

1. Introduction to Emergency Exercises

Conducting exercises is an integral part of school (public or nonpublic) preparedness efforts and is recommended by the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) (*School Guide*). The *School Guide* explains that a school or school district planning team should progress through a six-step planning process to create, review, or revise an Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) or part(s) of an EOP, which includes conducting exercises.

A planning team is first formed (Step 1: Form a Collaborative Planning Team) and the team then uses assessments to identify and prioritize threats and hazards for inclusion in the EOP (Step 2: Understand the Situation). Goals are created that identify desired outcomes for before, during, and after an incident, and objectives can be established that are specific and measurable actions to achieve those goals (Step 3: Determine Goals and Objectives). Courses of action are then developed to accomplish those objectives (Step 4: Plan Development [Identifying Courses of Action]). After a draft of the EOP is written and approved (Step 5: Plan Preparation, Review, and Approval), the process culminates with schools and school districts implementing the activities described in the EOP (Step 6: Plan Implementation and Maintenance). This includes conducting exercises to evaluate the EOP and emergency procedures.

Other reasons exercises are held include to:

- Promote school and community preparedness;
- Develop effective relationships with community partners, such as law enforcement and the fire department;
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of school staff and community partners;
- Assess the availability of resources and capabilities to respond to emergencies;
- Identify areas in need of improvement; and
- Comply with state and local legislation, such as the need to conduct several drills each year.

Exercise Types

Several exercise formats are available, including those that are discussion based and operations based. The *School Guide* highlights four of these formats:

Discussion-based exercises familiarize players with current plans, policies, agreements, and procedures, or may be used to develop new ones.

- **Tabletop Exercises** involve key personnel discussing hypothetical scenarios in an informal and stress-free environment. This form of exercise can be used to assess current plans, procedures, or systems and help to identify strengths and areas in need of improvement.

Operations-based exercises are characterized by an actual reaction to a simulated scenario; response to emergency conditions; mobilization of apparatus, resources, and/or networks; and commitment of personnel, usually over an extended period.

- **Drills** are coordinated, supervised exercise activities, normally used to test a single specific operation or function. Schools commonly conduct fire evacuation drills, but a comprehensive approach to emergency management also requires practicing many other procedures (e.g., shelter-in-place, lockdown, etc.) under a variety of times and conditions (e.g., during lunch and when substitute teachers are providing instruction).
- **Functional Exercises** are similar to drills but involve multiple partners. These types of exercises are conducted in a realistic environment without movement of personnel and equipment.
- **Full-Scale Exercises** are the most complex type of exercise. They are multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional, multi-organizational exercises that validate many facets of preparedness. Full-scale exercises are conducted in real time, creating a stressful, time-constrained environment that closely mirrors real events.

Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP)

HSEEP is a capabilities-based exercise program provided by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that helps provide a standardized methodology for designing, developing, conducting, and evaluating exercises. With HSEEP, exercises are guided by principles such as they are informed by the risk facing the locality, they include the whole community, and they are anchored to a common set of priorities or objectives and build toward an increasing level of complexity over time. Schools and school districts should consider conducting exercises that are consistent with HSEEP principles in collaboration with the local emergency management office, who are sometimes required to conduct a certain number of HSEEP-compliant exercises annually.

After Action Report (AAR) Process

After an exercise is completed, an AAR should be developed to provide feedback on the exercise's results and suggested recommendations for improvement. For example, the exercise participants' actions may indicate that revisions need to be made to the EOP. An AAR is based on immediate feedback of exercise participants (called a "hot wash"), participant feedback forms, and evaluations from any staff supporting the exercise, such as evaluators or facilitators. An Improvement Plan (IP) should then be created that lists corrective actions that need to be taken, such as specific adjustments to how a team responds to an emergency. The IP should list what the corrective action is, who needs to complete it, and by what date. An [After-Action Report/Improvement Plan Template](#), which schools can adapt to meet their needs, is provided by HSEEP.