

Nov./Dec. 2021

ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Refreshing your safety practices

After getting back into the routine of in-person learning, schools may need to dust the cobwebs off some important regular procedures.

Safety drills are a critical step in making sure students and staff respond appropriately when there is an emergency. But with most classrooms sitting empty last year because of COVID-19 shutdowns, most schools have gone more than a year without any kind of safety drill.

Now that students have returned to class, there is a lot of catching up to do in all areas. It might be tempting to put safety drills on the back burner, but a better approach — and a requirement in some states — is to make them a priority.

Review your safety plan

Your first task is to review your school's safety plan and make sure it is up to date. Emergency plans must cover everything from fires and earthquakes to active shooters and environmental hazards. After so many months away from the building, it's important to review your safety procedures with all staff. You likely have new staff members since the pandemic began, and even your returning staff members will need a refresher on steps to take during different emergency situations. Your district very likely has updated your plan with new protocols and procedures regarding COVID-19. Take time in a staff meeting to review where people can ask questions and offer insights.

Share your safety procedures with parents

Parents need to feel confident that their child is safe at school, and it's reassuring to them to know school staff members are prepared for various emergency situations. Keep parents well informed about your safety procedures and the steps the district will take — and parents need to follow — if reunification is required. Send parent notifications and post alerts on your website when there is a lockdown or other emergency. Parents appreciate hearing such news directly from the school, rather than on the television or radio.

Schedule regular safety drills

Drills are important for a lot of reasons. One, they are required by law. Most importantly, they help people know what to do in emergencies so they can react quickly and appropriately. That's critical for students as well as staff. Think about this: this year's 10th graders haven't been in school since eighth grade, so the high school is new to them. They don't know what they're supposed to do or where they're supposed to go during emergency drills.

Also be aware that emergencies are stressful, and people don't always respond the way you might predict. A good practice is to hold cross train drill assignments, so that more than one

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staff member is prepared to handle different roles. That way, if someone is out sick or gets injured during a crisis, others will be able to step in and do their job.

By making teachers and students familiar with your emergency plan, you reduce anxiety and confusion, so they remain calm when an emergency actually happens.

Add table-top exercises with community stakeholders

While drills are essential, it's smart to also conduct occasional table-top exercises, and invite local first responders and other stakeholders. This offers an effective way to stage different scenarios and learn from each other. It also creates stronger relationships with your community partners.

How to Make the Most of Your Drills

As you prepare to conduct school safety drills this year, a good resource is a free publication from Campus Safety Magazine titled, "18 Months Without A Fire Drill: How Your Emergency Exercises Can Make A Come Back." You can download it at this link: www.campussafetymagazine.com/download/18-months-without-a-fire-drill-how-your-emergency-exercises-can-make-a-come-back

- Get everyone involved. Emphasize cooperation between your school, police and first responders. Each party is critical to your school's success in responding to critical incidents.
- Keep the age and cognitive abilities of students in mind when developing drills. Drills at a grade school need to look different than those at a high school.
- Treat the drill like a real emergency. Demand and expect full and serious participation from all involved — administrators, teachers, students and first responders.
- Practice frequently and realistically. Local mandates may dictate how frequently to hold drills, but you can mix up when you schedule the drills — don't let convenience dictate timing. And hold some when the principal is out of the building to allow others to get comfortable being in charge.
- Practice different types of drills. It's common to focus on fire and bad weather drills. But make sure your drills reflect issues that are specific to your geographic area (earthquakes, wild animals) or school population (a large percentage of students with special cognitive or physical needs). Consider planning for and practicing other situations: a child who's not breathing or who's had an allergic reaction, or an aggressive dog on the playground.
- Hold post-drill debriefings to understand what went right — and wrong. Gather input from a variety of participants and learn from mistakes. Create an environment where missteps are seen as opportunities to improve, or participants will be reluctant to speak up when they see a problem.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant