

TAKE THE FIRST STEP!

PREPAREDNESS AND PUBLIC HEALTH THREATS: Addressing the Unique Needs of the Nation's Vulnerable Populations



Schools Serving Children in Kindergarten through 12th Grade

Ensuring that children are safe when they are in schools is one of the most important goals for any teacher or administrator. However, the challenge of a comprehensive emergency response plan for schools are unique, given preparedness requires coordination with diverse groups such as, parents, children and law enforcement officials. A preparedness poll conducted by APHA¹ found that in light of recent national emergencies, including the September 11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina, 94% of school districts have emergency response plans in place, but only 50% have a plan for an infectious disease epidemic. This lack of preparedness is a grave concern, given a serious infectious disease could spread rapidly through schools and communities.

Since ninety-one percent of most school administrators rate preparing for a public health emergency as a priority, the primary obstacles for emergency preparedness among schools appear to be costs and lack of resources. Only 6% of surveyed schools report sufficient funding to make substantial investments in student health and safety, while 66% report their budgets are 'tight' or in 'crisis.'

In spite of these barriers, most schools do at least have some emergency procedures in place. Of the schools surveyed, 64% report they have a communication plan for contacting students and staff family members, 59% have recent photos of students, and 84% stated they have procedures in place to evacuate students in cases of immediate threat. However, in cases where 'sheltering in place' may be necessary, only 18% of school administrators state they have enough drinking water to support the school population for at least three days.

So what steps can school administrators and teachers take to assess their school's level of preparedness? Following are a series of questions designed to assess emergency preparedness for unexpected or ongoing public health crises:

How to prepare for the first 24 hours of a public health crisis:

Step 1: Have you prepared safety drills for your school?

- Do students and faculty know the appropriate building evacuation route and have they practiced evacuating?
- Have students and faculty practiced how to "shelter in place"?

Step 2: Have emergency communication plans with local authorities been clearly established?

Step 3: Is your school's emergency response plan appropriate for your geographic region?

- Is your school's plan adaptive to different types of emergencies?

¹ Under contract with APHA, Peter Hart Research Associates, Inc. conducted a national survey of 150 school superintendents and principals, from February 9-25, 2007. At the 95% confidence level, the margin of error is +8.0.



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Step 4: Have parents of students been educated about emergency evacuation procedures?

- Are parents aware of how to reunite with their children if students are evacuated from school grounds?
- Have parents been taught appropriate response behaviors to prevent hysteria among the students, particularly younger children?
- Are communication systems in place to advise parents of children's well-being in the event students need to "shelter in place"?

How to prepare for an ongoing public health crisis:

Step 1: Develop a plan for distance learning if schools are closed for an indefinite period of time.

- Determine how students will receive instruction materials during an indefinite school closure.
- Determine how communication between students and teachers will be established during an indefinite school closure.

Step 2: Evaluate the school curriculum to identify "teachable" moments related to the ongoing crisis.

Step 3: Return to instruction as soon as possible, and monitor students' emotional well-being.

Strategies for Emergency Response Plans:

1. Make sure all relevant stakeholders are aware of emergency response procedures. Provide user-friendly plans in writing to students, parents, teachers and local authorities, including the police and fire departments.
2. Make emergency preparedness a living, breathing process. Hold meetings with parents and faculty to discuss procedures and appropriate responses. And practice emergency response drills with students. These actions will help the community feel empowered, rather than fearful.
3. Establish a standing committee of community leaders that continually review and revise emergency response plans.

Other resources:

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/school/schoolchecklist.html>

<http://www.healthyschools.org>

<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/index.html>

<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/crisisplanning.pdf>

