



## TAPPING INTO NONTRADITIONAL COMMUNITY PARTNERS FOR EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Collaboration by schools with community partners during the entire emergency management process is a common trait of the most successful school emergency management programs. The strength and quality of the partnerships mirror those aspects of the district and school emergency management plans. To develop sound emergency management practices, schools must establish linkages with core partners—members of law enforcement, public safety, public and mental health, and local government—as well as with the broader community. Nontraditional partners and resources, such as families, churches, local industries or businesses, area colleges, health care facilities, and social service agencies, are critical to the success of emergency management.

Each phase of emergency planning yields unique opportunities to discover new partners, identify reciprocal assets and needs, refine response protocols, and achieve more rapid recovery and restoration of the learning environment after a critical event. The following strategies can be used by school districts to create a solid foundation with community partners, expand their current networks of

collaboration, and anticipate potential obstacles so that partnerships will be activated quickly and efficiently if a critical incident occurs.

### Strategies for Developing Collaborative Partnerships

#### *Identifying partners and including them in the planning process*

The first step towards ensuring that district and school emergency management plans are strengthened by effective community collaboration is to identify the essential partners early in the planning and development process. It is not enough to include these groups in the plan; they must participate meaningfully in the planning. By establishing cooperative working relationships in advance of any incidents, schools and community partners will develop a level of trust and familiarity, learn each other's terminology, and be able to streamline communication in situations when every second counts.

While each community is unique, tapping into groups such as parents and guardians, private schools, faith-based organizations, medical facilities, utility companies, local businesses, social service agencies such as the American Red Cross, YMCA or other United Way affiliates, local public transportation departments, and area colleges and universities will broaden the scope and capacities of the collaboration. These nontraditional groups will bring expertise and resources to add to those of core partners as plans are developed, tested, and refined.



### *Respecting each partner's mission and contribution*

While school districts may be catalysts for collaboration and their emergency management projects the *raison d'être* for the convergence of a variety of partners, it is important to recognize that each partner brings its own unique mission and orientation to the partnership. For example, the mission of most municipal services and agencies is to guard the safety and security of the communities they serve. Hospitals and medical personnel may have high-quality health promotion and efficient access to emergency care as their priorities; local businesses will likely need to highlight continuity of operations, product visibility, and consumer satisfaction. The district, the schools, and the community partners should seek to understand, appreciate, and respect everyone's contributions and points of reference, and be open to conversation and compromise at each stage of collaboration.

### *Obtaining school administration buy-in*

Schools may be in the position of beginning emergency management-related dialogues with community partners; thus it is important to secure the cooperation at the highest possible level of school and district administrations. In many states, school superintendents are required to meet annually with heads of law enforcement and emergency management to review and update school safety plans. These meetings may be an opportunity to identify and describe a mechanism for ongoing collaboration or to thank the first responders for their current collaboration with the district.

### *Tapping into established connections*

Administrators may have established networks with area businesses or the local college but have not considered their contributions as they relate to the district's emergency management efforts. Similarly, school social workers may be linked to potential partners such as the local YMCA or Boys and Girls Club. Teachers may have a spouse or friend who works at the area utility company or serves a local religious congregation, both possible nontraditional emergency management partners. Bringing these already well-established relationships into a school's emergency planning process is an effective strategy for creating new collaborative partners. Authorization for all partnerships, however, should come from individuals with decision-making authority at the highest level of district and school administrations, even if other designees in their respective organizations are slated to fill ongoing contact roles. This way, local groups will be less likely to encounter challenges in trying to collaborate with larger systems such as regional emergency management and planning networks, state agencies, including police and public health, or local businesses such as restaurants and retailers that may require endorsement from corporate management.



Creating a school safety advisory team, or perhaps establishing a school-specific subcommittee of the local emergency planning council, can provide an effective vehicle for regular communication among the key emergency management partners and be a springboard for expanding the network of collaboration based on identified needs. Once needs are identified, emergency management teams should reach out to school staff to identify pre-existing connections to potential partners (see previous section).

### **Reaching Out to Nontraditional Partners**

Core partnerships are essential for developing, implementing, refining, and sustaining school emergency management systems. Widening the field of potential partners provides immeasurable enhancements to plans. There are a myriad of such potential partners, sharing similar concerns, attempting to address compatible needs, and willing to contribute time, effort, and tangible resources. Craig Zachlod, the director of School Community Emergency Management for the Mendocino County Office of Education in Ukiah, Calif., found that, “Partnerships have been essential to the success of our emergency management program. Not only have these collaborations helped to extend project funds, but they’ve established a public identity for our school safety initiative.” Mendocino County’s Office of Education has been extremely successful in weaving both public- and private-sector involvement. One particularly creative example is an ambitious mitigation project that networked the district with well-known corporate sponsors in the area, including



several insurance companies and Clover Stornetta Industries, a large producer and distributor of ice cream and dairy products based in Northern California. “We created a ‘School-Guard Calendar,’” explained Zachlod, “using popular Clover Stornetta ad images to illustrate monthly safety messages, such as ‘Be Prepared for e-MOO-gencies.’” The calendars were distributed to every family in the district, and the company provided additional support by sponsoring monthly coloring contests on the district’s Web site and providing ice-cream parties for winning classrooms. Other synergistic components of the partnerships included support from local businesses for printing the calendars and significant involvement of several insurance companies to help sponsor community safety expositions and of other suppliers which led to discounted safety equipment and funding for the district’s Teen CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) program. “The calendars touched every aspect,” noted Zachlod. “It was education for our students and families, it opened doors for collaboration, it got the word out and brought tremendous support for our project. Community partnerships are about recognizing that we have a common mission, with ongoing and sustainable resources.”

In the Northeast, the “Emergency Response and Crisis Management/Region-on-Call” project of the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District obtained similar benefits from outreach efforts in western Massachusetts. Monthly for the last four years, key community representatives and district staff meet as the Safety and Emergency Advisory Team (SEAT) to identify and address combined school and community safety concerns. “We could not be successful without the partnerships that we developed, and it is our ability to use our partnerships as resources that gives us the confidence needed to move forward,” observed Paul C. Gagliarducci, Hampden-Wilbraham’s superintendent of schools. “When I pick up the phone to seek assistance, I always know that the advice will be valid and useful.” In addition to the visible and direct involvement of local government, police and fire departments, and various community members in the monthly SEAT meetings, Hampden-Wilbraham has creatively utilized partnerships in the preparedness and response phases of emergency management. In 2004, when the district began collecting classroom emergency supplies, it sought an efficient and accessible container solution that would allow for the affordable distribution of supplies to over 400 classrooms. As Wilbraham is home to the Friendly Ice Cream Corporation, the solution was just a phone call away, in the form of sturdy, covered buckets originally used by the chain’s restaurants nationwide for sundae toppings and other ingredients. Tom Bonavita, Friendly’s director of Corporate Safety and Security Programs, serves on the Local Emergency Planning Council and facilitated the logistics for the “Go-Bucket” project. “Friendly’s is proud to be a contributor to the Emergency Preparedness Program for Hampden-Wilbraham,” explains

Bonavita. “Annually we donate a large number of pails for each school’s emergency go-kits. Friendly’s is always happy to participate in a program that will help to ensure the safety of local residents, students, and employees.”

Since every community is different, each city, town, and region will have its own local heroes who are ready to bring something unique and valuable to its schools’ emergency management efforts. Local colleges may welcome the possibility of a semester project or internships that allow students to assist with virtual mapping or Web site design. A hospital might host compatible professional development opportunities in suicide prevention or trauma response, or include school personnel in tabletop exercises or full-scale drills. Partnerships may come from an employee assistance program offering tips on self-care for staff after an incident, the media offering their services to develop training videos, a victims assistance unit affiliated with the district attorney’s office offering additional counseling support, a private ambulance company offering specialized transportation for off-campus evacuation of handicapped students, a faith-based institution offering parent reunification space, a funeral home offering bereavement support materials, or any local company with a product or service that fits a particular need. The key lies in knowing your community, knowing your needs, and reaching outside the box to nontraditional partners.

### **Involve Nontraditional Partners in All Four Phases of Emergency Management**

Before a critical event occurs, the most relevant type of mutual support may come from working proactively with partners to **prevent and mitigate** crises and to plan



response protocols. Involving the local media when creating a press checklist for public information officers will address the district’s need for broad communication and the media’s need to get factual information in a critical situation. Assessing incident data with social service or other community agencies may forge opportunities to work with other partners in prevention, such as a local YMCA, public library, or even private business, that may support mentorship programs or after-school recreational activities. Reviewing plans to use schools as emergency shelters or dispensing sites may result in outreach to wholesale warehouses that may provide bulk deliveries of bottled water. **Preparedness** activities include practicing and conducting drills with a variety of partners. For example, when designating primary off-campus evacuation sites in buildings used for religious worship, drills will clarify when alternatives may be needed, like during funerals or holiday services. After the **response** to a critical incident, it is important to know who can provide the necessary resources to restore the school district’s critical infrastructure. For example, community partners such as a local hardware store or building contractor may reach out to schools, offering

items needed for clean up or repair. Counseling agencies or the local American Red Cross may be able to provide additional mental health staff with specialized training in disaster recovery. Local nursing homes or the YMCA may share additional resources such as space, materials, or transportation. The **recovery** phase seeks to restore the learning environment; the faster the school community is normalized and able to heal after a disaster or significant tragedy, the faster schools will return to fulfilling their education mission.

## Strategies to Consider When Collaborating With Nontraditional Partners

### *Decide on a common goal*

At the most fundamental level, community members and potential partners share a vision for safe schools and are united by this common goal. As school districts begin to reach out to various constituencies, each may have a distinct interest or a unique contribution, but the unifying concept—comprehensive emergency management—should always be in focus. Some school safety advisory teams find it helpful to create a mission statement to clearly express the intent and rationale of the collaboration. Participants will usually commit a significant amount of time, and perhaps tangible resources, to the partnership. During this time, it is important that they be free to articulate a sense of purpose that not only validates their participation but also effectively represents this affiliation in the larger community. Each partner essentially becomes an ambassador for the school safety agenda and should have a clear understanding of the big picture, seeing how its unique contributions fit in the comprehensive emergency management plan.

### *Create procedures to meet a variety of needs*

Procedures may be beneficial for more than one community partner's emergency management efforts with the school. For example, including community-based clinicians in the development of threat assessment protocols will increase the points of contact through which early warning signs may be identified. An example of a cross-functional procedure related to core partners is visitor sign-in protocols to limit access and discourage intruders. These same procedures will be referred to by both the fire department and law enforcement during an evacuation, when first responders need to know who could be trapped in a building that is compromised by fire or an environmental incident. Understanding the various priorities from each partner's vantage point allows schools and relevant partners to look at an issue from different facets and design corresponding protocols that are more efficient because they satisfy a number of concerns. This is even more important when the juxtaposition of various perspectives reveals divergent priorities. For example, in a lockdown situation the school's priority is to secure the building, but the family priority is rapid reunification. Requesting families' feedback on procedures for communicating with them during an incident can serve to identify potential obstacles in advance, which will strengthen the plan, increase confidence in the school district's level of preparedness, and likely facilitate a higher degree of cooperation in stressful situations. Partnerships create venues to hear others' concerns, value stakeholders' input, develop mutual trust and confidence, and work toward the common goal of creating safe schools.

### *Delineate specific roles and responsibilities*

If the roles and responsibilities of partners are not specified in advance, mobilizing community collaborations and relationships in a critical situation can create the potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding. Many school districts create formal Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) or Mutual Aid Agreements that define the roles and responsibilities of each partner, delineate expectations, and describe a method of resolving potential disputes in order to ensure equitable participation between or among partners. Such agreements are especially useful for districts that include more than one municipal jurisdiction or for consortiums that are created around the expectation of shared resources and mutual aid. Agreements with nontraditional partners may include an MOU with private schools to provide evacuation shelters or temporary classrooms, an understanding between the district and a local pharmacy to replenish school emergency medical and first aid supplies, or an arrangement with the transit authority to use public buses in the event that the school fleet is vandalized. Agreements with either core or non-traditional partners should define any preliminary expectations, such as a meeting schedule to review and update plans, the number, type, and frequency of table-top drills and functional exercises, and any training that the school or partnering agency or organization is to provide. Schools should be mindful that, for any partner, participation in meetings and drills involves scheduling, personnel, and, frequently, compensation for staff. It is best to identify the level and scope of involvement and sources of funding in advance.

## Challenges to Creating Nontraditional Partnerships

There are few drawbacks to establishing and maintaining solid partnerships, but there may be challenges. Outreach should be broad and inclusive of all potential voices, such as those of parents, staff, students, local government and legislators, the first responder agencies, local businesses, churches, charities, and utility services. While omissions can sometimes occur, periodic partnership review and evaluation and ongoing communication will ensure that gaps are addressed. Another consideration is synchronization of needs and services. In an emergency that is contained within a school or school district, mobilizing partnerships will increase the effectiveness of the response, but when a critical incident is community-wide or larger, available resources can be spread thin. Tabletops and exercises that involve multiple constituencies will help test these various interfaces in advance. For example, during a pandemic scenario with various partners, it may be apparent that each agency created a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) that involves use of the same school building, for clinic, shelter, or morgue. When partners plan together, communities can begin to problem-solve and build strategies around the allocation of more limited resources or commodities.

## Conclusion

It is impossible to comprehensively address school emergency management without solid community partners as they bring a diversity of skills, multiple perspectives, and resources to the planning process. Identifying and reaching

out to partners early in the process provides the opportunity to meet and work together before an incident occurs, and helps to establish clear roles, responsibilities, and lines of communication that will facilitate smooth response in a critical situation. Through communication and outreach with the emergency management community and community partners, the reciprocal role that school districts can play in strengthening local and state emergency planning efforts will be recognized. Reaching out to nontraditional partners will help to generate solutions to unanticipated problems and strengthen efforts across all phases and stages of prevention-mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Like all other aspects of emergency management in schools, building effective community partnerships requires planning, communication, and ongoing maintenance—and the results are worth the investment of time and effort.



## RESOURCES

For more information and potential partnership ideas in your area, contact your local Chamber of Commerce or Board of Realtors for an up-to-date listing of local businesses, and contact local affiliates of national organizations such as the following:

- The American Red Cross  
[www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)
- Boy Scouts of America  
[www.scouting.org](http://www.scouting.org)
- Community Emergency Response Teams  
[www.citizencorps.gov/cert](http://www.citizencorps.gov/cert)
- Community Service Leagues/  
Organizations including:
  - Rotary International  
[www.rotary.org](http://www.rotary.org)
  - Lions Club International  
[www.lionsclubs.org](http://www.lionsclubs.org)
  - Kiwanis International  
[www.kiwanis.org](http://www.kiwanis.org)
- Community Service Leagues/  
Organizations including: (con't)
  - Knights of Columbus  
[www.kofc.org](http://www.kofc.org)
  - Association of Junior  
Leagues International  
[www.ajli.org](http://www.ajli.org)
  - Girl Scouts of America  
[www.girlscouts.org](http://www.girlscouts.org)
  - National Association of School  
Psychologists (NASP)  
[www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)
  - National YMCA  
[www.ymca.net](http://www.ymca.net)
  - National YWCA  
[www.ywca.org](http://www.ywca.org)
  - United States Sign Council (USSC)  
[www.ussc.org](http://www.ussc.org)
  - The United Way  
[www.national.unitedway.org](http://www.national.unitedway.org)

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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](mailto:tara.hill@ed.gov)), Michelle Sinkgraven ([michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov](mailto:michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov)), or Sara Strizzi ([sara.strizzi@ed.gov](mailto: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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