Ten seconds. Close your eyes and count: one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi. . .
That’s not a lot of time, yet news headlines are filled daily with 10-second events: Eight students killed when tornado hits high school. School principal shot and killed by 15-year-old student. School bus crash kills four students. The list goes on and on.
You could easily hold your breath for longer than the 10 seconds it took for those devastating events to occur. But rather than collectively holding our breath and hoping such incidents will pass us by, let’s look at how you can establish an effective and sustainable emergency preparedness program for your school district.

The Framework
Regardless of your plan’s current state, a good starting point is to examine the standards and regulatory requirements.
An overarching standard for emergency management programs is NFPA 1600: Standard on Disaster/Emergency Management and Business Continuity Programs from the National Fire Protection Association. This well-organized standard covers the four phases of emergency management (prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery) and identifies the elements that you should include in your emergency program. It is the standard recommended by the National Incident Management System Integration Center.

By Donna Gingera and Aaron Masson
Another standard in emergency management is the Incident Command System (ICS). The ICS is an internationally recognized emergency management model that provides sound management principles along with a clearly delineated emergency organizational structure. If your district has not yet adopted the ICS as part of your emergency program, you should consider doing so.

In conjunction with these standards, your district must adhere to the various laws and regulations of your jurisdiction. Take the time to understand your responsibilities and ensure that your plan addresses these fiduciary duties.

Ignorance is no longer bliss. Not only do you need to know your jurisdiction’s requirements, but you are increasingly expected to learn from other organizations’ experiences. Management teams are being held accountable for their action or inaction.

**Leadership**

To have an effective program, you must go beyond simply creating school safety teams. Your program needs leadership at every level of your organization.

Simply put, senior management must establish the vision for your emergency preparedness program. Without needing to be subject-area experts, managers can set the direction for the program and its relative priority within other district initiatives.

Establish a leadership structure that permeates your entire organization and includes the following entities: district emergency response plan review committee, district emergency response team, school/site emergency response team(s), and program coordinator.

The district review committee acts as an advisory body for the program. The committee should include representatives from various stakeholder groups, both internal and external, and is charged with regularly reviewing the plan. Don’t give way to political pressures that would force you to create a dysfunctional committee by including representatives from every stakeholder group. Keep the group to a reasonable size and solicit input from all stakeholders as needs arise.

The district response team functions as the staff for the district’s emergency operations center (virtual or real) and as a backup team for the schools. Its primary responsibility is to support the schools during a crisis, with key personnel also providing leadership for the district’s emergency efforts within the greater community.

The school/site response teams act as the on-site emergency response team at their respective locations and serve in a leadership capacity in their plan’s administration. Both the district and the school/site teams should be based on the ICS organizational structure.

You should also appoint someone as district emergency program coordinator. The coordinator serves as the administrator for the program, attending to relevant tasks, monitoring the program, and ensuring that it stays up-to-date. This doesn’t need to be a full-time position, and in most cases it won’t be, but someone must address the day-to-day issues and champion the program. Otherwise, the program risks getting lost on a list of priorities with no specific person being held accountable.

**Risk Assessment**

An often missing or incomplete component of emergency planning is the risk assessment. A risk assessment identifies hazards and the relative probability of their occurrence; it then calculates the potential effect of these hazards on your students, staff, and property. A risk assessment also considers your organization’s vulnerabilities and how they may influence the outcome of an incident; for example, unique to schools is the high ratio of children to adults.

Although hazards are identified on a site-by-site basis, your schools share a number of common hazards, such as missing children, tornadoes (if you reside in a tornado-prone area), bus accidents, and acts of violence. Your risk assessment must address each of these hazards, along with the site-specific hazards.

A good risk assessment involves a considerable amount of information collection and intelligence gathering. That includes amassing core data for each site; conducting inspections for each facility (cataloging attributes and deficiencies); reviewing existing plans, policies, procedures, and practices; inventorying resources, such as staff availability and capabilities, equipment and supplies, and public emergency services; examining communication processes and interoperability issues; analyzing partnerships; assessing special-needs requirements; and reviewing community risk profiles.

**Mitigation Strategies**

For your plan to be effective, you need to develop mitigation strategies to address each identified hazard. Due to time and budget constraints, schools too often attempt to implement a plan without first completing this task, which results in erroneous or incomplete plans.

Failing to address this step may not be obvious until an incident occurs. For example, a class cannot execute a lockdown because a substitute teacher wasn’t given a key or the kindergarten class doesn’t hear the emergency announcement because the public-address system can’t be heard at the far end of the playground.

Depending on the hazard identified, mitigation strategies can range from policy development to facility modifications and site-specific procedures, including the creation of digital maps and photographs. Some strategies may
require a simple procedural change, whereas others may require capital appropriation or a cultural change for your district.

It is critical that the mitigation strategies address specific issues your district faces. Don’t expect a “template” plan to do this—strategies need to be customized for each school and administrative site, down to exact details.

Once you have established the leadership structure, completed the risk assessment, and developed your mitigation strategies—and still have the energy to continue—you can move on to developing your plan.

Don’t let these first three tasks deter you from tackling this endeavor. The results of these tasks form your plan’s foundation. And when done correctly, your plan will already be half completed.

**The Plan**

In constructing your plan, think of three attributes: consistency, comprehensiveness, and currentness.

**CONSISTENCY**

Every school likes to be acknowledged for its unique qualities; however, in the world of emergency management, consistency is key. You can accomplish this by mandating a base plan for use by all your schools. The base plan needs to include activation processes, protocols and procedures, and roles and responsibilities that are used consistently throughout your district. Site-specific procedures should be developed to address unique attributes or situations, and should be annexed as part of each respective school plan.

By establishing a consistent plan, you will go far in being able to communicate your plan to stakeholders, to train your students and staff, and to support your schools during a crisis. On the flip side, if you delegate the responsibility for developing the plan to the school level, you will create an environment in which every school has its own variation of the protocols and procedures.

Keep it consistent. If you don’t, you will confuse your students, your staff, and yourself.

**COMPREHENSIVENESS**

To be effective, a plan must address all four phases of emergency management: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Use NFPA 1600 as a guideline and be sure to include the following elements.

- **Clearly stated objectives.** Objectives should be endorsed by senior management and should provide the direction and scope for your plan.
- **Roles and responsibilities.** Delineate responsibilities from both a program management and a plan execution perspective. This requires assigning tasks related to the overall emergency program and assigning roles at the time of an emergency. Depending on your employee contracts, you may need to discuss these assignments with representatives of your employee groups.

**LOGISTICS SUPPORT AND RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS.** A frequently overlooked element that addresses logistics and resource requirements is preincident plans for district-based operations. Preincident plans should cover communications, facilities, transportation, student services, human resources, and information technology.

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Another logistics support component is the establishment of a district emergency operations center. An EOC can be created using a physical location or a virtual model. In the vast majority of cases, the EOC will not be a dedicated facility. Instead, the district will want to identify a room or facility that could quickly and easily be repurposed as the EOC.

These preincident plans help ensure that your resources and relationships are ready and able to support the schools at a moment’s notice.

**Process for managing an incident.** This process is your operational plan, where your procedures and protocols should be documented. Look to industry standards and best practices to help you develop these procedures and protocols rather than reinvent them yourself. You will not only save time, but you will have the benefit of the experiences and expertise of others.

**Communications plan.** Communications is one of the most important parts of your plan. It is also the part most cited in emergency management case studies as being problematic. Your communications plan must integrate with every aspect of your emergency plan—from stakeholder preparedness to activation processes and incident management. In addition, your communications plan must enable seamless communications across your district and with first responders. An emergency plan that doesn’t address communications comprehensively should never be approved by the administration.

**CURRENTNESS**

Keeping a plan current is critical to ensuring its effectiveness. Next to communications, this is the biggest issue in
managing an emergency program. The best way to address this challenge is to incorporate the task of updating into the normal planning cycle of your operations. At the time of an emergency, there is no substitute for current information. Relying on outdated information to manage your emergency program would be like using last year’s budget to manage your finances.

Professional Development
A good emergency program touches all staff and students within your district. Everyone has a responsibility in an emergency and everyone should have a level of personal preparedness.

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Your plan comes alive through your staff and the students. If the plan is collecting dust, it will serve no one well. Don’t try to teach all things to all people. The emergency program has a delineation of responsibilities. Focus on what people really need to know. Plans that rely on flip charts either do not have the details needed for the lead team or have too much detail for individual staff members.

Develop a training plan that addresses the varying needs of all your stakeholders. Include such elements as executive training for your board members, ICS training for lead teams, activation processes and protocols training for all staff, and an opportunity for parents to participate in student reunification drills (consider holding them on parent-teacher nights).

For school districts, training is a perpetual component of your plan. Every year, you have administrative changes, along with an infusion of new staff and a fresh crop of students. Although the need will never go away, experience shows that as the program matures, the responsibilities for training shift from being predominately those of administrators to a model of staff teaching staff and cooperative learning.

Testing Your Plan
The best way to strengthen your capability is to test your plan regularly. Put some thought into how you will test the plan to ensure that drills and exercises are meaningful.

Schools are notorious for training for the drill, rather than the event. Year in and year out, schools run fire drills. However, they seldom take the time to test the plan in a way that would simulate a real fire in the school.

To test the plan genuinely, you should declare an area of the school on fire. Consider the implications the fire would have on your response; Would classes be forced to use alternate routes? Would the fire affect your communications systems? Where would you go if you couldn’t reenter the school? Would you have the necessary equipment, supplies, and access to information? And don’t forget to involve first responders, the media, parents, and curious neighbors in your test, as they would all likely appear at your school if there were a fire.

Drills are only one method of testing your plan. You can also use tabletop exercises, functional or full-scale exercises, simulator exercises, or a hybrid of these. Regardless of the methodology, or combination of methodologies, you choose, make the test meaningful. By repeatedly conducting the same drills with no set objectives, you encourage staff and students to react without thinking. In an emergency, your staff will need to use judgment. Challenge them to do the same when you test your plan.

Maintaining Your Investment
Like many programs—educational, facilities maintenance, or employee assistance—your emergency program is not a onetime event. Once you have created that program, you need to protect your investment by maintaining it. That requires setting performance objectives with your emergency management “leaders” and holding them accountable in meeting those objectives.

To realize success, your leaders will need tools and resources to maintain their school plans or their portion of the overall plan. Using tools such as annual checklists, online training, and automated reporting can greatly assist them in accomplishing their performance objectives, particularly with larger districts or those facing administrative staff shortages.

Strategic use of technology can substantially increase your district’s effectiveness in maintaining your emergency preparedness program. The corollary, however, is that no technology will be the single answer. If you don’t invest wisely, you will divert valuable resources (time and money) from setting up more fundamental pieces of your overall program. So before you invest, understand what you are trying to accomplish with the technology.

Avoiding the Cost of Disaster
A realistic, risk-based program that is properly resourced and exercised will save money and lives. Alternatively, when a disaster strikes, the costs of not having a solid emergency preparedness program can be immense.

There is no question, it takes commitment to develop and maintain an effective emergency preparedness program, but consider this: you are building a program that will carry you through some of the toughest situations your organization may ever face, even if they are only 10-second events.

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