

PREPARING FOR EMERGENCIES AT SCHOOL



At 4:31 a.m. on January 17, 1994 a 6.8 magnitude earthquake struck a densely populated area in Southern California, resulting in 61 deaths.ⁱ Imagine if the Northridge earthquake struck during school hours, thousands of children would have been injured or killed by falling debris, desks or lighting. LA public schools withstood the earthquake well, in large part due to a stringent school construction code. However, schools cannot rely on their building's structure to protect staff and students. They must plan ahead for emergencies, as it could be the difference between calm and chaos and between life and death.

What Is An Emergency?

An **emergency** is a sudden unforeseen crisis, usually involving danger, which calls for immediate action. It is a situation that can directly or indirectly affect a single student or employee; an entire school; or impact a whole community. Emergencies can happen before, during or after school and on or off campus. It can be a range of events and hazards caused by both nature and people.

Schools in California are at risk for many different types of emergencies including:

- **Natural disasters** (earthquakes, floods)
- **Extreme weather** (storms, heat)
- **Fires** (building fires, wildfires)
- **Chemical or hazardous material spills or releases** (liquid mercury)
- **Major transportation accidents** (bus, car, motorcycle, bike or skate board crashes)
- **Incidents of violence** (school fights, shootings)
- **Bomb threats**
- **Medical emergencies**
- **Student or staff deaths** (suicide, homicide, unintentional or natural)
- **Acts of terror**
- **Outbreaks of disease or infections** (HINI virus)

i Preparing for the “Big One” – Saving Lives Through Earthquake Mitigation in Los Angeles, CA:
<http://www.huduser.org/publications/destech/bigone/summary.html>



Your school and district may be at risk for some of the emergency situations listed above. Focus on these possibilities when developing or reviewing your **School Emergency Plan**. Other schools' emergency plans can serve as useful models, but what is effective for one school may be ineffective for another (e.g., a large inner-city school vs. a school in a rural area). It is crucial that your plan meets the unique needs of your students, staff and local residents.

What Should School Emergency Plans Include?

Start by forming an emergency committee and identify who should be involved in developing your plan. Involve different staff representatives, students and parents. Effective planning begins with leadership, management support and open communication. Your plan needs to address state and local school safety laws and must comply with governmental agency regulations. The California Education Code requires public and private schools, K-12, to develop emergency plans and to conduct “drop, cover and hold” drills. Cal/OSHA requires all employers with ten or more employees to have an Emergency Action Plan in writing.ⁱⁱ

School Emergency Plans must include:

- **Evacuation, return and lock down procedures.** Designate which buildings will serve as emergency shelters, what staff should do during serious weather conditions and a plan of action for students or staff with disabilities or special needs. Determine the evacuation routes and outside meeting areas for emergencies that require leaving buildings. Exits and evacuation routes should be checked periodically to be sure they are not blocked.
- **Roles and responsibilities of school staff.** All staff must know the names or job titles of staff assigned to the following: incident commander in charge during emergencies, liaison to emergency responders, student caregivers, security officers, medical staff, spokesperson and public information officer.
- **Emergency drills and trainings for staff, students and emergency responders.** Conduct drills using the alarm system and “all clear” announcements. Staff should be trained on their emergency responsibilities, how to report emergencies, where to meet during emergencies, how to use emergency equipment, and how to manage students during emergencies, especially those experiencing panic reactions. Training must be provided when the Emergency Action Plan is first developed, whenever staff emergency responsibilities change, and every time the plan is altered due to issues that need to be addressed. Cal/OSHA's Emergency Action Plan standard: <http://www.dir.ca.gov/title8/3220.html>.

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- **Methods for communicating with staff, students and families.** Develop a mechanism to notify students and staff that an incident is occurring and instruct them on what to do. If students are evacuated from the school building, consider if staff will use cell phones, radios, intercoms or runners to get information to supervising staff. Decide how to communicate with parents/guardians to reunite them with their children.
- **Emergency equipment and supplies.** Appropriate equipment such as building sprinkler systems and fire extinguishers should be installed and tested on a regular basis. There should be enough phones or radios for communication, supplies, or first-aid-kits and master keys for emergency responders to have complete access to your school buildings.
- **Maps and facilities information.** Create site maps that include information about classrooms, hallways and stairwells, the location of utility shut-offs, and staging sites for medical personnel to treat the injured and for families to be reunited with their children.
- **Accountability and student release procedures.** Develop procedures to account for all students, staff and visitors. A method should be in place for tracking student release and ensuring that students are only released to authorized individuals.
- **Assessment of the school environment and emergency equipment.** Ensure that your school does not contribute to an emergency (e.g., fire extinguishers do not function and a fire spreads unnecessarily). Schools must make reasonable efforts to identify, prevent, intervene or remediate situations where there is foreseeable danger. Routine assessments of hazards are critical and may protect staff from lawsuits.

Take the time to develop a complete, comprehensive plan and review it at least once a year. Partner with emergency responders such as fire fighters and work with organizations such as the American Red Cross. There must also be a process in place for evaluating the effectiveness of a response after an incident occurs. For more information on developing School Emergency Plans, visit:
<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/index.html>.



Tips on Specific Types of Emergencies

Below are tips on three different types of emergencies that California schools are at risk for.

School Violence

Workplace violence is defined as any physical assault, threatening behavior or verbal abuse that occurs in the work setting. The percentage of public schools in the U.S. that reported violent incidents of crime on campuses for the 2007-08 school year was 75.5% or 27.9 incidents per 1,000 students.ⁱⁱⁱ Recent data demonstrate that teachers experience 39 crimes per 1,000 teachers (25 thefts and 14 violent crimes).^{iv} True rates may be much higher since most incidents go unreported.

The events of Columbine High School left the entire nation feeling vulnerable. Schools cannot always control school shootings, fights or bomb threats. However, they can take actions to reduce the likelihood of such events. Prevention efforts need to address all levels of school violence: individual, relationships (e.g., relationships with family and staff), community and society. The following are some school practices to help protect against school violence:

- Implement violence prevention programs such as anti-bullying, social problem-solving and life skills programs.
- Immediately address rule violations and reward adherence to them.
- Communicate clear and positive expectations for behavior.
- Stress high academic expectations for all students.
- Encourage meaningful involvement of parents and the community.

Visit: <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/youthviolence/schoolviolence/index.html>

iii Crime, Violence, Discipline and Safety in U.S. Public Schools 2007-08: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009326.pdf>

iv Violence Against Teachers and School Staff: http://www.cdc.gov/NIOSH/blog/nsb041408_teacher.html



Earthquakes

Earthquakes are a particular concern for schools with their large concentrations of children in confined spaces. During an earthquake if you are:

Indoors: Drop, Cover and Hold: Drop to the floor, take cover under a sturdy desk or table and hold on to it tightly. Be prepared to move with it until the shaking stops. If you are not near a desk or table, drop to the floor against the interior wall and protect your head and neck with your arms. Avoid windows, mirrors, hanging objects, hazardous chemicals, and cabinets with doors that swing open and contain loose or heavy items. If inside, stay inside until the shaking stops!

Outdoors: Move to an open space away from power lines, trees, signs, buildings, vehicles and other hazards. Lie down or crouch because your legs will be unsteady. Look around to be aware of dangers that may require movement.

Remember: Indoors or outdoors, take action at the first indication of an earthquake. Do not panic, run for building exits or use an elevator. Tell others around you to take cover. Stay under cover until shaking stops. If indoors, evacuation should occur as soon as possible after an earthquake due to the possibility of aftershocks, building collapse, fires or explosions.

Fires

Building damage, injuries or deaths due to fires can be avoided or reduced if:

- Aisles and hallways are kept clear at all times.
- Excessive paper or other combustibles in classrooms or offices are properly stored.
- School employees know the locations of fire extinguishers and understand how to use them.

Should your school encounter a fire or find significant smoke in an enclosed area, do the following:

- Report the fire/smoke to emergency personnel; pull the nearest fire alarm and call 911.
- Evacuate area immediately via the nearest exit and close doors behind you.
- Proceed to your designated outside meeting area for emergencies.