

Four Phase All-Hazards Planning for Schools

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In 2003 the United States Department of Education (USDOE) adopted the All Hazards model separated into Four Phases as the standard for emergency (natural disasters and man-made) planning. This Four Phase All-Hazard model is the same used by FEMA for emergency planning and response, as well as state and local emergency management agencies (who by the way are great sources for free assistance and training).

An integral part of this planning model as used by the above mentioned external entities is NIMS - the National Incident Management System. We'll address this in more detail below. With NIMS in place, your school's staff will work better with outside agencies and federal officials in responding to a crisis. This can be critical when dealing with a crisis that is larger than you can deal with on your own.

The best practices model is just as the name describes it - it should deal with all types of hazards within one plan so that you don't have to flip back and forth between various plans or documents during a crisis. The "Four Phases" refers to the four distinct plan sections:

- Phase 1: Prevention and Mitigation
- Phase 2: Preparedness
- Phase 3: Response
- Phase 4: Recovery

Prevention and Mitigation

This is the first phase of the plan because this is what you are already doing on a daily basis to keep schools safe by preventing bad things from happening and mitigating for those that will happen despite our best efforts (such as Hurricane Katrina).

Examples of prevention measures include having a school police officer, using random metal detection to search for weapons, peer mediation and bullying abatement programs, keeping exterior doors locked during the day to prevent an intruder and background checks for all employees to prevent child molesters and terrorists from gaining access to children.

Examples of mitigation measures include anchoring bookshelves and other large objects in case of an earthquake, conducting drills (fire, hurricane, lockdown, shelter-in-place, tornado, bomb threat evacuations, etc), installing Automatic External Defibrillators (AEDs) throughout your buildings and ensuring that facilities are not built within a flood plain.

These measures are designed to minimize the impact of an event that will occur despite any planning: a gunman could wander into the front door and go on a shooting spree, a flood or other natural disaster could strike without much warning, or an employee could have a heart attack at school. All of these will obviously disrupt the school day, but we can reduce the effects by mitigation measures.



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Preparedness

This is this part of the plan where you give instructions in detail for each employee during a crisis. Each employee (teachers, office staff, counselors, administration, custodians, bus drivers, nutritional staff, etc) should have a well defined role and understand that role well enough to perform it under stress.

Response

This is the 'cheat-sheet' section of the plan used during a crisis to summarize the Preparedness section in an easy to use form. Examples of this segment's components include checklists of actions for the crisis in question, time logs to record when an action was taken and by whom, and customized flip charts based on the employee-specific actions for each particular crisis. The time logs are for use in debriefing, court proceedings and improving the plan for next time. These are particularly important during testing of the plan to dissect your response and fix gaps that appear.

Recovery

The goal of this section is to prepare as much as possible to ease the transition to normalcy after an incident which may have been very traumatic. To this end, you should address business continuity in addition to mental health recovery. Suicide is a major issue after violent and traumatic crises (there have been 20 suicides as a result of one school shooting) and drop-in rooms, counseling and observation for signs of stress are critical elements of your planning.

NIMS

As mentioned above, forming your plan around the National Incident Management System can increase cooperation with outside agencies - this can result in lives saved, damage prevented and reduced costs due to a faster and smoother response. In a nutshell, NIMS is a command system based on the leadership of an incident commander with a chain of command below him or her.

The various levels of command should also stay within the optimal span of control - this is the most efficient number of people to be under the control of one person. Ideally there should be 3-7 people under one person's command, and each of these people can also command others further down the chain of command. Having a designated incident commander and liaisons between different organizations is crucial to an effective emergency response. FEMA offers free independent study training on NIMS through the Emergency Management Institute. Information on that program can be found here.

You Can Do It

With each part of the plan you must ensure that you are doing what you outline in the document. You don't want to be in court after a shooting that could have been prevented by a measure that you claim to conduct in the prevention plan but had not actually enacted yet. While it may seem like a daunting task, it is imperative that you properly plan for any event that could occur at your school (from heart failures to terrorist attacks). Many say "I don't have time to bother with this stuff." In fact, this is something that a school does not have time to not carry out - since a few hours of pre-planning can prevent weeks of wasted time and millions of dollars in lawsuits due to a preventable crisis.