



Preparing for  
School Emergency  
Drills and Exercises



# Preparing for Emergency Drills and Exercises

Emergency drills and practice exercises are important for preparing for emergency situations. Unfortunately, many schools and local emergency responders aren't ready to conduct these events. A school should follow these six steps to successfully conduct emergency drills and exercises:

1. Develop emergency plans
2. Train staff and students
3. Conduct tabletop exercises
4. Conduct drills
5. Conduct functional exercises
6. Conduct full-scale exercises



## Step 1: Develop Emergency Plans

Drills and exercises test an organization's written emergency plan. Do not hold a drill or exercise until you have:

- A comprehensive emergency/crisis master plan
- Position-specific emergency response guides for all staff with critical roles
- Emergency quick response guides

Since it is virtually impossible to identify and plan for every possible or potential hazard that could impact your district, emergency plans should be response-based instead of hazard-based. This means the emergency plans should be based on the actions you want your staff, students and visitors to perform regardless of the emergency. These 10 responses will cover 99% of all the emergencies a district may face:

1. Evacuation
2. Reverse evacuation
3. Lock out
4. Lock down
5. Clear the halls
6. Shelter-in-place
7. Medical emergency
8. Closing or cancelation
9. Death
10. Vehicle accident

The district's comprehensive emergency/crisis master plan should include variations on each of these 10 responses based on site-specific hazards and explain when each response is necessary.



## Step 2: Train Staff and Students

All staff and students should be trained at least annually on the emergency response plans and guides and on their roles within the plans. All plans should be shared with your local emergency responders, but not made publicly available.

## COMMON EXERCISE MISTAKES

When schools rush into performing emergency exercises, they often encounter the following problems:

- Exercises are conducted without any defined objectives
- Scenarios are too complex to manage successfully
- Inadequate time is allotted for exercise interaction
- An accurate critique of the exercise is not completed afterwards
- Emotional impact on the participants is not considered
- Safety of participants is not addressed properly
- Exercise is planned and initiated too quickly
- Some critical agencies are not included
- After-action recommendations are not implemented

## EVACUATION EXAMPLE

A school may evacuate for reasons such as fire, a gas leak or lack of power. The master plan should detail the district and building response and recovery for each of these hazards, but the immediate response by building administrators, staff, students and visitors is to safely evacuate the building and, if necessary, seek safety at another location.



### Step 3: Conduct Tabletop Exercises

Tabletop exercises allow schools to test their emergency plans and individuals' knowledge of their roles and responsibilities using hypothetical situations, without causing disruption to the school day. These exercises should be very limited in scope, covering a specific aspect of your emergency crisis plan.

Tabletop exercises are similar to a scenario-based board game. The facilitator presents a scenario to the "players" around the table, who verbally respond what actions they would take, based on the available information. Additional information is provided to the players over the course of the exercise, similar to the way new information emerges during real emergency events. The group must adjust and respond as the new information becomes available.

A recorder makes notes of items that need to be changed or added to the plan, based on the responses and other suggestions for improvement verbalized during the event. These exercises usually last between one and two hours.

Successful tabletop exercises help identify weak points in your emergency plan and staff training so you can address it as necessary. It is much better to find out your limitations in a controlled environment than during an actual emergency.

Tabletop exercises are a continual process. Even when you believe your plans are well tested, you should continue to hold tabletop exercises at least annually to help staff retain knowledge about their roles. You should also conduct tabletop exercises after you make staff changes, building changes, equipment changes or after you adjust your emergency plans.

### TABLETOP EXERCISE PLAYERS

The people involved in your tabletop exercise will vary depending on which section of your emergency plan you are testing. When you first facilitate tabletop exercises, it's helpful to include only a small group of employees, adding local emergency responders later in the process.

Example participants may include:

- District and building administrators
- Teachers
- Maintenance staff
- Transportation staff
- Safety/Security personnel
- Fire department/EMS
- Law enforcement
- Emergency management
- Crisis team members
- Nurse



### Step 4: Conduct Drills

Most schools already conduct mandated drills during the year, including those for fire and tornados, but conducting other emergency drills is just as important, even if not mandated. Emergency drills for responses such as lockdown, shelter-in-place, vehicle accidents or clearing the halls provide the training and route memorization of the skill sets necessary for emergency situations.

All emergency drills should be highly controlled, test a single procedure and involve both students and staff. Drills should be unannounced and performed under varying and nonideal conditions (e.g., different times of day, different weather conditions, different times during academic calendar, during absence of key personnel). Students and staff should be trained prior to any drill to make sure they know what is expected. Invite local emergency responders to observe the drill.



## Step 5: Conduct Functional Exercises

After you have performed a number of drills for specific procedures, the next step is functional exercises. These exercises help you understand how your emergency plans integrate with local emergency responders' plans, how

your incident command structure operates and how you communicate with emergency responders during an emergency.

Functional Exercises:

- Are scenario-based, like tabletop exercises, but conducted in a realistic, real-time environment without actual movement of personnel and equipment
- Involve all areas/departments of the district and likely all departments of the local emergency responders
- Are often conducted in several different rooms or buildings to reveal communication needs and to provide a more realistic disconnect between the school and the emergency responders
- Must be highly managed and well organized to produce useful results
- Must be extensively planned and require advanced notification



## Step 6: Conduct Full-Scale Exercises

A full-scale exercise is a complex, multiagency, multijurisdictional, multiorganizational exercise designed to validate many facets of emergency plans and preparedness. They not only test the district's emergency plans, but also the plans of the responding agencies. Very few schools ever perform this type of exercise due to time requirements (six to eight months of planning), coordination and expense involved. Full-scale

exercises are conducted in real time, creating a stressful, time-constrained environment that closely mirrors real events in a safe manner. This may include simulated building damage, human casualties, active search and rescue, mass transportation and other activities, depending on the scenario.

## AFTER-ACTION REPORTING

After-action reporting allows you to discuss, evaluate and document the results of drills and tabletop, functional or full-scale exercises. This helps analyze the emergency plans and participants' performances and provides corrective actions for areas identified for improvement. This is an important part of any exercise and should not be overlooked. The goal of the previously discussed exercises cannot be achieved until the recommendations from the after-action reporting process are implemented.

## IMPROVEMENT PLAN

An improvement plan serves as the roadmap to making changes, additions and deletions to your emergency plan or training. Use the after-action report to establish an improvement plan. Make sure the plan sets specific goals and assigns tasks with clear, specific deadlines to the appropriate personnel. No matter what drills or exercises you conduct, plans should be reviewed annually, at a minimum and revised as necessary.



## Learn More

To learn more about school emergency drills and exercises, contact your independent insurance agent or your local EMC loss control representative.

