



Collaborating With K-12 Administrators: Engaging Leadership in School Emergency Operations Plans

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

K-12 administrators, such as district superintendents, school principals, and assistant principals, must support and engage in emergency management planning in order to develop, implement, and maintain comprehensive school emergency operations plans (EOPs). The [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans \(School Guide\)](#) and [The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans \(District Guide\)](#) note this fundamental [planning principle](#). Engaging school administrators is crucial because their involvement is essential to elevating emergency management to a high priority at every school system level, administrative department, and school building. Administrator engagement also will lead to greater involvement of teachers and other school-based staff members. This fact sheet intends to provide school and school district staff, teachers, and school safety leaders with information and strategies to engage administrators in this important work.

Benefits of Administrator Engagement

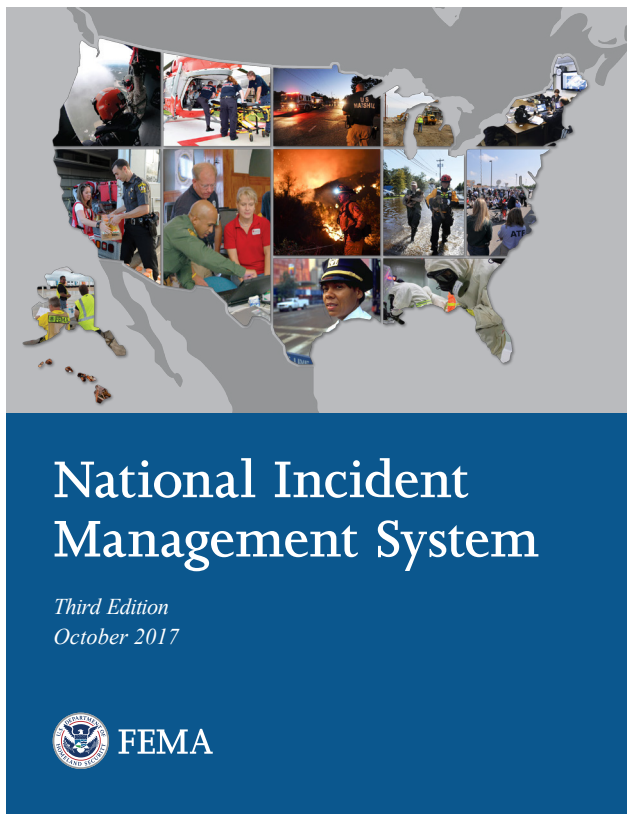
School emergency preparedness requires a greater interdependence between school and community leaders such as fire, police, emergency medical services, public health, mental/behavioral health, and emergency management personnel. This collaboration helps create a dynamic and interactive environment where the school-based administrator's authority can be transformed and shared through a single voice with a collective message about emergency management priorities and actions. Depending on the scope of the incident, this may mean that administrators need to share responsibility in decision-making with community partners, hand control over to the incident commander from first responding agencies, or possibly maintain their autonomy in an emergency.

School district- and school-based administrators' actions in advance of incidents are critical to the success of emergency management efforts at all levels of the school community. For example, administrators can articulate support by providing the financial resources and time needed to plan for emergencies and train all district personnel. K-12 administrators' collaboration with a broad spectrum of professionals and agencies will help develop and maintain a shared vision for emergency management and establish a long-term commitment to implement, practice, sustain, and update EOPs. Effective K-12 administrators are well-versed in the benefits of establishing personal relationships with key community partners to supplement and enhance program support available for families and students. Administrators can capitalize on these relationships and use similar strategies to protect the whole school community. K-12 administrators' active involvement in school emergency management helps schools and school districts to

This fact sheet was developed in collaboration with the National Association of Secondary School Principals.



- Articulate the key components and critical activities of the five National Preparedness System mission areas — [protect](#), [prevent](#), [mitigate](#), [respond](#), and [recover](#);
- Work with community partners and build from their expertise to develop, implement, and sustain EOPs collaboratively based on the unique characteristics of each school and that address the needs of the whole school community (including people with disabilities and access/functional needs);
- Help community partners understand the unique characteristics of the school building, school grounds, students, and families; and
- Understand that managing an incident or emergency should be done within the context of the [National Incident Management System \(NIMS\)](#), a unified, standardized national system for managing domestic incidents that is suitable for schools nationwide to use before, during, and after to facilitate local decision-making and improvement.



Strategies and Best Practices

Core planning teams and school safety leaders can use the following sections of this fact sheet to engage school administrators in EOP development and secure their buy-in for school safety, security, emergency management, and preparedness.

Understanding the Benefits of Collaborating With Community Partners

District and school-based administrators sometimes have misperceptions about their responsibilities during incidents. For example, administrators may erroneously believe that they must assume total responsibility for managing an emergency, and feel that they are solely responsible, which can be overwhelming. All the additional individuals in the school and local community (e.g., first responders, parents, guardians, and media representatives) involved in an incident can also compound the capacity of an administrator because those parties will need information amid the confusion that often ensues following an emergency. It can also be overwhelming for administrators to understand what resources are best to manage different types of incidents.

It is important for administrators to realize that they can help mitigate the impacts of an incident by planning in advance and reaching out to community partners. With plans in place, they will not need to resolve an incident themselves should one occur.

Determining the Advantages of School Emergency Management

For most incidents that occur in school, the school administrator is the first to respond. Rapid response by the school administration and staff to an emergency can prevent injuries, save lives, and allow a more rapid return to normal school operations. Emergencies and incidents develop more quickly than one may imagine, and it is unlikely that first responders are located next to schools. Therefore, schools must develop the capability to be self-reliant, at least until first responders arrive.

The [Building Blocks to School Safety](#) is a great place to start. This toolkit offers a compendium of key resources to assist practitioners in understanding

the School Guide and District Guide. It also provides recommendations for creating high-quality school EOPs and information on where to access supplementary resources to support planning efforts. Providing this toolkit to administrators can serve as an overview of school emergency management and help establish a foundational understanding through its use of digestible publications. Creating a shared understanding of school emergency management can help administrators see the advantages of preparation and planning.

Another way to help both district and school-based administrators understand the benefits of school emergency management is to familiarize them with NIMS and the Incident Command System (ICS). NIMS and the ICS establish a centralized command, outline various roles during an incident or emergency, and include standard terminology for responding to events. The ICS structure establishes a school-based incident management team for either small or large incidents or emergencies. The school-based incident management team may include community partners

and school-based personnel such as school resource officers, facility managers, transportation directors, cafeteria managers, school nurses, disability specialists, counselors, and teachers. Providing administrators with a template to establish this team will help to ensure that all ICS functions are covered. Because administrators are often out of the school building, they may wish to delegate each ICS role to three people to ensure adequate and continuous coverage of each function.

Administrators can use the ICS framework to work with their community partners to create criteria to activate agencies and transfer command. For example, when a school receives a bomb threat, the predetermined agreements typically designate the fire department or police department officials as incident commanders. If principals understand that ICS dictates that they transfer command to someone else, they will view their primary role and responsibility as assisting first responders to ensure that students and staff are safe, not as having their authority reduced or diminished.

Community Partnership Tips

- Provide opportunities for administrators to view media tapes and newspaper clips of incidents to observe that a school response requires involvement in planning for potential threats and hazards. It is important to emphasize to both district- and school-based administrators that past incidents, whether in the local community or in another region of the United States, magnify the need to have an EOP.
- Train administrators that all EOPs are not “one size fits all” and should focus on all types of hazards and threats. Administrators should work with community partners to focus and prioritize the risks unique to their school building, school grounds, and surrounding environment. For example, a school near an airport faces different hazards than one near a busy highway used by large trucks carrying chemicals and gas. Additionally, a three-story school will require a different evacuation plan than a one-story building.
- Ensure that community partners are a part of the site assessment team and conduct a walk-through of the building or campus as a team. Examining the safety, security, emergency preparedness, and accessibility of school buildings and grounds collaboratively will illicit important information on threats and hazards that the school, school district, and surrounding geographic areas face. Following the site assessment, the team should identify prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery strategies.
- It is also important for law enforcement, fire, and other community partners to understand the administrators’ role in assuring a safe environment. Developing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with community partners will increase mutual understanding and respect of the administrators’ role and facilitate preparing for an emergency or incident.

Helping Define Administrative Roles Before, During, and After an Incident

Most administrators are familiar with the process of collaboration in providing academic and mental/behavioral health services to students; therefore, being part of a district or school-based core planning team or response team will not be something entirely new. Just as police and fire personnel have expertise and experience in their fields, administrators know their school communities—the campus, the buildings, and the people.

Before an incident

- Organize a multidisciplinary behavioral threat assessment team that includes personnel such as principals, teachers, school-employed mental/behavioral health professionals, instruction or curriculum professionals, school resource or safety officers, and a staff member skilled in data collection and analysis. A staff member experienced in that area could assist with emergency exercises, collecting and tracking data throughout the facilitation of the exercise, and leading the team through a post-exercise evaluation and subsequent review and update of the school EOP. Including the greater community beyond the school or district staff, K-12 administrators and first responders can identify and define roles for each agency.
- Agree upon the roles and responsibilities of all school community members, including administrators, and document them in the EOP and its annexes. Administrators and team members can better prepare for an emergency if they have a prescribed set of responsibilities.
- District leaders should work with school administrators to develop a [Communications and Warning Annex](#) that outlines how they will communicate with the media and community following an incident. District administrators can include protocols for answering media requests following an incident in both the district and school EOPs. To adequately support school administrators and principals, they need to know precisely how to handle interview requests and other media inquiries before an emergency occurs.

During an incident

- It is helpful for staff to be able to look to well-prepared school and district leaders for problem-solving skills and deep knowledge of the school and district, as administrators serve as incident commanders.
- School leaders will be a main point of contact for all stakeholders. In many cases, the administrator will be responsible for notifying students, staff, and visitors of an incident and which plans need to be activated, such as a shelter-in-place or lockdown.
- Administrators also play a primary role in ensuring continuity of operations (COOP) of essential functions such as business services, computer systems and support, facilities, and continuity of teaching and learning.
- Finally, keep in mind schools are an integral part of the community and often one of the most valuable resources for shelters, evacuation sites, and transportation centers. They may also help keep track of students and families. First responders often rely on schools and school leadership for support during an incident in the community.



After an incident

- Administrators will lead the facilitation of the academic, physical/structural, business services, and health/social/emotional/behavioral recovery of a school or district, organizing such tasks as
 - determining the closing and reopening of buildings;
 - establishing temporary spaces and educational programming; and
 - delegating responsibilities to staff members for specific tasks like tracking assets, working with utilities and insurance companies, communicating with staff and the community, providing mental/behavioral health services, and applying for emergency funding.
- Administrators can review the resources focused on the [COOP](#) and [recovery](#) to support these efforts and ensure that essential functions continue and that all aspects of recovery are addressed.
- Administrators will also be a part of the after-action review, where the core planning team will create an after-action report and determine gaps in the EOP. Administrators will help to address those gaps through EOP revisions and policy review.

Reinforcing the Role of District-Based Administrators

District-based administrators can support school-based administrators by providing the leadership, access to training, resources, time, and processes

needed for creating well-integrated EOPs. These activities should address how to design, implement, evaluate, and update the plans consistently. District administrators should raise awareness and show support through ongoing dialogue. District safety staff and administrators can provide support to train school staff and students about the plans and disseminate information to families about emergency management and family reunification procedures.

District administrators also play a crucial role in integrating school emergency management efforts. District-based administrators should encourage each school to consider the unique needs of the school, while aligning EOPs with state legislation and community agencies' plans. This continuity of effort will help ensure that the plans address the five phases of the National Preparedness System mission areas—protect, prevent, mitigate, respond, and recover.

District and school leaders should provide support in the immediate aftermath of an incident. Notably, there is a need to provide an adequate number of trauma-informed mental/behavioral health professionals to assist students and staff. While leaders should ensure partnerships with community mental/behavioral health providers are in place before any incident, trauma-informed trained mental/behavioral health professionals must be available after an incident. It is important that schools and districts are prepared and secure the right type of support and assistance for students, staff, and the community in the aftermath of a traumatic event.



Establishing Emergency Management Objectives and Schedules

Many school-based administrators underestimate the time it takes to (1) develop an EOP and (2) assemble community partners in developing the plan. Timing is integral to engaging administrators. Summer provides a natural “downtime” within the context of administrators’ responsibilities to plan for the upcoming school year. District security chiefs and safety coordinators should provide structured schedules and objectives guiding administrators in their efforts and also offer meeting, collaborating, and debriefing opportunities.

District administrators can begin the emergency management process by sending all principals and assistant principals an e-mail in late April or May announcing the general goals for emergency management for the upcoming year. Principals can identify the school’s incident management team and review the EOP. Also, they can identify the training needs of incident management team members so the district can design and schedule appropriate training with community partners. The district should also schedule follow-up meetings with representatives from the district office and first responders. Having both district administrators and first responders attend this meeting helps to provide objectivity in determining updates to the EOPs and appropriate procedures. Dividing the tasks of updating the EOPs and attending training into segments will help principals see that each component is possible and can be completed within a specific timeframe.



Focusing Trainings for Administrators on Real Events

Transforming school emergency management training for school administrators’ meetings into “authentic” experiences is the best way to raise awareness, increase learning, and emphasize collaboration.

A tabletop exercise is a simulation or a scenario that tests how critical school staff and community partners would respond to an emergency and assesses the feasibility of an EOP. Tabletop exercises with realistic emergency scenarios allow school administrators to test new knowledge regarding emergency protocols for their school building, student body, and staff. Conducting collaborative tabletops allows stress-free environments for problem-solving scenarios with planning teams, response teams, and community partners before an emergency. Tabletop exercises will nurture relationships and create collaborative networks between all community partners. Additionally, collaborative tabletop exercises will help school administrators become more familiar and comfortable with emergency management, while community partners become more familiar with the unique nature of a school community.

Inviting community partners will also help identify and break down differences in philosophy, terminology, and procedures. Other valuable participants are the lawyers retained by the school district and community agencies who can discuss the potential legal implications of having first responders serve as



site commanders during a school-based emergency. Lawyers can emphasize the importance of ensuring that everyone assumes the roles and responsibilities outlined in NIMS and ICS so that nothing will interfere with potential investigations and future litigation.

All training should incorporate adult learning principles that respect the wealth of experiences that administrators possess. The training should include goal-oriented, relevant, and practical sessions where administrators can integrate new knowledge and skills in emergency management with their existing experiences and skills. Information presented in administrator trainings and exercises should always be relevant to schools and include realistic school-based examples.

Note that while authentic experiences can be beneficial to administrators, it is important to conduct different types of appropriate exercises for students and school staff. For example, simulated active shooter drills may be harmful to the mental/behavioral health and wellbeing of certain school communities. The National Association of Secondary School Principals' [Safe Schools Position Statement](#) recommends:

“Ensure that non-sensorial lockdown drills are the foundation of active assailant training. Schools should not use simulation techniques with students, and exercises should be appropriate to the participants’ developmental level and physical abilities. Drills should never involve props that interject or simulate physical harm, force physical contact with participants, or include other graphic elements that could be traumatizing for participants and negatively impact the school culture.”



Conclusion

Students and staff must feel safe from a variety of emergency incidents. This [sense of security](#) is integral for supporting the school learning environment, ensuring high staff and student morale, and establishing school safety. When students feel safe, they are better able to focus on learning, which in turn leads to increased academic achievement. Recent research even suggests that perceptions of school safety may have a more significant impact on student success than actual safety.

School administrators experience day-to-day incidents and emergencies — some of which can be responded to quickly without calling first responders and other agencies. However, events in the past decade have proven that proactive school emergency management planning is essential for guiding school administrators and community partners through an established and predetermined set of responses and procedures for their school community. Collaboration between district- and school-based administrators should take place before, rather than during or after, an emergency or incident.

Resources

Further Reading — REMS TA Center Resources

- [Building Blocks to School Safety: A Toolkit for K-12 Schools and School Districts for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) offers a compendium of key resources for practitioners interested in understanding the *School Guide* and *District Guide*. It also provides recommendations for creating high-quality school EOPs and information on where to access supplementary resources to support planning efforts.
- [Emergency Exercises Package](#) contains materials for planning and conducting tabletop exercises for two scenarios: a power outage and an infectious disease outbreak.

- [Implementing the National Incident Management System \(NIMS\): Practitioner-Oriented Strategies for Education Agencies Fact Sheet](#) provides an overview of NIMS; explores its important role in school safety, security, emergency management, and preparedness (school safety); discusses how it can be integrated with planning; and offers practitioners tips for supporting its implementation community partners.
- [Safety Leadership Resources Web Page](#) includes links to various tools and resources to support school and safety leadership staff with enhancing their ability to prevent, protect, mitigate, respond to, and recover from emergency incidents that impact education agencies.
- Trainings by Request is a free synchronous training program delivered by the REMS TA Center to education agencies [virtually](#) or [on-site](#) that can assist with professional development and capacity-building efforts.

Further Reading – National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)

- [A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools](#) is a joint statement authored by the National Association of School Psychologists, NASSP, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and other leading national education groups that provides a framework for improving school safety and increasing access to mental/behavioral health supports for children and youth.
- [NASSP Safe Schools Position Statement](#) offers recommendations for school and district leaders to foster safe learning environments and protect the safety, health, and wellbeing of all students and educators.



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