

Functional Exercises: Practicing the Plan With Multiple Community Partners

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

A key component of comprehensive school and higher ed emergency operations plans (EOPs) is an [exercise program](#) that includes the five types of exercises: (1) orientations, (2) tabletop exercises, (3) drills, (4) functional exercises, and (5) full-scale exercises. The exercise program can be developed during [Step 5](#) of the six-step planning process outlined in the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans, The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#), and the [Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education](#). It can be documented in the Basic Plan section of the EOP and executed during [Step 6](#), when the whole school/campus community practices the plan. Exercises not only provide education agencies' personnel with the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses in their EOPs, but also enhance partnerships with first responders, other local agencies, and the general public.

This fact sheet provides schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education (IHEs) with lessons learned and strategies for planning and conducting functional exercises to practice EOPs with community partners.

An Overview of Functional Exercises

Functional exercises are the most intensive, interactive, and time-sensitive types of exercises. They test one or more functions of a school or higher ed EOP. Additionally, functional exercises provide education agencies with an opportunity to

- Prepare the core planning team to coordinate with local, state, and Federal agencies;
- Familiarize participants with plans and procedures through low-stress activities;
- Practice courses of action outlined in the EOP in a realistic, real-time environment;
- Test the capabilities of the whole school/campus community;
- Examine capacities for mitigating, responding to, and recovering from various hazards and threats;
- Conduct the performance analysis part of the exercise to provide a gap analysis to identify deficiencies and problems in the current program;
- Measure adequacy and acquisition of resources;
- Examine cooperative relationships;



- Enhance collaboration among school districts, public information officers, and other community partners; and
- Increase the confidence of the planning team and whole school/campus community while strengthening their ability to respond effectively to an emergency.

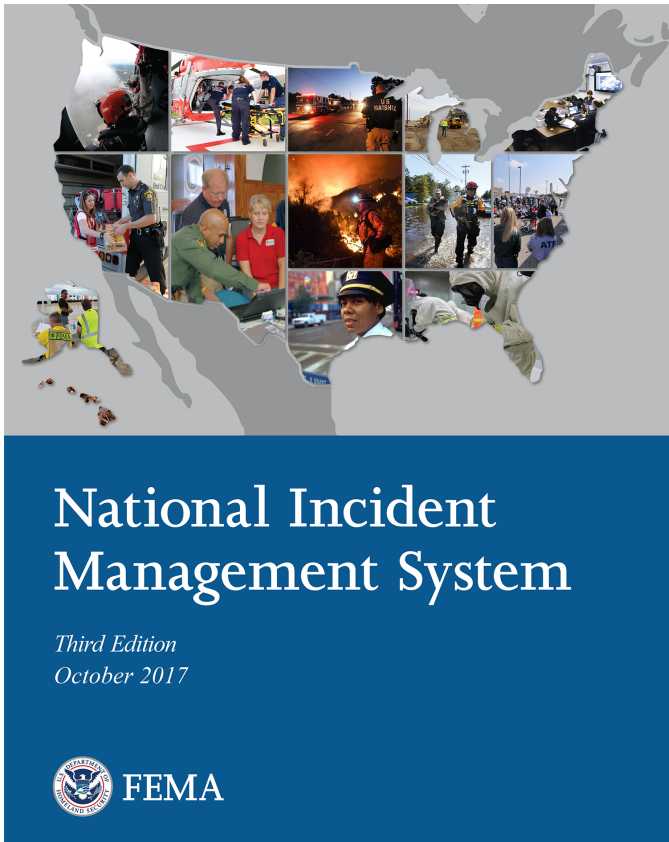
Assemble the Core Planning Team and Identify an Exercise Manager

The core planning team is established in [Step 1](#) and should have diverse membership from across the education agency, local community partners, state community partners, individuals and organizations representing the diverse interests of the whole school/campus community, and additional partners. Their collective expertise may be used to develop, implement, and refine the EOP throughout the six-step planning process, including conducting functional exercises.

An exercise manager should be selected from the planning team to ensure that the exercise is carried out on time and that all logistical issues are resolved. Ideally, the exercise manager will be from the education agency and will have experience with emergency exercises. The designated person will also be responsible for the overall monitoring of the exercise so that the scenarios are performed as planned. The exercise manager ensures that the school, school district, IHE, and community partners effectively communicate throughout the exercise to obtain information and reevaluate the scenarios and the schedule, if needed.

Utilize NIMS and ICS

Understanding incident management, the [National Incident Management System](#) (NIMS), and the [Incident Command System](#) (ICS) is crucial for planning team members and may be used as a common framework to guide their efforts. NIMS was established by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and includes ICS, which provides standardization through consistent terminology and established organizational structures. ICS is a standard strategy for handling all school- and campus-related incidents, whether the



education agency is the sole responder or community responders also participate. ICS outlines how to address and manage emergencies; provides an operating structure; offers guiding concepts, principles, and protocols; and establishes a command center, a command team, and an incident commander. ICS has five functions: (1) Command, (2) Operations, (3) Planning, (4) Logistics, and (5) Finance Administration. To carry out the Command function of ICS, the planning team should determine the location of the command center that will be used during the exercise and in the event of a real emergency. Other considerations include deciding on the number of personnel needed to monitor that area—specifically an incident commander—as well as their roles and responsibilities. Establishing a command center and selecting an incident commander facilitate the activation of the other functions of a school, school district, or IHE’s ICS. If possible, school, school district, and IHE staff members such as the principal, security/police officer, administrator, and/or maintenance manager—along with the district’s director of operations and head of security—should be assigned to the command center to support all first responder functions and communicate important information about the education agency, as needed.

Develop an Adequate Timeline

The core planning team should begin exercise planning approximately 9–12 months prior to the scheduled date. For the first 3 months, the team should meet monthly;

for the next 4 months, bimonthly; and for the last 2 months prior to the exercise, weekly. A month prior to the exercise, we recommend that the exercise managers devote 50 percent of their time to finalizing details, while the week before, they should spend 100 percent of their time finalizing logistical details.

SAMPLE CALENDAR

Activity	Weeks Prior to Exercise	Responsible Party
Conduct initial planning meeting with all partners and select an exercise manager.	36	Core Planning Team
Write script and determine locations for the functional exercise and the command center.	24	Core Planning Team
Conduct bimonthly meetings.	16–20	Core Planning Team
Identify role players (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, nurses, etc.).	18	Core Planning Team
Distribute script and assignments to all participants.	12	Planning Section Chief
Conduct weekly meetings.	8	Core Planning Team
Conduct an orientation meeting with all participants (including evaluators) and outline expectations.	8	Exercise Manager
Alert community members, families, and other agencies about the exercise.	2	Public Information Officer
Conduct a walk-through of the building(s) used in the exercise.	1	Exercise Manager

Reach a Consensus About the Functions to be Tested

Using the Functional Annexes section of the EOP, the core planning team should agree upon the functions to be activated and tested during the exercise. The Functional Annexes section details the goals, objectives, and courses of action of functions (e.g., evacuation, communications, recovery) that apply across multiple threats or hazards. Taking the time to reach a consensus about the purpose, goals, and expected outcomes of the exercise is a critical step toward ensuring its success.

Once the functions to be tested have been determined, the location of the exercise can be selected. To the maximum extent possible, the location should allow for the actual depiction of events, such as blood in the hallways and on walls; doors that can be broken by intruders or locks that can be picked; windows that can be shattered by intruders or first responders trying to gain access to the inside of the building; or a small fire in a classroom or office. A location that has been scheduled for closure or demolition may provide an optimal setting for an exercise.

Design the Exercise to Resemble an Actual Emergency

A script will provide participants with sufficient detail about the events that will occur during the exercise, including how each individual or group will act. Additionally, the planning team may choose to have

multiple scenarios written into the script, such as a bus fire, mass casualties, etc., to better simulate an actual emergency. Other enhancements for the exercises may include props and makeup to simulate injuries. The education agency should determine in advance where to place props and who will be in charge of transporting them to and from the exercise site.

SAMPLE SCRIPT

Time	Scenario	Location	Roles and Participants	Annexes to Test
10:05 a.m.	The power throughout the campus goes out. The power also appears to be out in the whole community. The emergency generator, which powers critical building systems, turns on automatically.	Campuswide	<p>Administrators: Tom Boyer and Jack Brown</p> <p>Safety Officer: Betty Mitchell</p> <p>Teachers: Amy Sanchez and Liz Brown</p> <p>Students: Shelly Wright, Megan Phillips, and Charles Dunbar</p>	<p>Continuity of Operations</p> <p>Communications and Warning</p>

SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS

School/campus personnel: The administrator decides to convene your response team, which you are a member of, to decide the next steps. As the weather is warm and there is enough daylight, the team decides to continue classes, albeit with some adjustments to the schedule.

Safety officer: About 30 minutes later, the power is still out. The students are calm and seem to be actually enjoying the novelty of being at school without power. The administrator speaks to a liaison at the local power company who says they are still trying to identify why the power went out and the extent of the outage. The person says that, at the moment, they are unable to determine the extent of the outage or predict when power will be restored. The response team reconvenes.

Conduct a Series of Orientation Meetings Before the Exercise

Orientation meetings are a thoughtful way to provide participants and evaluators with the precise information they need regarding their roles in the exercise. Orientation meetings build a working relationship among the members of both groups and

promote ongoing support for the exercise and the EOP. Several orientation meetings may be needed to

- Review the EOP and the purpose and goals of the exercise;
- Assign roles and review the responsibilities for each;
- Walk through the designated site to become familiar with the environment in which the exercise will occur;

- Review what actions first responders will take when carrying out their responsibilities; and
- Emphasize to the volunteers the importance of following the directions given by first responders.

Education agencies may also consider conducting a separate orientation for evaluators to review the evaluation forms and clarify roles and expectations.

Engage Stakeholders

Stakeholders are the individuals or organizations that stand to gain or lose from the exercise, and that will encourage collaboration and trust, provide resources, and share in the responsibility for decision-making. [Community partners](#) such as the fire and police departments and emergency medical services (EMS) are not the only stakeholders that may participate in an exercise. Recruiting administrators, faculty and staff, campus leaders, district personnel (e.g., curriculum directors), mental health practitioners, and community members to assume the roles of counselors, teachers, professors, visiting supervisors, parents, reporters, nurses, or building engineers will help to increase awareness that the simulated emergency can actually occur and will help to foster greater interest in emergency management within schools, campuses, and local communities.

Building positive relationships with stakeholders can be challenging, making it difficult to get their buy-in

and engage them effectively. A variety of factors, including competing priorities, resource constraints, divergent opinions, and privacy laws, can disrupt stakeholder engagement. Obtaining the cooperation of all stakeholders is necessary to practice courses of action outlined in the EOP and to examine and strengthen capacities for mitigating, responding to, and recovering from various hazards and threats. Below is a list of tips for establishing stakeholder buy-in gathered from the [Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Practice and Validate Emergency Operations Plans fact sheet](#):

- Collect and present data;
- Create surveys;
- Reference resources; and
- Conduct emergency exercises and post-exercise evaluations.

Another important stakeholder is the public. Community members may need to receive an alert about the exercise 2 or more weeks in advance to warn of possible inconveniences such as traffic or blocked roads, and to avoid assumptions and panic. Methods of transmitting alerts may include sending to schools, homes, and businesses a prerecorded telephone message about the exercise date and time or asking newspapers and radio and television stations to report on the exercise. It is also important to have the media observe the exercise and work with the ICS-designated public information officer to accurately report on the goals and outcomes of the exercise.



Consider Student Involvement

Student involvement can provide practical experience when testing the Accounting for All Persons Annex and Family Reunification Annex, as well as the command center’s triage plan. If students will be participating in the simulation, use the following considerations:

- Establish a context for students’ participation by providing them with an overview of emergency management planning and the purpose for the exercise;
- Provide students with their own scripts that specify their roles, the sequence of events, and how they should respond to prevent feelings of anxiety or fear during the exercise;
- Caution first responders and other officials not to reveal information that will compromise the integrity of the EOP. Students should not have access to privileged response information that would make the education agency vulnerable if in the future a student should become a perpetrator.
- Reassure participating students that they can quit the exercise at any time, should they become frightened or anxious; and
- Obtain parental or guardian consent before assigning roles, if necessary, and select students with the maturity level to assume the assigned roles.

Evaluate the Exercise

A thorough evaluation of the exercise enables schools, school districts, and IHEs to assess the effectiveness of the procedures outlined in their EOPs and demonstrate their plans’ usefulness in responding to actual and simulated emergencies. The evaluation also will help to identify the resources and training needed to ensure the education agency’s EOP is current and comprehensive.

On-site evaluation through the use of one or more evaluation methods can be helpful in assessing the exercise. One option is to use a time sampling of events in 30-minute intervals, during which time the evaluator observes and documents the activities and

actions from a specified location. Evaluators can also check for displays of emergency-related information inside classrooms and common areas, and how well exercise participants followed proper emergency response procedures (via in-person observations or videotaped performances). Participants may be asked to complete a survey immediately after the exercise to evaluate the ability of various agencies—such as the fire and police departments and EMS—to secure students, faculty, and staff members during the event.

Conduct After-Action Debriefings and Modify EOPs

When planning an exercise, the exercise manager and core planning team should incorporate a schedule and structure for conducting an after-action debriefing. An after-action debriefing is an excellent method to identify the strengths and weaknesses of an exercise and determine which components of EOPs need modification. There are several types of after-action debriefings, the first of which is a “hot wash.” The hot wash, held immediately after the event by the exercise manager (with someone taking notes), captures the participants’ immediate reactions. The manager also may consider conducting a separate after-action debriefing with the participants immediately after their roles have been acted out rather than at the end of the entire exercise



to determine how their levels of preparation for emergency response changed after being involved in the exercise. Participants can also provide feedback through a feedback form. You can find exercise resources from state and local education agencies in the REMS TA Center [Tool Box](#).

Debriefings serve as the foundation for a longer meeting with the planning team that will culminate in the development of an after-action report. The report should detail the following:

- What happened during the exercise;
- What worked and what did not;
- Why certain decisions were made; and
- The strengths and weaknesses in the current EOP and how it will be modified.

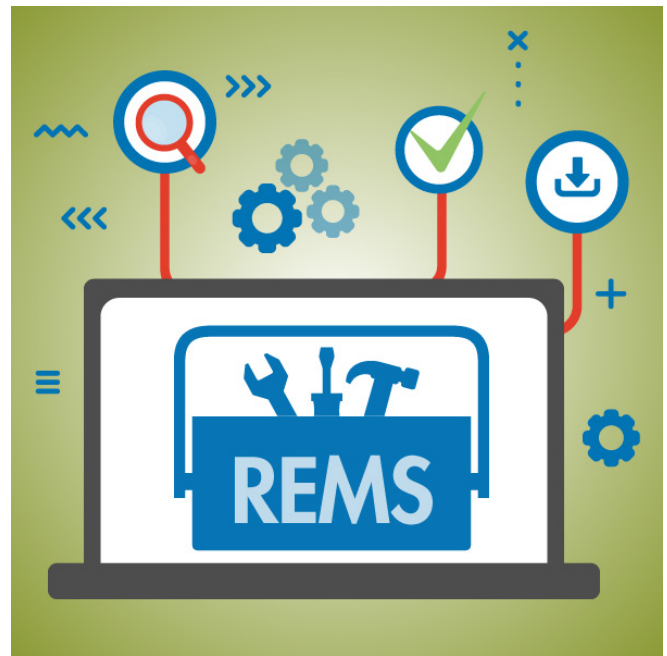
Conclusion

Functional exercises are excellent tools for testing the extent to which an existing EOP contains the appropriate procedures, policies, roles, and responsibilities for responding to various hazards. Exercises test the knowledge and capability of all school, school district, and campus personnel and community partners, and the extent to which collaborative activities occurred. It is important for everyone involved in the exercises to participate in debriefings and develop [after-action reports](#) to identify any gaps or vulnerabilities in the current EOP; challenges that may arise during emergency response; or additional training that may be needed by all partners.

Resources

Further Reading – REMS TA Center

- [Implementing the National Incident Management System \(NIMS\): Practitioner-Oriented Strategies for Education Agencies](#), Fact Sheet
- [Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Practice and Validate Emergency Operations Plans](#), Fact Sheet



- [After-Action Reports: Capturing Lessons Learned and Identifying Areas of Improvement](#), Fact Sheet
- [Whole Community Planning: Incorporating Community Events Into Emergency Operations Plans and Coordinating With Partners](#), 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](#), Fact Sheet
- [Tool Box](#), Web Page

Training Opportunities – REMS TA Center

- [Understanding the Role of Community Engagement Specialists in Supporting School Safety Before, During, and After an Emergency](#), Webinar
- [Building State-Level Relationships to Support Education Agencies With Disaster Response and Recovery Planning](#), Webinar
- [Developing Memoranda of Understanding \(MOUs\) for Enhancing Emergency Preparedness in the School Setting](#), Online Course
- [Developing and Enhancing Memoranda of Understanding \(MOUs\) With Your Community Partners](#), Specialized Training Package
- [Emergency Exercises Package](#), Specialized Training Package

Further Reading – Whole Community Planning

- [A Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management: Principles, Themes, and Pathways for Action](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [Building a Learning Community & Body of Knowledge: Implementing a Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [Defining the Value of Campus Emergency Management Programs to Communities: Findings From a Critical Issues Forum](#), Publication (National Center for Campus Public Safety)

- [Preparedness Toolkit](#), Website (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)

Further Reading – Coordination With Community Partners

- [Plan Integration: Linking Local Planning Efforts](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [Pre-Disaster Recovery Planning Guide for Local Governments](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [Community Recovery Management Toolkit](#), Website (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)

