilize electronic variable messaging boards, short message systems (SMS) and/or TTY/TTD technologies to communicate with students and staff during evacuations.
- Identify both primary and alternative evacuation routes with full accessibility.
- Post signs to alert motorists in the environment around the school of students' hearing and vision impairments.
- Work with public safety to place sidewalks with curb cuts and tactile warning strips, and Braille signage at critical junctions, and to establish accessible shelters.
- Ensure adequate resources such as backup supplies of medicines, hearing aids and batteries, and food for guide dogs.
- Maintain ongoing hazard assessments, given that many facilities for deaf and blind students are outdated or are being used for purposes for which they were not originally designed.
- Utilize students in conducting assessments.
- Plan for securing confidential student records during extended emergencies.

Virtual Classrooms

Most of the school safety concerns associated with emergency management in traditional schools are not relevant with regard to virtual classrooms. However, it is important that administrators of such programs ensure off-site backups of critical student records, communicate any district-wide emergency

response policies or response actions to students of virtual classroom programs and their parents, and ensure that they have continuity of operations plans in the event of extended network or other infrastructure disruptions.

Home Schools

Home school parents and teachers are required by law to learn fire safety and other emergency preparedness skills. While it is unrealistic to expect significant levels of collaboration with emergency response agencies in the development of site-specific safety and emergency response plans, it is incumbent on home schoolers to stay informed of the latest recommendations for keeping students safe. Suggestions include:

- Contacting county disaster and emergency service offices to learn of vulnerability assessments that have been completed or unique hazards relevant to the home school;
- Conducting hazard assessments with age-appropriate students;
- Developing family emergency preparedness plans and emergency kits;
- Educating students about Internet safety, securing network access, and installing filter software;
- Giving students critical emergency contact information;
- Ensuring communication plans with neighbors and out-of-county friends and family members; and
- Staying informed of public health information and alerts on infectious disease.

Emergency Management Considerations That Apply to All Nontraditional Schools

Conducting a comprehensive needs assessment

As is the case in any school emergency management planning, conducting hazard and vulnerability assessments is a critical component of the prevention and mitigation phase. This process serves as the occasion for many schools to make their first connections with city and county disaster and emergency service officials. In the case of rural schools, the likelihood of severe weather events that damage school infrastructure, complicate parent-student reunification, and create exceptionally hazardous transportation and communication issues for school bus services is high, and thus the needs will be significant as well.

Similarly, in the case of many alternative schools in urban settings and storefront schools, assessments must take into account hazards these schools face given their immediate proximity to high-crime neighborhoods and adjacent businesses such as banks, liquor stores, industrial sites, and vacant warehouses. Ongoing communication and frank, regularly scheduled discussions with business owners and county officials are critical if school emergency management plans are to realistically reflect unique risks. This latter point is particularly important because many business owners are often reluctant to share such sensitive information.

Finally, the value of having students themselves trained to conduct limited vulnerability and hazard assessments cannot be overstated.

Students typically feel empowered and valued when involved in such projects, particularly when they are allowed to present their findings to school administration and school boards. Such presentations can garner positive media attention and public support, and often motivate the freeing of resources for hazard mitigation initiatives that otherwise may not have been approved. When allowed, students can often be the greatest advocates for school safety.

Collaborating with community partners

Building and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders represents one of the most vital steps in the emergency management cycle. Like the cycle itself, this process is ongoing and requires constant attention. This is particularly true in the case of nontraditional schools, which must be adept at leveraging any additional community support they can. Such schools, which be overlooked in community planning efforts, and their small populations may mean they are less likely to receive immediate services in the event of a large-scale disaster. It is particularly incumbent on safety teams and school administrators to take a very proactive stance in reaching out to neighboring businesses, engaging parents in drills and exercises, and ensuring their place at the table with business advisory groups, chambers of commerce, and local emergency planning councils.

Aligning emergency plans with the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command System (ICS)

Among its many other benefits, implementation of the NIMS' ICS can help rural schools maintain critical emergency management functions for an extended period of time as they wait for emergency services to arrive. As one high school principal in a rural Montana school has observed, ICS allowed him to manage what would otherwise have been an overwhelming number of responsibilities and decisions while police, fire, and EMS were en route. Once such services arrive, they are often short-handed to deal with the number of students and staff impacted by the emergency and thus are more than willing to operate in a unified command structure with school officials.

As is the case in any school, students can be very effectively utilized in ICS-supportive roles, such as scribes who, under the direction of the incident commander, complete incident action plans; spotters who direct emergency services; runners who relay messages and serve as parent and student escorts during the reunification process; those who advise in planning and logistics considerations, assist with student accountability, and perform limited first-aid roles—provided that they have received formal training and that the implications of performing such roles have been considered by the school's legal counsel.

Overcoming transportation and communication issues

The following strategies may be used in nontraditional schools to address transportation and communication issues:

- Re-draw school transportation routes to eliminate areas of non-existent or intermittent cellular phone service.
- Utilize automatic notification systems.
- Equip school busses with Global Positioning System (GPS) tracking technology.
- Ensure all bus drivers are trained in CPR and first-aid, carry extensive emergency kits (beyond basic first-aid supplies), are trained in district emergency management procedures, and are provided necessary information about the specific needs of students with disabilities.
- Utilize TTY communication devices for relaying messages to students and parents with hearing impairments.
- Seek guidance from county emergency management offices and local law enforcement agencies *before* acquiring communication systems.
- Develop relationships and partner agreements with amateur radio clubs to provide an additional channel to disseminate coordinated, official school information.

Additional Strategies

Other strategies for nontraditional schools to consider in emergency management planning include the following:

- Work with local media to focus on school safety initiatives and to inform families and other community members about emergency response procedures.
- Ask businesses, civics groups, parent associations, and faith-based institutions to donate services and time to special projects within the schools.
- Ensure off-site, digital backups of critical school records, preferably in a separate county, city, or state.
- Conduct schoolwide CPR and basic first aid training in coordination with organizations such as the Red Cross.
- Use student-led service learning projects, with the support of local businesses, to assemble classroom emergency go-kits and 72-hour kits—kits created to sustain a classroom for 72 hours in case emergency services providers are involved in a massive response effort and unable to attend to the school for several days.

- Ensure that emergency procedures, reunification plans, and medical release forms are translated for families for whom English is a second language.
- Survey staff to determine their emergency management expertise.
- Partner with law enforcement and social service agencies to establish vigorous anti-gang programs at the first sign of any such activity.
- Assign staff to participate in Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs).
- Encourage students and staff to join Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) and Teen CERT programs.

RESOURCES

The Montana Safe Schools Center (MSSC)

MSSC provides extensive outreach, training, research, and professional development services to schools and communities across Montana and throughout the United States. Training topics include: school hazard-vulnerability assessments; Incident Command Systems; mental health recovery; parent-student reunification; planning and conducting effective drills, table-tops, and full-scale exercises; designing comprehensive emergency operations plans and procedures in schools; and threat assessments.

http://www.montanasafeschools.org

United States Access Board: Resources on Emergency Evacuation and Disaster Preparedness

The board develops and maintains design criteria for the built environment, transit vehicles, telecommunications equipment, and electronic and information technology. It also provides technical assistance and training on these requirements and on accessible design and continues to enforce accessibility standards that cover federally funded facilities.

http://www.access-board.gov/evac.htm

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For information about the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools grant (formerly the Emergency Response and Crisis Management grant) program, contact Tara Hill (tara.hill@ed.gov), Michelle Sinkgraven (michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov), or Sara Strizzi (sara.strizzi@ed.gov). Suggestions for newsletter topics should be sent to the ERCM TA Center Suggestion Box at http://ercm.ed.gov/.

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