HELPFUL HINTS
FOR SCHOOL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

READINESS AND EMERGENCY
MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS
TA CENTER

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Students as both stakeholders and resources

Comprehensive emergency management in schools requires both a leadership vision and a realistic, multiyear plan that is rooted in building strong, working relationships between schools and their many stakeholders. In the emergency management context, stakeholders typically include school and district staff, emergency response agencies, parent groups, surrounding neighborhoods or businesses, and the media. Often overlooked, however, is the input of one stakeholder group with perhaps the most first-hand involvement in the school setting: students. Rather than solely representing an entity needing to be managed in an emergency situation, students can in fact serve as a valuable resource in their own right for planning and partnering in emergency management efforts.

As a stakeholder group, students possess unique first-hand knowledge of both the physical and social structure of the school setting as well as its strengths and vulnerabilities. Oftentimes, this view is far more accurate than that of administrators and outside agencies. Students also have a great deal of clout when it comes to garnering community support for school initiatives and funding allocations. Finally, they exert significant influence on the behavior of their peers, particularly in emergency situations. When students develop a sense of personal responsibility for school safety, they also develop ownership, pride, and a meaningful connection to their role in a community.

Given those reasons and the fact that students are often extremely receptive to leadership roles (especially those roles separated from the mainstream academic curriculum), an invitation to students to serve as stakeholders in the school's or district's emergency management work will likely be well received. The following sections will describe strategies for engaging this key stakeholder partner in school emergency management planning efforts while still safeguarding their well-being.

Students' roles in the emergency management cycle

Each of the four key phases of the emergency management cycle provide unique opportunities to engage students. The goal of the first phase, *prevention-mitigation*, is to decrease the likelihood that emergencies will occur and to take steps to minimize harm, including property damage and the loss of life. Students can help identify hazards, or engage in mitigation projects, or both. For example, students in woodworking or shop classes may create supports or other aids, such as secure room dividers or library bookshelves, to prevent or mitigate nonstructural collapses in the event of an earthquake. Students also can play a key leadership role in drug, alcohol, suicide, and bullying prevention programs—all of which bear a connection to violence prevention. For example, select students may provide input into the school's policy on responding to suicides; they may organize substance abuse prevention public awareness campaigns; and they can model leadership to peers by actively intervening to stop instances of bullying.

HELPFUL**HINTS**

The second phase, *preparedness*, aims to facilitate a quick and coordinated response in the event of an emergency. Students can engage in role-play responsibilities during drills or training events, help draft aspects of the emergency management plan, and identify and create such materials as signs or posters to aid in crowd or traffic control that can be used during a response. In the third phase, *response*, students can help staff members efficiently execute the school's emergency management plan by assisting in preassigned functions for which they have been trained, such as helping in the setup of the parent-student reunification site, assisting with crowd control, or when staff resources are extremely limited, serving as scribes to document the sequence and time charting of decisions by the incident commander or other key positions in the Incident Command System (ICS).[1]

Finally, keeping with the central goal of the fourth phase, *recovery*, students can play a critical role in restoring the learning environment and supporting healing by helping to repair both the physical and emotional damage to the facilities and the school community, respectively. Students can take a leadership role, for example, in campus beautification projects, they can engage community groups in securing donations for repair, and they can provide input into policies surrounding anniversaries.

Issues to consider regarding student involvement in emergency situations
Ultimately, schools have a legal obligation to maintain the safety of their students. Therefore, some schools may hesitate to involve students in emergency management work for fear of litigation. However, despite potential liabilities, schools need to engage students because of all the positive attributes and skills they bring to the table. With careful

training and selection of response functions that are appropriate for students, schools actually may decrease their liabilities. The obligation to prevent injuries in schools is not only the responsibility of the institution but also of the members of that community. Therefore, the more students are involved in planning and trained in response procedures, the more the district has done to ensure they are prepared for emergencies, and the less likely a cause for institutional negligence can be found. In all cases, parental approval and legal consultation should be sought before involving students in emergency planning efforts beyond low-level participation in regularly scheduled drills.

Many administrators fear that if students are too involved in emergency planning, a greater chance exists for a disruptive student to access sensitive information and intentionally cause harm, or worsen an already dangerous situation. For example, a school could fear that if students participate in vulnerability assessments[2] then certain students may learn the schools' weaknesses or critical infrastructure points and exploit these when planning an act of targeted school violence. Similarly, administration might worry that if students knew vital egress routes or emergency response staging areas, they could plant explosives in these areas. These are legitimate concerns supported by extremely rare cases where students have, in fact, used such information to cause harm. Accordingly, limited and appropriate levels of student involvement and responsibility in planning efforts and limiting student access to sensitive information are merited. For example, students should not be placed in decision-making roles in the response phase, nor should they be expected to render basic first aid unless they have been formally trained.

[1] The Incident Command System is an emergency management system designed to enable effective and efficient domestic incident management by integrating a combination of facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures and communications operating within a common organizational structure.

[2] Vulnerability assessments are the processes of identifying and prioritizing risks to an individual school that includes designing measurable activities and timelines to address risks.

With these caveats in mind, there is a multitude of meaningful ways in which students can be involved. For example, students can assist in supervised vulnerability assessments where access to key information, such as the location of gas shutoff valves, keys to chemical storage, or codes for communication systems, is limited. Students may model the ICS, provide input into school response procedures (such as suggestions for increasing the efficiency of evacuations), and help to promote the acceptance of mental health recovery interventions.

Students can alert staff to safety issues or to disenfranchised or emotionally struggling peers whose needs otherwise may go undetected. Additionally, they can help bridge the growing communication divide that exists between young people and adults due, in part, to the increasing use by youths of such technology tools as online social networking and text messaging. Effectively understanding these emergent tools is critical to successfully controlling the flow of information during and after an emergency, and students' input is pivotal to adults reaching this understanding.

Overall, students take greater pride in their school the more they are involved and their input is trusted. A partnership with students in emergency management planning efforts can bring great benefit to the community as a whole as well as to the development of each student as a citizen leader.

Prevention-mitigation phase activities for students

Natural connections exist between a school's curriculum and extracurricular structure and activities related to the prevention-mitigation phase of emergency management planning. For example, core aspects of most character development programs focus on behaviors that promote the well-being and happiness of the individual, help the student define his or her rights and obligations, and build skills that serve the common good of his or her community and society in general. Emergency management activities in schools are a perfect match for service-learning programs that aim to integrate meaningful community service with the academic curriculum.

School administrators also can identify specific community safety planning needs that can be fulfilled through curricular avenues. Tying activities in both the prevention-mitigation and the preparedness phases to the existing academic culture will enhance staff buy-in and provide real-world projects that are personally meaningful to students. As an example of multidisciplinary linkage to the curriculum, social studies and government classes can analyze the complexities of federal, state, and local response procedures to natural disasters. Information technology classes, in coordination with local agencies, can utilize geographic information system (GIS) data to help map the safest evacuation routes, the best locations for community staging areas, estimated flooding zones, telephone "callback areas" that allow schools to automatically redial emergency contact numbers for students and parents until they are able to connect, and emergency medical service (EMS) response times. Other examples of prevention-mitigation activities for students include:

- Helping to administer safety surveys;
- Conducting supervised vulnerability assessments and risk prioritization;
- Helping with school beautification and repair projects that are linked to Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles;
- Helping to set up and promote anonymous reporting options;
- Participating in conflict resolution and peer mediation programs; and
- Receiving training in warning signs and the referral process regarding potential to suicide.

Preparedness-phase activities for students

The preparedness phase is frequently one of the longest and most involved components of emergency management. Schools should be regularly engaged in preparedness efforts to enhance their effectiveness in responding to emergencies. With creativity, student participation can be sustained throughout this phase as well.

For example, students can take a prominent role in the organization of logistics for school safety trainings, tabletop exercises,[3] and other activities. Student groups can receive basic first aid and CPR training and can learn about and use the ICS structure to manage such specific events as the prom. As one example, the Montana Safe Schools Center (MSSC) has worked with schools to have students recommend to administration, based on perceptions of skill sets and personality type, which staff would best serve key ICS roles. MSSC Director Richard van den Pol said that while this may seem a role reversal to many administrators, "The fact is that students are keenly tuned into how staff operate under duress." According to van den Pol, "Once the joking is aside, students often take this role very seriously because they realize their opinions and knowledge are being valued." Other preparedness-phase ways to engage students include:

- Working with English and communication teachers to develop sample press briefings;
- Compiling and fund-raising for first aid supplies and "Go-Kits," portable emergency supply kits which contain a stockpile of essential emergency supplies for a recommended 72-hour period;
- Helping to maintain current inventories of classroom emergency supply packs;
- Developing scenarios for tabletop exercises;

[3] A tabletop exercise is a facilitated analysis of an emergency situation in an informal, stress-free environment.

- Serving as "victims" or assisting with moulage during full-scale exercises; and
- Creating signage for traffic control and parent-student reunification sites.

Response-phase activities for students

Although perhaps unlikely to admit it, many students may have a strong feeling of helplessness in school emergency situations because they are not empowered or authorized to take specific action, because response expectations may not have been clearly communicated, or because their roles have not been consistently or realistically rehearsed. Involving students in emergency management planning helps alleviate some of these feelings and places students' actions squarely in the context of their responsibility to a broader, more coordinated, and critically important shared obligation they have to their personal safety and that of their peers.

In many contexts, and particularly in rural schools, **properly trained** students can provide key on-site assistance during the critical window of time before professional response agencies arrive on scene. It is critical that students involved in the response phase are thoroughly trained. For example, trained students may assist in setting up the medical triage, command post and staging areas. This is especially true in large-scale disasters where resources are stretched thin across the community. Other response activities for students that may be appropriate, with adequate training, supervision, parental consent, and *after* the student has been safely and formally accounted for, include:

- Serving as "runners" between the student care area and the parent reunification site;
- Assisting the liaison officer with directing response agencies to additional resources and information;
- Assisting school staff and law enforcement to preserve the crime scene;
- Delivering basic first aid;

- Assisting school staff with crowd control;
- Relaying appropriate and accurate information to parents, caregivers, and siblings; and
- Assisting teachers with student accountability procedures.

Recovery-phase activities for students

The line between the response and recovery phases is often blurry for schools. That is, even after emergency response agencies depart the school facilities, many critical issues still face school administrators, staff, students, and parents. As Marleen Wong, former director of Crisis Counseling and Intervention Services for the Los Angeles Unified School District commented, students often "voice their trauma with their feet or act their way out of school—in other words, they sometimes don't come back to school shortly after a tragic event or they engage in aggressive, hostile acting-out behavior that leads to suspension or expulsion." Yet, according to the research of leading experts and organizations, such as the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, helping students regain a predictable routine is a central step in aiding the healing process. This is particularly the case for children in elementary and preschool grades. Engaging students directly in the recovery process might help facilitate their reconnection to the school environment.

Students also can play a vital role in restoring the learning environment by assisting with damage assessments once the setting is deemed safe by officials and participating in mental health interventions, such as Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS).[4] For example, students may assist in promoting wellness and stress management programs or disseminating information on common traumatic stress responses. Students

should not be placed in positions where they could be directly dealing with peers who are at risk of harming themselves or others. Additional response activities may include:

- Assisting in after-action reports from the student body perspective;
- Providing feedback on ways the school should address anniversaries and memorials;
- Engaging in activities to repair infrastructure, such as woodshop classes to build new book and trophy cases, shop classes to assist in welding, or student groups to replant damaged landscaping;
- Helping spread awareness to their families and their peer groups of the normal range of emotional reactions to tragic events, as well as the symptoms of traumatic stress; and
- Giving input into further revisions to the emergency management plans of the school after the event.

A story of student involvement

When Massachusetts's Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District's Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools[5] project provided trainings in lockdown procedures, students at Minnechaug Regional High School were surprised to learn that there was no "sheltering" counterpart to the Massachusetts law requiring schools to conduct evacuation drills each year. In response, the school's Model Congress Club launched a two-year project that would take them all the way to the Massachusetts State House. The students then drafted Senate Bill No. 305, *An Act Relative to Student Safety*. They presented testimony before the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security during spring 2007.[6] Superintendent Paul Gagliarducci said that his students are genuinely concerned

---

[4] The Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS), a collaborative project with the Los Angeles School District (LAUSD), provides mental health screening and a standardized brief cognitive behavioral therapy treatment in schools for students who have been exposed to violence.

[5] Formerly the Emergency Response and Crisis Management (ERCM) discretionary grant program.
[6] At the time of the release of this Helpful Hints publication, Senate Bill No. 305 had not yet been approved, but according to the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District it was likely going to be resubmitted.

HELPFUL**HINTS**

about the safety in their schools. "In helping draft Senate Bill No. 305, [the students] demonstrated their deep investment in safety issues and made us more keenly aware of the impact of students' voices," Gagliarducci said.

Conclusion
Students have a vital interest in contributing to the safety of their school and community. Such work is central to their development as citizens and is, in fact, part of their ethical and moral responsibility to themselves, their peers, and school staff. Though there are legitimate and important safety limits that must be placed on student engagement in emergency management activities, schools should place a high priority on involving this critical stakeholder group in prevention-mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery activities.

If schools miss this opportunity, they not only deny students unique learning and leadership opportunities, they also decrease their ability to harness one of their greatest, resources available to them. The day of a major emergency, schools need all of the coordinated assistance they can receive; adequately trained, empowered students will step up to this role if they are given the tools and trust of adults to do so.

Resources
Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center
The REMS TA Center, supported by the U.S. Department of Education, offers school-based emergency management resources, including: webcasts; training documents from experts in the field; information on the REMS discretionary grant program; and various publications addressing key issues from the field. Web site: http://rems.ed.gov.

Teen Community Emergency Response Team (CERT)
The Teen Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program focuses on disaster preparedness and training students in basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations. Teen CERT members are trained to assist others in their schools, neighborhood, or workplace following an event where professional responders are not immediately available to help and to take a more active role in community emergency preparedness projects. The 20-hour training program originated from Eastern Michigan University and is based on the adult-oriented, federally supported national Citizen Corps' (http://www.citizencorps.gov/cert/index.shtm) Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training. Web site: http://www.teencert.org.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Emergency Management Institute
As part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, FEMA works to prepare the nation for all potential hazards and contributes to the federal response and recovery efforts following emergencies. FEMA also leads essential mitigation activities and trainings and manages national programs. FEMA's Emergency Management Institute (EMI) provides training based on the four phases of emergency management—prevention-mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery—to equip first responders, government officials, private and public sector personnel,

HELPFUL**HINTS**

and school administrators and staff to reduce the impact of a crisis. EMI offers self-paced courses designed for people who have emergency management responsibilities and for the general public. All are offered at free of charge to those who qualify for enrollment. To learn more about the course Introduction to the Incident Command System, I-100, for Schools (IS-100.SC), see http://training. fema.gov/EMIWeb/iS/is100Sc.asp. Web site: http://training.fema.gov/IS.

American Red Cross Curriculum
The Red Cross' Masters of Disaster is a curriculum for grades K–5 that teaches children how to prevent, prepare for, and respond to disasters and other emergencies. The program teaches youths the importance of preparedness while reducing fear of the unexpected. The goal is to empower youths with the confidence and knowledge to prepare for disasters and help create a culture of preparedness. The lessons are nonthreatening, age appropriate, and adhere to national education standards. Web site: http://www.redcross.org/disaster/masters.

FEMA for Kids
FEMA for Kids contains resources for building personal and family preparedness and prevention skills in young students. Students can learn what causes disasters, play games, and read stories. There is also a link for parents and teachers. Web site: http://www.fema.gov/kids.

Montana Safe Schools Center (MSSC)
MSSC provides extensive outreach, training, research, and professional development services to schools and communities across Montana and throughout the United States. Training topics include: school hazard-vulnerability assessments; Incident Command Systems; mental health recovery; parent-student reunification; planning and conducting effective drills, tabletops, and full-scale exercises; designing comprehensive emergency operations plans and procedures in schools; and threat assessments. Web site: http://www.montanasafeschools.org.

HELPFUL**HINTS**