Emergency Response Safety for Schools

Most school districts and individual schools have emergency response plans in place. However, they are not always practiced regularly, coordinated with community resources, updated regularly or based on factual data and circumstances. As a result, when schools and districts find themselves in situations that merit an emergency response, they are often left unprepared. Having a solid emergency response plan in place is essential, as emergencies of all shapes and sizes occur in schools on a daily basis, and these incidents can have lasting physical, emotional and educational ramifications. This article outlines the four main phases involved in planning an effective emergency response plan.

Phase 1: Mitigation and Prevention

Mitigation is the actions a school and district can take to eliminate or reduce loss of life and property damage resulting from an event that cannot be prevented. On the other hand, prevention is the actions that can be taken to decrease the likelihood that an event or crisis will occur. Some examples of mitigation include bolting bookshelves to the wall and fencing off hazardous areas, whereas some examples of prevention include forming policies related to food preparation, mail handling and building access; making assessments related to threats, physical infrastructure, and culture and climate of the school; and assessing current school efforts, such as antibullying policies and wellness activities. To put this phase into action, school officials should be encouraged to take the following steps:

- Know the school building thoroughly and the community at large.
- Become acquainted with local first responders, community partners and the state emergency management agency.
- Bring together regional, local and school leaders.
- Make regular school safety and security efforts part of larger mitigation and prevention efforts.
- Establish clear lines of communication for emergency situations.
- Conduct routine safety and security needs assessments to identify ongoing vulnerabilities or gaps in protection.
- Incorporate lessons learned from previous emergencies and drills to update emergency plans.

Phase 2: Preparedness

The preparedness phase is designed to get the school community ready for potential emergencies by coordinating efforts with community partners. This involves developing protocols and policies, creating incident command systems and conducting formal training and exercises. Here are some best practices to consider during the preparedness phase:

- Identify and involve stakeholders in the planning process.
- Determine what crises the plan will address.
- Define roles and responsibilities for key stakeholders.
- Develop methods for communicating with staff, students, families and the media during emergencies.
- Obtain necessary emergency equipment and supplies.
- Prepare for immediate responses.
- Create detailed maps and facility information.
- Develop accountability and student release procedures.
- Predetermine policies for locating staff and teachers following emergencies.
- Establish systems off-site for storing registration information and for conducting payroll services.
- Practice the program with all those affected by a potential emergency.

- Address possible liability issues stemming from emergency situations.

Phase 3: Response

The response phase involves taking action to effectively contain and resolve an emergency by implementing the school's or district's emergency response plan. Some important guidelines to consider during this phase include:

- Expect the unexpected.
- Assess the situation and choose the appropriate response.
- Notify appropriate emergency personnel and the school crisis response team.
- Evacuate or lock down the premises, as appropriate.
- Triage injuries and provide emergency first aid to those who need it.
- Keep emergency supplies nearby and properly organized at all times.
- Identify primary and alternative evacuation sites in case the primary sites are not available during an emergency.
- Move district resources (e.g., buses) out of the immediate disaster area.
- Trust leadership to know how to handle the situation.
- Communicate accurate and appropriate information.
- Activate the student release system.
- If it is a large-scale disaster and the buildings were evacuated for an extended period of time, establish a system for distributing or disposing of food stored in school facilities.
- Allow for flexibility in implementing the emergency response plan. Afterward, document the process and how successful the plan was in addressing the situation.

Phase 4: Recovery

The recovery phase is designed to assist students, staff, and their families in the healing process and to restore the school's educational operations following an emergency. This includes repairing the school's physical and structural aspects, attending to business and financial needs, resuming the academic curriculum, and addressing psychological or emotional trauma. Planning for recovery involves establishing community partnerships, developing policies, providing training and developing memorandums of understanding. Here are some key steps to consider amid this phase:

- Assemble a crisis intervention team.
- Return to the "business of learning" as quickly as possible.
- Keep students, families and the media well-informed, while also respecting the privacy of those affected.
- Provide assessments of the emotional needs of the staff, students, families and emergency responders.
- Provide stress management resources after class resumes.
- Conduct daily debriefings with staff, emergency responders and others assisting in the recovery efforts.
- Don't rush the process. Allow everyone involved to take as much time as needed for recovery.
- Pre-negotiate contracts for transportation, food, construction and other district needs.
- Implement a system to manage the receipt of any donations.

Goal of Emergency Response Systems

If an emergency response plan is created and executed correctly, it should hopefully achieve the following objectives:

- Address all four phases of emergency response, as listed above
- Take an "all hazards" approach, meaning that the plan addresses the following perils:
  - Natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, tornadoes, floods and other extreme weather events)
  - Technological emergencies, such as power outages
  - Infrastructure issues, such as road, bridge and utility breakdowns
  - Nonstructural concerns, such as broken equipment or fixtures
  - Man-made concerns, such as hazardous materials release or acts of terrorism
  - Biological disasters, such as a flu pandemic or the spread of foodborne illness
  - Physical and mental well-being issues, such as broken bones from playing too roughly or student suicide
  - Student culture and climate concerns, such as bullying, drugs or violent behavior on the premises

It's a Team Effort

Schools don't have to navigate their emergency response efforts alone. By engaging with the local government, law enforcement, students and their families, and the district in these efforts, schools can take appropriate measures to make their facilities safer places to learn and work. Furthermore, trusted insurance professionals can make all the difference in helping schools identify potential exposures arising from various emergency situations and in providing customized loss control initiatives and coverage solutions to minimize these risks. For additional industry-specific risk management resources and insurance guidance, contact us today.