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# Conducting Crisis Exercises and Drills: Guidelines for Schools

While high profile crisis events and instances of violent crimes at school are extremely rare (e.g., the odds of a student being the victim of a school-associated homicide are about 1 in 2.5 million), it is essential that all schools be prepared to respond to emergency situations as part of their school safety and crisis planning and preparation. Current state laws already require certain types of drills (e.g., fire drills) and many schools have begun to conduct a much broader range of crisis exercises and drills. Which type of drills are conducted and how is critical to both their effectiveness and minimizing the potential to cause trauma or harm unintentionally. Members of the National Association of School Psychologists' PREPaRE Workgroup offer the following guidelines to help schools understand what might be considered best practices in the development and implementation of a variety of exercises and drills.

## Start With Simple Exercises

School crisis response training and exercises can be discussion-based (orientation seminars, workshops, or tabletop drills) or operations-based (a variety of specific emergency drills, functional exercise drills, or full-scale exercises), each of which can be useful in preparing school staff, crisis team members, students and other agencies for a wide variety of crises. However, *it is recommended that districts start with simple, low-cost discussion-based exercises (e.g., orientations) and work their way toward more complex and expensive, operations-based exercises (e.g., full scale drills* U.S. Department of Education, [USDE], 2006; Freeman & Taylor, 2010). Although there is little empirical research about drills, existing research suggests that drills implemented according to best practice can increase students' knowledge and skills of how to respond in an emergency, without elevating their anxiety or perceived safety (Zhe & Nickerson, 2007).

## Select an Appropriate Exercise Scenario

There is a difference between crises that are possible and those that are more probable, and *exercises are most useful when based on a vulnerability assessment that identifies the types of risks or potential hazards that have a probability of occurring in a specific community*. Vulnerability assessments that address both physical and psychological safety help schools identify areas wherein they are most vulnerable (e.g., responding to wild animals, trespassers, food contamination, chemical spills, angry students or parents; Reeves et al., 2011). Building administration and crisis response teams should consider training on how to respond to different emergency protocols within their crisis plans (e.g., fire drills, lockdowns, shelter-in-place drills, and evacuation procedures). Districts that are vulnerable to certain types of natural disasters (e.g., tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and earthquakes) should consider drills related to hazards associated with specific events. Exercises should be planned to address multiple hazards and consider unexpected occurrences (e.g., crisis occurring during a passing period or recess). When conducting crisis exercises and drills, schools also need to consider how they will respond to individuals with special needs. This includes students and staff members with physical handicaps (including temporary ones), medical needs, and emotional concerns (Reeves et al., 2011).

## Discussion-Based Exercises

Discussion-based exercises are used to familiarize students and school staff members with crisis plans, policies, agency agreements, and emergency procedures. Orientation seminars and workshops can be an efficient way to introduce school staff members, first responders, and volunteers to the school's crisis plans and procedures, and tabletop drills can be an effective first step in testing crisis response protocols (USDE, 2006).

**Orientations.** These relatively brief seminars (which can be a part of regularly scheduled staff meetings) are discussions facilitated by a school crisis team leader (e.g., school principal). This is often the first step in ensuring that all school staff members understand a recently developed (or revised) school safety or crisis preparedness plan. These meetings review the school's emergency response procedures; and they provide the opportunity to discuss crisis response coordination, roles, responsibilities, procedures, and the equipment that might be needed to respond to a school emergency. Orientations can be facilitated by the use of a PowerPoint presentation, handouts, or videos illustrating the correct response to an emergency situation (Freeman & Taylor, 2010).

**Workshops.** Relative to an orientation, crisis response workshops typically last longer (up to 3 hours), involve more participant interaction, and may focus on a specific issue. They include sharing information; obtaining different perspectives; testing new ideas, policies, or procedures; training groups to perform specific coordinated crisis response activities; problem-solving; obtaining consensus; and building teams through lecture, discussion, and break-outs (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [USDHS], 2007).

**Tabletop drills.** These drills involve presenting crisis response teams with a crisis scenario and asking them to then discuss what their crisis response roles would require them to do in the given situation. These drills help participants better understand their crisis response roles and responsibilities, and can last from 1-4 hours (Freeman & Taylor, 2011). Tabletop drills are designed to prompt an in-depth, constructive, problem-solving discussion about existing emergency response plans as participants identify, investigate, and resolve issues (Reeves et al., 2012; USDE, 2006). When conducting this kind of drill a specific individual facilitates the drill, another person records each step the team suggests, and another is responsible for facilitating an evaluative discussion covering what the team did well and what areas are in need of improvement. Schools can develop written or video scenarios for the crisis team to follow during the tabletop drill. Effective tabletop scenarios should inject unexpected events into the discussion. Crisis events typically do not occur predictably. Thus, injecting "new" pieces of information into the tabletop drill makes it more realistic.

### **Operations-Based Exercises**

Operations-based exercises serve to validate plans, policies, and procedures; clarify roles and responsibilities; and identify gaps in resources. They involve school staff and students reacting to a simulated crisis; practicing the response to specific emergency conditions. They may include the mobilization of emergency equipment, resources and networks. When planning operations-based exercises, it is important that schools start with less intense emergency drills and work their way up to functional exercises and full-scale drills. Practicing different types of emergency drills can help a school prepare for a more involved emergency response (Freeman & Taylor, 2010; USDHS, 2007).

**Emergency drills.** These drills involve practicing a single specific emergency procedure or protocol and can last from 30 minutes to 2 hours (Freeman & Taylor, 2011). Many schools already conduct a variety of these drills (e.g., lockdown, fire, evacuation, reverse evacuation, duck-cover-hold, and shelter-in-place) with students and staff, which allow them to practice the steps they should take in emergency situations. These exercises may include local public safety agencies (USDE, 2006). Each state requires a different number and type of annual emergency drills. Some states also require that local public safety agency representatives be present when schools conduct these drills.

**Functional exercises.** These exercises are simulations of emergency situations with realistic timelines that can last from 3 to 8 hours, and that test one or more functions of a school's emergency response plan during an interactive, time-pressured, simulated event. Functional exercises are often conducted in a school district's emergency operations center, but do not involve the movement of emergency personnel and equipment. Participants are given directions by exercise controllers and simulators via telephones, radios, and televisions, and they must respond appropriately to the incidents as they arise. Evaluators candidly critique the exercise and the team's performance. Roles in a functional drill include (a) an exercise controller who manages and directs the exercise, (b) players who respond as they would in a real emergency, (c) crisis simulators who assume external roles and deliver planned messages to the players, and (d) evaluators who assess performance through observations. Functional exercises are also

less expensive than a full-scale drill due to the lack of movement of emergency personnel or equipment (Freeman & Taylor, 2010; 2011; USDE, 2006).

**Full-scale drills.** As a school considers a full-scale drill, it is essential that it be carefully planned and that it does not cause harm (e.g., unnecessarily frighten participants). The local community and parents must be informed about the drill starting at least one month in advance, and the school should work with the media and its local municipality to inform all members of the surrounding community. These drills are the most elaborate, expensive, and time consuming, lasting from a half-day to multiple days, and often have a significant effect on instructional time. The full-scale drill is a simulation of emergency situations in real time with all necessary resources deployed, allowing for the evaluation of operational capabilities of emergency management systems in a highly stressful environment that simulates actual conditions. This type of drill will test multiple emergency protocols at once (e.g., reverse evacuation and lockdown to an off-site evacuation). To design and conduct a full-scale drill, districts collaborate with multiple agencies (including but not limited to police, fire, health departments, mental health agencies, transportation, local utilities, hospitals, and emergency management agencies). Full-scale drills also may involve multiple municipalities and jurisdictions (Freeman & Taylor, 2010; 2011; USDHS, 2007). Additional considerations for the full-scale drill are offered in Table 1.

When conducting full-scale drills, schools should choose a scenario that is most likely to occur in their communities and thereby increase the likelihood of involving all community stakeholders. A vulnerability assessment that includes a local hazard analysis can assist schools in determining what scenario should be chosen for the full-scale drill (Reeves et al., 2011). Additional considerations for the full-scale drill are offered in Table 1.

**Table 1 *Essential Considerations When Developing/Conducting Full-Scale Drill***

- May require as long as a year to 18 months to develop.
- Should be preceded by orientation sessions, emergency drills, and functional exercises.
- Should be part of a long-term emergency exercise plan that begins with basic drills and culminates with the full-scale drill.
- May require collaboration with an outside expert or consultant to provide guidance in conducting crisis exercises.
- Must not be mistaken for a real crisis event.
- Likely will not require exposing students and staff to potentially traumatic stimuli (e.g., shooting blanks, fake blood) to meet drill objectives, as this exposure may lead to increased threat perceptions, serve as a reminder of prior trauma, and generate distressing reactions.<sup>b</sup>
- Does not need to involve the entire student body.<sup>c</sup>
- Should have participating agencies follow the National Incident Management System's Incident Command System and activate an Emergency Operations Center.
- Should require participants to sign in before the drill begins, receive an initial briefing, and wear identification on who they are and what their roles are during the drill.
- Should generate a postincident critique to identify issues to correct.<sup>d</sup>
- Establishes a no-fault/no-fail expectation and emphasizes that mistakes or inconsistencies are learning opportunities to improve future crisis response.

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*Notes.* <sup>a</sup>Sources include Freeman & Taylor (2010). <sup>b</sup>Schools must consider the costs and benefits of using certain types of props during a full-scale drill and the developmental level of the children that are involved. The district's risk manager and a mental health staff member must be involved in the process of determining what types of dramatizations will occur. In addition, it should be recognized that some props may damage school or community facilities (e.g., blanks can leave nicks in the wall). <sup>c</sup>The drill can be conducted on the weekend with a small group of student actors and other adults playing students. All drill participants should be carefully selected and screened for past trauma history, trained about what the drill will involve, and supported afterward. <sup>d</sup>This report summarizes the findings of the drill and analyzes its outcomes relative to drill goals and objectives. Any areas that need improvement are identified and provided to the crisis team to determine further training needs or changes to the crisis response plan.

**The guidance in this document is not a substitute for crisis team training, planning and more in-depth knowledge of the school crisis prevention and intervention process.** For more extensive school crisis prevention and intervention information please refer to Brock et al. (2009) or visit [www.nasponline.org/prepare](http://www.nasponline.org/prepare) for details the PREPaRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum. For detailed guidance on planning, conducting, and evaluating crisis exercises and drills specifically, review FEMA's Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) at [https://hseep.dhs.gov/pages/1001\\_HSEEP7.aspx](https://hseep.dhs.gov/pages/1001_HSEEP7.aspx)

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