Rural Schools: Emergency Management Planning for All Settings

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Schools have the task of keeping students and staff safe; thus, emergency management planning is critical in rural communities despite the unique circumstances and challenges they may face. Education Across America: Cities, Suburbs, Towns, and Rural Areas, a Website released by the National Center for Education Statistics, illuminates the steps that rural schools across the country are taking to prepare for emergencies, including creating emergency operations plans (EOPs) that describe courses of action for scenarios such as active shooter situations, natural hazards, pandemics, and various other incidents. Rural schools are also practicing with their students by conducting exercises, including evacuation and lockdown drills.

This fact sheet provides rural school leaders and core planning teams with additional information on how to engage in emergency management planning in collaboration with community partners. The fact sheet also highlights the importance of the rural community at large coming together to support safety, security, emergency management, and preparedness, particularly in rural school settings.

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*) recommend that multidisciplinary teams — composed of school personnel, school district personnel, and community partners — plan for emergencies by developing a comprehensive EOP that is customized to the building level. A high-quality school EOP should

- Address a range of threats and hazards;
- Be supported by leadership;
- Integrate data from community partners;
- Consider the whole school community; and
- Outline plans for before, during, and after emergency incidents that can take place in a variety of settings and during different times of the school day.

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A wide range of threats and hazards can happen anywhere, including rural communities. Categories and examples of emergencies cover (1) *natural hazards*, such as tornadoes, earthquakes, wildfires, and floods; (2) *technological hazards*, such as chemical plant explosions or dam failure, which may also cause water failure or contamination; (3) *biological hazards*, such as pandemics, infectious diseases, or contaminated food outbreaks; and (4) *adversarial, incidental, and human-caused threats*, such as cyberattacks, opioid overdoses, and suicide.

Suicide rates among teenage and youth populations have steadily increased, and suicide has been the second leading cause of death for this age group over the past 10 years, as outlined in a National Institutes of Health Research Brief titled "Rural Youth Often Lack Access to Suicide Prevention Services." The brief also notes that suicide rates are higher for youth from rural areas, which may be attributed to a lack of resources around suicide prevention and a scarcity of mental health facilities.

Challenges and Considerations in Rural Schools

Rural communities, and thus rural schools, have many qualities that make them unique but also present challenges that can make emergency management planning difficult. Many rural schools are geographically dispersed and in isolated locations. For example, in Alaska, some staff and students get to school by plane or boat. These isolated locations present barriers that can limit access to even the most basic services such as health care, community resources, and emergency services, making response times incredibly challenging in the event of an emergency. In addition, rural schools typically have fewer staff members than nonrural schools have, and school personnel often serve in multiple roles; for example, the superintendent may also be the cafeteria worker and the school bus driver. With limited staffing, rural schools may find it difficult to fill roles for emergency management planning teams. Finally, rural schools face many competing challenges for resources, including but not limited to

- Accessibility to funding;
- The schools serve students with higher poverty levels;
- Teacher shortages or limited access to high-quality teachers;
- A lack of professional development for teachers and administrators; and
- Issues accessing technology due to limited broadband access, which may impact continuity of operations that ensure essential functions are accessible before, during, and after emergency situations.

Thus, rural schools have competing demands vying for their attention and limited resources, which may allow emergency management planning to get lost in the shuffle, even though it is a vital necessity. However, these challenges only highlight the need for ongoing and collaborative emergency management planning.

Emergency Operations Plan Development in Rural Schools

Emergencies are unpredictable; they can occur at any time and anywhere, whether before, during, or after school hours or on or off campus. An EOP can help rural schools prepare for the variety of threats and hazards that may impact their community and that may occur during different times of the school day and within different settings. The *School Guide* and *District Guide* highlight the six-step planning process as a recommended approach for EOP development and implementation because it succinctly describes the activities schools need to consider in their emergency management planning and who must be involved.
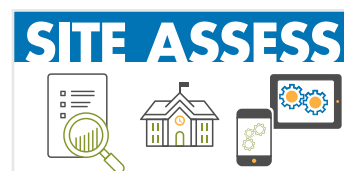
Step 1: Form a Collaborative Planning Team

Schools identify the core planning team that will use its collective expertise to inform the development, implementation, and refinement of the school EOP. Schools should consider diversity when forming the planning teams and include personnel from the school district and from within the school building, such as administrators, educators, facilities managers, transportation directors, school health staff, and food services personnel, among others. Core planning teams should also include partners from across the community, including law enforcement officers, fire officials, emergency medical services personnel, public health officials, mental/behavioral health practitioners, and youth-serving organizations. However, because rural schools may have limited staffing and access to community resources, it is important to understand that many individuals on the planning team may serve in multiple roles or that roles may be staffed by volunteers.

One consideration for rural school districts with limited staffing is to partner with other rural schools to create multidistrict mutual aid agreements where they share resources, including planning staff to help fill any gaps in staffing limitations.

Step 2: Understand the Situation

The core planning team identifies all possible threats and hazards that the rural school community may face. In this stage, it is critical to gather data from a variety of sources, including school and school district assessments; input from local, regional, state, and Federal agencies; and information from the school community. Then the planning team will evaluate the risks and vulnerabilities posed by threats and hazards and prioritize them. Capacity assessments are particularly helpful sources of information that capture the capabilities and skills that already exist within the rural school community and identify which services are lacking. Local hazard mitigation plans and historical databases from the local, regional, state, and Federal levels can also elicit data on threats and hazards that a school community faces. Additionally, site assessments examine the safety, security, accessibility, and emergency preparedness of school buildings and grounds and can help teams understand the potential impact of threats and hazards on facilities and the campus. The REMS TA Center offers a free site assessment tool, the SITE ASSESS mobile application, for teams to use.

Six-Step Planning Process for High-Quality EOP Development

| 1 Form a Collaborative Planning Team | 2 Understand the Situation | 3 Determine Goals and Objectives | 4 Plan Development (Identifying Courses of Action) | 5 Plan Preparation, Review, and Approval | 6 Plan Implementation and Maintenance |

Step 3: Determine Goals and Objectives

The core planning team selects threats and hazards identified in Step 2 to be addressed in the EOP and then develops goals and objectives. In this stage, planning teams will also identify emergency management functions — such as evacuation, accounting for all persons, communications and warnings, family reunification, and continuity of operations — that may need to be activated in response to a variety of the threats and hazards. The planning team will also develop goals and objectives for these functions, as well, addressing the before, during, and after phases.

Step 4: Plan Development (Identifying Courses of Action)

The core planning team assigns the courses of action that are required to accomplish the goals and objectives for before, during, and after potential emergencies, and addresses the who, what, when, where, why, and how. Courses of action will help outline the specific roles and responsibilities of the core planning team members and are ideally developed using scenario-based planning. Rural school planning teams should not consider the availability of resources, or the lack thereof, when developing courses of action, but, instead, should identify the resources needed that are specific to each school. Once the requirements and resources are identified, then the planning team can match its resources to its school's requirements or identify where shortfalls exist and then seek out targeted assistance to overcome those gaps. For example, there are local, regional, state, and Federal networks, such as the Rural Domestic Preparedness Consortium, that may be able to provide resources that are specific to the needs of rural communities

The University of Central Missouri's Institute for Rural Emergency Management (IREM) provides a great example of a state-based system that is designed to help enhance emergency preparedness in rural communities. IREM engages the use of student interns, researchers, and a private Facebook group to share resources and best practices among the emergency management community in rural Missouri.

One of California's deadliest and most destructive wildfires was known as the Camp Fire in Paradise, which, within hours, quickly spread throughout the rural community while people were at work and students were in school. As evacuation of the town began, the few escape routes became congested, and many people, including a bus full of students who were evacuated from one of the elementary schools, were trapped in the congestion. Because the fire spread so quickly during the time of day that evacuation was immediately needed, many families were separated from their children, making family reunification impossible until hours after the event began. This specific natural hazard provided significant considerations for large-scale evacuations of schools in rural areas, especially those in remote locations that must evacuate in a short amount of time. It also showed the importance of creating functional annexes to prepare for the before, during, and after phases of an emergency, including incidents like this one, which required the activation of consecutive functions such as evacuation, accounting for all persons, and family reunification.

Step 5: Plan Preparation, Review, and Approval

The core planning team reviews the plan, obtains official approval, and shares the plan with the community of stakeholders. Goals, objectives, and courses of action are formatted into annexes, and the Basic Plan section is written. Prior to plan

approval, it is critical to obtain insight and feedback from stakeholders. Once approved, all stakeholders must know the plan and be given opportunities to practice the plan. While not all sections of the plan need to be shared publicly, the parts that involve the critical community of stakeholders must be shared with them. If mutual aid agreements or memoranda of understanding are set up with community partners (including neighboring schools, school districts, or institutions of higher education), it is important to share those portions of the plans with partners to ensure that everyone understands his or her role and responsibility in the event of an emergency.

Step 6: Plan Implementation and Maintenance

All stakeholders are trained on the plan and then continually exercise, maintain, and revise the plan as needed. Effective EOPs require practice and training so that the entire school community is more effectively prepared to act before, during, and after an emergency to lessen the impact on life and property. Though some rural communities may struggle with adequate technology, there is Federal funding assistance and an increased focus on ensuring that rural communities' needs for technology are met, as outlined in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Rural Playbook. Thus, with enhanced technological infrastructure, multidistrict planning teams may be able to use technology like video-conferencing to engage in various emergency exercises, such as tabletop exercises, and plan drills with one another and with other service providers. New information can also be gleaned from certain events to inform the EOP and allow schools to review and update their plans or sections of their plans after actual emergencies have occurred. Additional factors that may require a plan review or update are changes in the school and surrounding community, changes in threats and

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The West, Texas, fertilizer plant explosion in 2013 is an example of how several close-knit rural communities came together in response to a technological hazard that affected this small, central Texas town. In addition to causing death, injury, and damaged homes, the explosion destroyed three of the four schools that were within blocks of the plant. Continuity of operations for teaching and learning was an immediate need to address, which the district did with the help of neighboring communities. Nearby school districts accepted students and donated numerous supplies, food, and materials. The district also had to plan ahead for the following school year, knowing that recovery and rebuilding would take years. Plans included setting up temporary buildings for students and temporary living arrangements for many displaced staff and students — both of which impacted student enrollment — as well as addressing the loss of vital student records. Other factors outside of the school community that also directly impacted rebuilding were repairs required for city services, such as water and sewer lines disabled by the explosion. While the rural community slowly recovered from this tragic incident with the help of other close-knit communities, it took 3 years to rebuild the schools that were destroyed, leaving school officials, students, and the community in an extended recovery mode.

hazards, or the emergence of new threats and hazards over time. Assessments will likely generate new information that should be considered on an ongoing basis by the core planning team.

Engaging the Rural Community in Emergency Management Planning

Community connectedness is one of the things that make rural communities so endearing and demonstrate that community really matters. Both the Camp Fire in Paradise, California, and the West, Texas, fertilizer plant explosion were significant incidents that did not happen directly at the school but in the community surrounding the school. This highlights the importance of engaging the community in emergency planning, particularly for events that have tremendous and long-lasting impacts on students, educators, and the entire rural community. Engaging the rural community in emergency management planning also includes engaging students, considering the needs of diverse community members, and accessing available funding and resources.

Community Matters in Rural Communities

Rural schools are often the most valuable resource, the hub, in rural communities not only for educating students but also because they often employ many community members. People who live in rural communities are rich in their culture and history and are known for their tight-knit relationships because they are often geographically isolated and must rely on one another for support and assistance. This isolation may put those in rural communities at a disadvantage for equitable access to resources. However, while rural communities may be isolated, they must often pool resources, sharing services and responsibilities because they understand that community truly matters in rural areas.

Engaging Students

Rural schools can prepare youth volunteers alongside the core planning team in the safeguarding of schools, enlisting them as active thought partners in the EOP development process. Preparing youth to be a voice for their peers and a key resource in emergency management and planning is crucial, and youth volunteers can be trained on school safety protocols.

For example, Teen Community Emergency Response Team (Teen CERT) programs integrate youth into school safety activities by helping them acquire leadership skills needed to address emergency preparedness in their schools and communities. What better way to enlist the help of students to better support their schools, especially those in rural communities where resources and first responders are limited. Rural schools can start their own Teen CERT programs with free Federal resources.

Equity Considerations for Diverse Rural Communities

The need for equitable access to services extends to emergency management planning. Members of the rural community with limited English proficiency or other access and functional needs must have access to the EOP, as well. Therefore, it is important to translate the plan and any communication around the plan into the language of those in the community.

Conclusion

In addition to using the six-step planning process as a guide for EOP development and implementation, it is important to note that one of the most valuable resources in emergency management planning is the rural community itself.

Further Reading — REMS TA Center

- [Building Blocks to School Safety: A Toolkit for K-12 Schools and School Districts for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](), Publication
- [Building Youth Preparedness and School Safety Capacity by Integrating Educational Initiatives](), Fact Sheet
- [Tool Box](), Web Page
- [Managing Donations and Volunteers as a Part of Education Agency Emergency Management](), Fact Sheet
- [EOP Interactive Tools](), Web Page
- [Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Practice and Validate Emergency Operations Plans](), Fact Sheet

Further Reading — Funding Sources

- [Guide to Using Small, Rural School Achievement (SRSA) and Rural and Low-Income School (RLIS) Funds](), Web Page (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education)
- [Title IV, Part A Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program Overview](), Web Page (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, Title IV, Part A Technical Assistance Center)
- [Rural Community Toolbox: Funding & Tools to Build Healthy Drug-Free Rural Communities](), Web Page (U.S. Department of Agriculture; and The White House, Office of National Drug Control Policy)
- [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Rural Playbook: A Roadmap for Delivering Opportunity and Investments in Rural America](), Web Page (The White House)

Further Reading — Mental Health, Suicide, and Opioids

- [Federal Resources for Rural Communities to Help Address Substance Use Disorder and Opioid Misuse,]() Resource Guide (The White House, Office of National Drug Control Policy; and U.S. Department of Agriculture)

- [National Center for Rural School Mental Health](), Website (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences)
- [Special Considerations for Mental Health Services in Rural Schools](), Web Page (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Now Is The Time Technical Assistance Center)
- [Rural Youth Often Lack Access to Suicide Prevention Services](), Web Page (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health)

Further Reading — Rural Emergency Management

- [Rural Domestic Preparedness Consortium](), Website (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Preparedness Directorate, National Training & Education Division)
- [Institute for Rural Emergency Management](), Website (University of Central Missouri)
- [Teen CERT](), Web Page (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [*Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*](), Publication (U.S. Departments of Education; Homeland Security, led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency; Justice, led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and Health and Human Services)
- [*The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*](), Publication (U.S. Departments of Education; Homeland Security; Justice; and Health and Human Services)

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PLEASE NOTE: The tools and resources identified in this document are not intended as endorsements and are merely offered as examples that you may consider in your own planning efforts.