



## The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

As part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, FEMA works to prepare the nation for all potential hazards and contributes to the federal response and recovery efforts following emergencies. FEMA also leads essential mitigation activities, sponsors training sessions and manages national programs and sub-agencies (e.g., Flood Insurance and the U.S. Fire Administration). As part of its mission, the agency provides information, guidance and resources on the four phases of emergency management as well as on specific issues related to emergency management. In addition, FEMA has regional and state offices that work with state and local first responders in their emergency management activities. A list of state emergency management offices and agencies is accessible at <http://www.fema.gov/about/contact/statedr.shtm>.

# HELPFUL HINTS

## FOR SCHOOL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Vol. 2, Issue 4, 2007

## PLANNING AND CONDUCTING A FUNCTIONAL EXERCISE

A key component of comprehensive school and school district emergency management plans is an exercise program that includes the five types of exercises: orientation seminars; drills; tabletop exercises; and functional exercises.<sup>1</sup> Exercise programs not only offer school and school district staff many opportunities to identify strengths and weaknesses in their emergency management plans, they also enhance partnerships with local law enforcement, emergency response agencies and organizations, and the

general public. Functional exercises, in particular, are the most intense, interactive and time-sensitive types of exercises, and they test one or more functions of a school or school district's emergency management plan.

The Water School District<sup>2</sup> recently conducted an all-day functional exercise that involved over 500 people from 15 agencies and organizations. The exercise tested and evaluated: the district's emergency management plan; the mobilization of emergency



- 1 "Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Validate School Safety Plans." *ERCM Express* 1, no. 3 (2006): 1-4, [http://www.ercm.org/views/documents/Emergency\\_NewsletterV2I3.pdf](http://www.ercm.org/views/documents/Emergency_NewsletterV2I3.pdf).
- 2 This issue of Helpful Hints is based on the recounting of an actual exercise. The school districts' names have been changed for the purpose of this document. Information for this publication was gathered through a series of interviews with stakeholders involved in actual exercises.

The helpful hints in this document are the reflections of one school district and are based on one exercise. They are not prescriptive best practices for every school or school district; rather, they are suggestions to consider when planning an exercise.

personnel from multiple agencies; and the interoperability of communication equipment. The following helpful hints on functional exercises were gathered from interviews with Water School District staff and the district’s local partners.

**Allow for Sufficient Planning Time**

Exercise planning begins approximately nine to 12 months prior to the scheduled date. (See fig. 1 for a sample calendar.) A core advisory group comprising representatives from the school



district, local and state law enforcement agencies, emergency medical services (EMS), the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army and emergency management

services should be established, which will help to sustain the planning process. For the first three months, the advisory group may meet monthly; for the next four

**Figure 1. Sample Calendar for Planning and Conducting a Functional Exercise**

Planning Activity	Weeks Prior to Exercise	Responsible Party
Conduct initial planning meeting with all partners and select an exercise controller.	36	Advisory Group
Write script and determine locations for the functional exercise and the command center.	24	Advisory Group
Conduct weekly meetings with advisory group.	22	Advisory Group
Identify role-players (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, nurses, etc.)	18	Advisory Group
Conduct bimonthly meetings with advisory group.	16-20	Advisory Group
Distribute script and assignments to all participants.	12	School Security Chief
Conduct an orientation meeting with all participants (including evaluators) and outline expectations.	8	Exercise Manager
Alert community members, families and other schools about the exercise.	2	Public Information Officer
Conduct a walk-through of the building(s) used in the exercise.	1	Exercise Manager

months, bimonthly; and for the last two months prior to the exercise, weekly. A month prior to the exercise, one person may devote 50 percent of his or her time to finalizing details, while the week before, he or she may spend 100 percent of his or her time finalizing the logistics.



Next, the advisory group should develop an Incident Command System (ICS)—a standard strategy for handling all school-related incidents, whether the school is the sole responder or community responders also participate. The ICS: outlines how to address and manage emergencies; provides an operating structure; offers guiding concepts, principles and protocols; and establishes a command center, command team and an incident commander. An ICS has five functions: Command; Operations; Planning; Logistics; and Finance-Administration.<sup>3</sup> To carry out the Command function of the ICS, the advisory group 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 man that area—specifically an incident commander—as well as their roles

and responsibilities. Establishing a command center and selecting an incident commander facilitates the activation of the other functions of a school or school district’s ICS. If possible, school and school district staff such as the principal, security officer and 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 school as needed.

An exercise manager should then be selected to ensure that the exercise is carried out on time, and that all logistics issues are resolved. He or she should also be responsible for the overall monitoring of the exercise so that the scenarios are performed as planned. In addition, the exercise manager makes certain that the school, school district and community

partners effectively communicate throughout the exercise to obtain information and reevaluate the scenarios and the schedule, if needed.

### **Reach a Consensus About the Functions to be Tested**

Integral to the success of any exercise is the need to openly articulate and clarify all partners’ understanding of the purpose for the event as well as the functions that will be tested. 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.



3 “The National Incident Management System (NIMS).” *ERCM Express* 2, no. 6 (2006): 3-7, <http://www.ercm.org/views/documents/NIMS.pdf>.





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 school 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.

(See fig. 2 for a sample script involving a school shooting.) In addition, a school or school district may choose to have multiple scenarios written into the script, such as a bus fire, mass casualties and so on, to better simulate an actual school crisis.

Other enhancements for the exercises may include props and make up to simulate injuries. School and school districts should determine in advance where to place props and who will be in charge of transporting them to and from the exercise site.

**Figure 2. Sample Functional Exercise Script**

Time	Scenario	Location	Roles and Participants	Functions to Test
10:05 a.m.	Intruders shoot an administrator in the hallway as he investigates prior gunshots	Main office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Administrators:</b> Tom Boyer and Jack Brown</li> <li>■ <b>Secretary:</b> Betty Mitchell</li> <li>■ <b>Teachers:</b> Amy Sanchez and Liz Brown</li> <li>■ <b>Students:</b> Shelly Wright, Megan Phillips and Charles Dunbar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Lockdown procedures</li> <li>■ Communications system</li> <li>■ Medical response procedures</li> </ul>
<b>Specific Instructions</b>				
<p><b>Teachers:</b> According to the emergency management plan, your classroom door must be physically locked during a lockdown; however, someone is knocking on the door. You may not open the door for anyone, <i>including</i> first responders. You call the main office every five minutes for 30 minutes to ask office staff to confirm whether first responders are knocking on your door; unfortunately, no one picks up the phone.</p> <p><b>Visiting Supervisors:</b> You are in a classroom when the lockdown announcement is made. The teacher panics and runs out of the classroom, leaving you alone with the students. You see a two-way radio on the desk and use it to call the office, but no one answers. The situation worsens when three girls become hysterical and try to climb out of the classroom windows.</p>				

## 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 emergency management plan. Several orientation meetings may be needed to:

- Review the school district's emergency management plan 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.



School districts also may 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 who stand to gain or lose from the exercise, and who will encourage collaboration and trust, provide resources, and share in the responsibility for decisionmaking. Community partners such as the fire and police departments and EMS are not the only stakeholders that may participate in an exercise. Recruiting school principals and district personnel (e.g., curriculum directors) to assume the roles of counselors, teachers, visiting supervisors, parents, reporters or

evaluators will help to increase awareness that the simulated emergency can actually occur and will help to foster greater interest in emergency management within school and local communities.

Another important stakeholder is the public. Community members may need to receive an alert about the exercise two 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 a school's student accountability and student-parent reunification plans as well as the command center's triage plan. If students will be participating in the simulation:

- Obtain parental or guardian consent before assigning roles;
- Select students with the maturity level to assume the assigned roles;
- Establish a context for students' participation by providing them with an overview of emergency 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;

- Reassure participating students that they can quit the exercise at any time, should they become frightened or anxious. Establish a hand signal or code word for them to use if the drill becomes too intense or if a real emergency occurs;
- Inform evaluators, the exercise manager or another key adult of the signal or code word and provide them with instructions on how to safely remove students from the exercise and care for their emotional needs; and
- Caution first responders and other officials not to reveal information that will compromise the integrity of the emergency management plan. Students should not have access to privileged response information that would make the school or school district vulnerable if in the future a student should become a perpetrator.

## Evaluate the Exercise

By thoroughly evaluating the exercise, school and school districts can assess the effectiveness of the procedures outlined in their emergency management plans



and demonstrate their plans' usefulness in responding to actual and simulated crises. The evaluation also will help to identify the resources and training needed to ensure the school and school district's emergency management plans are 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. (See fig. 3 for a sample observation tool.) Evaluators can also check for displays of emergency-related information inside classrooms and common areas and how well exercise participants followed





**Figure 3: Sample Observation Evaluation**

Time	Activities/Actions	Mood	Situation	Comments
2–2:30 p.m.	Upset parents meet with Public Information Officer demanding that PIO collect names to check on students held hostage. PIO explains that police will not release that information. Parents leave to find a police official to plead for the release of names of hostages.	<input type="checkbox"/> Chaotic <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Stressful <input type="checkbox"/> Calm	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Secure <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not Calm <input type="checkbox"/> Secure <input type="checkbox"/> Calm	Parents screaming at PIO; PIO raising his voice to them.

Information adapted from the following source: Allen, K. 2007. *Mock Drill: Time Sampling Observation Tool*. Unpublished measure.

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 both students and staff during the event.

### Conduct After-action Debriefings and Modify Emergency Management Plans

When planning an exercise, the advisory group should incorporate a schedule and structure for conducting an after-action debriefing. After-action debriefings are an excellent means of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of exercises and determining which components of emergency management plans 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.



Debriefings serve as the foundation for a longer meeting with the advisory group that will culminate in the development of an after-action report. The report should detail: what happened during the exercise; what worked and what did not; why certain decisions were made; and the strengths and weaknesses in the current emergency management plans and how those plans will be modified.

## Conclusion

Functional exercises are excellent tools for testing the extent to which an existing emergency management plan contains the appropriate procedures, policies, roles and responsibilities for responding to various hazards. Exercises test the knowledge and capability of all school personnel, first responders 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 emergency management plan; challenges that may arise during emergency response; or additional training that may be needed by all partners.

## RESOURCES

### The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Comprehensive Exercise Curriculum (CEC)

This series of courses, available at <http://www.training.fema.gov/emiweb/cec/ceccourses.asp>, provides classroom training and hands-on experiences designed to improve emergency management staffs' abilities to manage exercise programs and design, implement and assess emergency management exercises. The CEC covers topics such as:

- Community Disaster Exercises;
- Exercise Design, Control, Development and Evaluation; and
- Controller-Simulator, Program Manager, and Evaluator Workshops



The Emergency Response and Crisis Management (ERCM) Technical Assistance (TA) Center and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS) would like to thank the Portsmouth Public Schools and the Portsmouth Local Emergency Planning Council, Portsmouth, Va., for their assistance in preparing this publication. The ERCM TA Center was established in October 2004 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS). The center supports schools and school districts in developing and implementing comprehensive emergency and crisis response plans by providing technical assistance via trainings, publications and individualized responses to requests. Helpful Hints provides a quick overview of school emergency preparedness topics that are frequently the subject of inquiries. For additional information about conducting exercises or any other emergency management related topic, visit the ERCM TA Center at <http://www.ercm.org> or call 1-888-991-3726.

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This publication was funded by the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools at the U.S. Department of Education under contract number GS23F8062H with Caliber Associates, Inc. The contracting officer's representative was Tara Hill. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government. This publication also contains hyperlinks and URLs for information created and maintained by private organizations. This information is provided for the reader's convenience. The U.S. Department of Education is not responsible for controlling or guaranteeing the accuracy, relevance, timeliness or completeness of this outside information. Further, the inclusion of information or a hyperlink or URL does not reflect the importance of the organization, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered. All hyperlinks and URLs were accessed on Feb. 5, 2007.