



# Coronavirus Disease 2019<sup>1</sup> (COVID-19): Key Preparedness and Response Considerations

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

FACT SHEET

## Modifying Education Agency Exercises and Drills in Response to the Pandemic

Protecting Students, Faculty, Staff, and the Whole School Community While Practicing Plans

### Conducting Exercises and Drills: A Look at the Challenges

Exercises of all kinds (e.g., walk-throughs, tabletops, drills, full-scale drills) play a key role in enhancing school safety planning because they provide an opportunity for the whole school community to consider, practice, and refine school and school district emergency operations plans (EOPs) and the procedures they put forth. Exercises and drills help education agencies illustrate and practice in a scenario-based setting how team roles and responsibilities, as well as the required emergency management functions (lockdown, evacuation, family reunification, etc.), will be carried out in the event of a real emergency. In many states, legislation requires state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) to collaborate with partners to conduct exercises at specific points within the school year and to involve students, faculty, and staff in those activities.

As education agencies across the country operate schools in person, virtually, or using a hybrid model and continue to meet their exercise-related requirements, the COVID-19 pandemic presents new challenges that school safety planning partners must consider and plan for in collaboration with education leaders and public health and emergency

### Key Considerations When Modifying School-Based Exercises

- ✓ Consult the education agency's general counsel.
- ✓ Collaborate with school, district, and community partners.
- ✓ Educate the whole school community on how masks and personal protective equipment will be integrated into the exercise and drill setting.
- ✓ Consider smaller-scaled drills that are staggered over an extended period of time.
- ✓ Consider conducting role-based and classroom-based exercises and drills.
- ✓ Consider how evacuation meeting point designations will be modified.
- ✓ Create and apply virtual exercise and drill models.
- ✓ Integrate school safety-based tabletop exercises into staff meetings and other faculty- and staff-based professional development offerings.
- ✓ Reinforce the importance of creating and practicing family emergency plans.
- ✓ Work with partners to promote community-wide safety that highlights the importance of preparedness, including creating and practicing emergency plans.

<sup>1</sup> According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, this novel coronavirus is named "SARS-CoV-2," while the disease it causes is named "coronavirus disease 2019." (Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>, last accessed November 16, 2020.)

management partners. One such challenge is how to implement community mitigation strategies, like maintaining social distancing guidelines, which protect the health and well-being of students, faculty, and staff, while conducting exercises. It is important for education agencies to explore how to improve plans around exercises, while still maintaining their integrity and purpose.

While there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution to the challenge of ensuring that exercise requirements are met in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center has collected some details on the variety of models being used on the SEA, LEA, and individual school levels. In some states, requirements specific to conducting exercises apply only to those education agencies that are operating or reopening at full classroom and/or school capacity. In some cases, states have modified their requirements and models based on state fire marshal occupancy requirements, local and state fire codes, and/or types of exercises (i.e., severe weather vs. lockdown vs. fire), while in others, these requirements have remained the same.

## Conducting Exercises: Recommendations for Modifying Plans

We encourage school safety planning partners — education leaders and their community partners — to review the following recommendations as they explore how to modify plans specific to conducting exercises and drills and integrating them with the overall emergency management planning efforts during this pandemic.

### Consult the education agency’s general counsel.

Exercise and drill requirements are often aligned with state legislation and grant program requirements. Therefore, it is important for school safety planning partners and education agency leaders to work together and communicate regularly with their general counsel and legal staff to confirm whether legislation and/or grant program requirements exist or have been updated to include specific COVID-19 and related mitigation strategies. This will help ensure that the agency remains in compliance and continues with its safety protocols throughout the pandemic. These conversations will also help ensure that protocols designed and implemented are culturally competent, inclusive, and equitable and are designed with the needs of the entire school community in mind, including those of students, staff, faculty, and visitors with access and functional needs.

### Collaborate with school, district, and community partners.

Numerous experts and partners, including experts from within the school system and partners from within the broader community they all serve, should be a part of the collaborative planning process to help ensure effective and safe exercises and drills.

For example, facilities managers, school nurses, educators, and front office staff all have specialized expertise and insight that can be powerful for helping to ensure safety and compliance. Similarly, state and local public health and emergency management agencies, as well as the fire marshal, are key partners when considering supports available to effectively modify exercises. They not only offer resources that align with your state’s requirements but also provide information on how other entities are approaching this issue based on state or local public health recommendations and stay-at-home orders. In some states, education leaders are requiring individual schools to work directly with the fire marshal(s) or local fire department(s) assigned to the school to help ensure that the agency remains in compliance with local rules.





# RULES DURING EXERCISE AND DRILL SETTINGS



## **Educate the whole school community on how masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) will be integrated into the exercise and drill setting.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a new normal within our country. As schools reopen, education leaders are exploring the use of face masks, as well as PPE such as protective shields, gloves, and other protective tools, in the school setting. Education agencies have adopted varied models around who is required to use masks and PPE and in what circumstances. In a real emergency, it may be more challenging for students, faculty, and staff to remember or comply with those requirements, which only emphasizes the importance of practicing with them in exercises and drills.

In a scenario-based setting, education agency leaders can control the use of masks and PPE and work to help ensure that state, local, and individual school requirements are implemented while the plan is being practiced. School Resource Officers and other staff can be assigned to monitor and support students, faculty, and staff to help ensure that they know how and when to use masks and PPE in order to fulfill expectations during the designated drills.

## **Consider smaller-scaled drills that are staggered over an extended period of time.**

SEAs and LEAs in some states are considering alternative approaches to large-scale drills, such as hosting exercises and drills with one class and/or a designated maximum number of students, faculty, and staff at a time, thus reducing the mixing of student groups. Another approach is scheduling exercises that take place during multiple points in the day, week, and month; multiple sessions allow for increased social distancing and reduced social density. For example, some SEAs and LEAs have created recommended “rotation” schedules in which they limit the number of students in hallways and exiting the buildings at the same time.

## **Consider conducting role-based and classroom-based exercises and drills.**

Exercises and drills show how the varying roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders can work together to support prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery in the event of an emergency. Through exercises, all key

- 1 Listen to Directions Carefully.**
- 2 Get in Line Quietly.**
- 3 Walk Calmly out of the Building Following Your Teacher.**
- 4 Stay With Your Teacher Until He or She Says, “It is Safe to Return to Class.”**

stakeholders can practice and more clearly understand their specific role within the EOP. Federal partners have various resources on youth preparedness that teachers can access and use in the classroom setting. The REMS TA Center also offers a variety of virtual training tools, including [trainings by request](#), [specialized training packages](#), [online courses](#), and [Webinars](#), that education agency leaders can use in the professional development setting. The REMS TA Center recommends that SEAs, LEAs, individual school leaders, and safety planning teams use this time to create new training opportunities that allow students, faculty, and staff to not only practice their role during a response but also participate in the after-action planning that will support EOP revisions and updates.

### **Consider how evacuation meeting point designations will be modified.**

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Evacuation exercises and drills require student groups to go to a “rally point” (i.e., congregate at a designated spot that is a safe distance away from surrounding buildings). In light of the pandemic, education agencies will now need to consider how proper social distancing guidelines and protocols can be applied to this scenario, which may require modifying existing meeting sites and adding new meeting points to help ensure that proper space between individual students and student groups can be accomplished. Furthermore, school safety planning partners and education leaders must consider how to help ensure that mitigation strategies are applied so that schools can safely manage family reunification, both in an exercise-based scenario and a real emergency.



Find a few key questions that planning partners can ask as they explore the topic of reunification in the context of real-life planning below:

- Will reunification take place within the school or at a campus site outside of the school?
- If an evacuation moves staff and students to an off-site location, will that site be prepared to take them in? Is it safe and secure? Is it currently accessible? Will students, faculty, and staff be able to maintain social distancing guidelines within that location?
- Will students, faculty, and staff be required to wear masks and PPE during the reunification process?
  - If yes, how will the school prepare to help ensure that everyone will have access to proper masks and/or PPE? If that is not possible, what protections can be set up to help ensure the health and safety of students and staff in the event parents are not wearing masks and/or PPE?
  - How will school response staff and others, such as drivers, be identified if they are wearing masks or PPE that covers a portion of the face?
- What additional items should be included in the go-kits for the district and school response team, administrative staff, and classroom and non-classroom staff?
- If students and staff will be inside during reunification, will families be allowed in the building, or will adults be expected to wait outside?
- How will student sign-in/sign-out be accomplished while adapting to current safety guidelines?
- How will the Communications Annex be updated to help ensure that families know their roles and responsibilities in advance of a possible incident?

## Create and apply virtual exercise and drill models.

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Virtual exercises and drills provide a flexible option for education agencies and their school communities, as they can be utilized in both the physical learning setting and the virtual learning setting. For example, to maintain social distancing requirements in individual schools that may require students to remain in one classroom during the majority or the entire school day, leaders may opt to require teachers to “walk” students through a virtual simulation and then discuss roles and action steps within the classroom setting as a follow-up.

This same strategy could be used in an online learning setting, with follow-up discussions taking place via video learning sessions and/or assignments completed by students. Schools that are currently providing virtual learning services can employ these same strategies, which will familiarize students with response protocols at home and at school.

## Integrate school safety-based tabletop exercises into staff meetings and other faculty- and staff-based professional development offerings.

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Exercises and drills can also be integrated into other planned professional development dates on the academic calendar. For example, education agencies can use tabletop exercises at staff meetings as an opportunity to walk carefully through scenario-based planning activities, required roles and responsibilities, and expected updates to EOPs based on recently conducted exercises, state or local legislation, or trends in the field. Leadership, faculty, and staff can then share that information with students in a classroom or virtual auditorium setting and with other key members of the school community, such as community partners, families, and caregivers.

## Reinforce the importance of creating and practicing family emergency plans.

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It is important to find ways to involve families and caregivers in efforts to practice the plan, as well as to inform them about protocol modifications specific to conducting exercises and drills in the physical learning environment. Many of the safety exercises conducted in the school setting can also be shared and practiced in the virtual learning setting, which is particularly important to consider as education agencies work to integrate those families who plan to utilize hybrid or virtual learning environments in school safety planning activities and efforts.

For example, if a school that is offering a hybrid learning model for families in the community decides to participate in the [Great ShakeOut Earthquake Drill](#), school safety planning team members can create a virtual learning opportunity that allows students in the classroom and students learning at home with their families to schedule a designated time during which they all drop, cover, and hold on as a part of an organized earthquake drill. To reinforce learning at home, education agencies can share additional information with students, families, and caregivers on the importance of creating and also practicing a family emergency plan and on how it will be implemented based on the threats and hazards the school, family, or community may face. School preparedness, youth preparedness, family preparedness, and community preparedness are interconnected and build on one another. By working together, a result will be that students, staff, and families will be more prepared at school, at home, and in the community.



## Work with partners to promote community-wide safety that highlights the importance of preparedness, including creating and practicing emergency plans.

Although education agencies and their community partners are in uncharted territory as they plan to safely conduct exercises during the COVID-19 pandemic while maintaining social distancing, it is important for SEAs, LEAs, and individual schools to remember they can take meaningful and reasonable steps to help protect the whole school community while practicing and be more prepared in the event of a potential, real-world emergency. As we have outlined above, a variety of alternative approaches can be used in the midst of the pandemic to help meet exercise requirements while integrating social distancing measures. Schools can work with key stakeholders within the whole school community to help ensure that they are both aware of these enhanced procedures and have time to practice their school safety roles and responsibilities as outlined within school and school district EOPs.

### Thank You

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its REMS TA Center sincerely thank you — school communities, the education agencies that support them, families, and community partners — for your continued service and dedication to children and your community during this challenging time. Please remember that the REMS TA Center is here to support you in all of your school safety efforts, including school safety at home.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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