

IS-702 National Incident Management Systems (NIMS) Public Information Systems

The Federal Emergency **Management Agency** (FEMA) administers the **Emergency Management** Institute (EMI) and provides training in emergency management free of charge. EMI offers online independent study courses for emergency management personnel on a wide array of topics. IS-702 provides information on Public Information Systems, the role of the PIO and strategies for effective communication. The course is accessible at http:// training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/ IS/crslist.asp (last accessed on Dec. 18, 2007).

EMI also offers independent study courses to better prepare the entire school community to respond to and recover from an incident. These courses are part of EMI's Independent Study Program (ISP) and are free of charge for those who meet program requirements. The full course list, including course descriptions, is available at http://training.fema.gov/IS/crslist.asp.

HELPFULHINTS

FOR SCHOOL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

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ESTABLISHING AND DEVELOPING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES

The media can be an asset to both the community and the school district throughout the four phases of school emergency management (preventionmitigation, preparedness, response and recovery). Interacting with news media outlets—including print media, and radio and TV stations —can be a highly efficient strategy for enhancing school emergency and management efforts. The media can promote positive messages in advance of emergencies, as well as communicate vital information during and after an incident. The stronger a district's or school's partnerships with media representatives are before an incident occurs, the more effectively the media can help schools communicate with the community during and after the incident.

Develop Proactive Partnerships Before, During and After an Incident

School districts should make proactive efforts to initiate relationships and build trust with

their local media. A cooperative relationship will facilitate the delivery of timely and accurate information to the community. The stronger the relationship, the more likely the media will trust that the information provided is accurate and complete, and the more likely the district can rely on the media to follow directives and communicate its messages.

School emergency management teams can make efforts to be positively portrayed before an emergency occurs. Before an incident, the media are effective means for promoting your district's emergency management program.



The contents of this *Helpful Hints* are not prescriptive best practices for every school or school district, but rather suggestions to consider when developing and maintaining positive working relationships with the media.

The media serve as universal communication lines and increase awareness community-wide of the effective steps schools are taking to prevent, mitigate, prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies.

The stronger a district's relationship is with the local media, the more the media can be of help to the district. Media can: 1) communicate potential hazards at or near the school (e.g., highways, nuclear power plants); 2) enlist participation in prevention-mitigation activities (e.g., reporting suspicious activity, driving at appropriate speeds when near schools); and 3) inform the community, build awareness and contribute to an effective incident response. Districts can work with the media to proactively communicate response protocols such as when and why a lockdown is called or steps for reunification after an evacuation. The media also can help remind the community to refer to them when there is an emergency for up-to-date details and directions. Furthermore, through increased media attention, districts are more likely to garner community support and better sustain their school emergency management programs.

Schools should be prepared for a convergence of media representatives (local and national) in the event of a major incident. Pre-established policies

Helpful Hints for Promoting Positive Relationships

- Send a press release announcing the district's ongoing positive efforts in school emergency management.
- Initiate relationships with those local TV, radio and newspaper reporters who write about the district and/or community partners.
- Become a resource for local reporters by sending press releases and updates to them.
- Write a letter to the editor about the district's or school's emergency management program.
- Nurture a relationship with reporters by sending invitations to observe or even participate in emergency drills and exercises

and relationships with the local media, supported by school personnel trained to work with the media, will facilitate the onsite coordination of the media and help maintain order from the onset of an emergency. Local media personnel can serve as allies to the district by providing guidance on these policies to their national affiliates. These cooperative relationships may strengthen the process for escorting the media to the designated media staging area, establishing behavior expectations on both sides, scheduling interviews, communicating

information and creating an atmosphere of compliance.

The media have a job to do that is not entirely congruent with the incident command's goals, and thus the two parties need to work together. The media's primary goal is to get information from the district, whereas communication with the media is only one goal of the incident command. During an incident, when the media are given timely and accurate information, they can help schools and districts relay the critical information necessary for an efficient response. A trusting relationship has positive outcomes for both sides. satisfying the media's request for information and the district's need to relay that information. The incident commander and the incident response team cannot be distracted by the media. Therefore, districts should identify and train a public information officer (PIO) to serve as the only line of communication between the incident command and the media



The PIO will establish policies for how, when, where and to whom information will be provided. The media need to respect the PIO's orders (i.e., staying within the designated media staging area). Pre-established relationships and polices will help to avert confusion and conflict when an incident does occur.

After a major incident, the media will continue to report about the event while school personnel work through the recovery phase. The media will likely report on the original incident, analyze response actions, describe damages and injuries and spotlight particular individuals. Repeated exposure to images or video of an incident can be disruptive to the emotional recovery of the students and staff who were exposed to the trauma. News personnel should be guided toward more cathartic stories and should present recovery activities and updates in a positive light.



Develop a Communications Plan

A comprehensive emergency management plan should provide procedures for communicating with community partners, staff, students, parents/guardians and the media. The communication plan should outline key personnel and their roles and responsibilities for supporting the incident command and communicating with each stakeholder. The plan should identify key media contacts, procedures for communicating with the media and specific protocols (i.e., relaying key instructions to the community on behalf of the district). Processes and procedures include:

- Partner agreements coordinating the release of information.
- Preliminary communication guidelines and templates based on the district's prioritized risks. The templates can be tailored to meet the unique and immediate needs of the situation. For example, a PIO can prepare in advance a template informing the community of a student death, available services through the district and community partners, and guidance for talking with the students about the tragedy.
- Response protocols to ongoing media requests.



- Information on critical emergency response procedures (e.g., lockdown, evacuation, family reunification).
- Assurance that information released is consistent with state and federal privacy laws (e.g., Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act).¹

Identify and Train a Public Information Officer (PIO)

The U.S. Department of Education recommends that all schools support the implementation of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and institutionalize the Incident Command System (ICS) put forth by NIMS.²

The Communications and Information Management component of the NIMS calls for a trained public information officer (PIO), the primary liaison to the public. Under ICS, the PIO informs the incident commander (IC) of all public information matters related

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects all students' records and personal information by limiting access to it. FERPA allows access to records only by the parents, those students 18 or older and officials with written permission. It is important to consider a student's right to privacy and comfort in having personal information disclosed to strangers. Additional information on FERPA is accessible at http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html.

The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools and the ERCM TA Center produced "ERCMExpress National Incident Management System," providing information on NIMS and the ICS accessible at http://rems.ed.gov/views/documents/NIMS.pdf.

Helpful Hints for Managing a Designated Media Staging Area

- Designate a media staging area that limits exposure to students and the incident command team, and allows easy access for emergency vehicles and equipment.
- Identify and train personnel to supervise the designated media staging area.
- Escort authorized media personnel to the designated media staging area.
- Provide a basic set of expectations, such as remaining within the designated media staging area, not speaking with first responders and not interviewing students without parental permission.

to the management of the incident and provides approved, accurate information to the public in a timely manner. All communications are reviewed and authorized through the IC and then delivered by the PIO, the sole source of information to the media.

Roles and Responsibilities of the PIO

Districts should identify and train a PIO to develop agreements and coordinate with community partners about the release of information. This is especially important for

events that escalate beyond the expertise and capacity of the school. A large-scale incident requires support from community partners such as law enforcement, fire personnel and emergency medical services. Upon arrival of community responders, districts transfer command—IC leadership—to the community partner and form a multi-agency or joint command. The district would then provide background information on the incident status and district staff would become support personnel to the new IC. When schools transfer command to a community partner, the role of PIO also transfers The district PIO would become a member of the command agency's Public Information System, providing support to the command agency's PIO. If the incident escalates and requires a multi-agency response that includes numerous community partners, a joint information center (JIC) would be established. Each participating agency PIO then becomes a member

of the JIC, which is led by the command agency's PIO and IC. For example, if a detonated bomb prompted an off-campus evacuation and law enforcement led the IC, directing all services—police, fire, public and mental health, EMS—each agency's PIO becomes support staff to the JIC, led by the law enforcement's IC and PIO.

The JIC exchanges and verifies information between the response agencies. The lead PIO is still responsible for updating the IC and communicating with the media. The JIC can host joint press briefings with a jointly prepared, unified message. The statement would be delivered collaboratively, side-by-side, and the lead PIO would receive and direct questions to partners when appropriate.

Preparing Communication for the Media

PIOs can prepare far in advance and immediately before speaking with the media by conferring with the IC



Tips for Communicating With the Media During a Response

- Promptly alert the press of relief and recovery operations.
- Provide approved language only.
- Do not speculate or blame.
- Provide directives to the community (including family reunification and road closures).
- Reiterate steps taken to secure and contain the incident.

to supply answers to predictable questions. For example, the media are likely to pose a basic set of questions about the time of the incident, who was present, who was responsible, and the number and kinds of casualties, in addition to inquiring about current relief and recovery efforts. When creating a communication process, PIOs should provide for time with the IC to gather approved, accurate information. A form with prompts for key information can be completed in collaboration with the IC to be used as a guide during the response.

Helpful Hints for Writing Effective Communications

When developing written communication for the entire school community and media representatives, schools and school districts should:

- Be prepared by having a process in place for writing, reviewing and disseminating information.
- Be direct and clear, but not simplistic.
- Identify and maintain the message throughout the communication.
- Stay on topic and not give out unnecessary information.
- Be calm and reassuring, but never underestimate the incident;
- Use plain language.
- Have information accessible in more than one language as needed.

The media play a pivotal role in school emergency management. Their contributions can either enhance or hinder the process and a school's transition into the recovery phase. Schools can take proactive steps throughout all four phases to work with the media. The media can help advertise the emergency

management program, enlist support, inform the community of the response protocols, and relay information about support services. Districts and schools should reach out to the media, establishing an ongoing relationship, providing mutual support and creating experiences that will instill trust at the time of an emergency. Forming partnerships and cooperative processes and protocols will support response efforts and hasten the recovery process.

Conclusion

Highly trained personnel, positive relations and predetermined communication policies and procedures are vital to an effective response. When an emergency incident takes place at a school, word travels fast and schools need to be prepared for a convergence of media. The following are additional resources outlining positive steps districts and schools can take when developing communication plans for the media.



RESOURCES

Communication with Parents/ Guardians, Austin's and Virginia Beach's Perspective

Jo Moss, from the Austin (Texas) Independent School District, and Nancy Soscia and Richard Ponti, from Virginia Beach City (Va.) Public Schools, presented at the ERCM FY 2005 grantees' meeting in Atlanta, Ga., in January 2007. They reviewed the steps school districts can take to involve parents and the community in crisis planning communication. Moss addressed the community's need for information and the vital role of a school's ongoing communications program. Soscia and Ponti furthered these points based on lessons learned and presented a school Joint Information Center (JIC) model. The presentations are accessible at http://rems.ed.gov/index.cfm?event=trainings#AtlantaMeeting.

Sample Key Messages For School Officials

The Contra Costa (Calif.) Health Services
Department created this communication template that
addresses school closure and a potential pandemic
flu. A brief set of messages are presented and ready

to be incorporated into an official announcement. The Health Services Department created an online action kit for schools that includes additional guidance for working with the media and communicating with parents: "Sample Talking Points for School Officials" and "Sample Press Releases." The Pandemic Flu School Action Kit is accessible at http://www.cchealth.org/topics/pandemic_flu/school_action_kit/.

Balancing Student Privacy and School
Safety: A Guide to the Family
Educational Rights and Privacy Act for
Elementary and Secondary Schools and
Balancing Student Privacy and
School Safety: A Guide to the Family
Educational Rights and Privacy Act for
Colleges and Universities

The U.S. Department of Education offers guidance to schools outlining the types of student information and conditions under which it may be shared with officials. Both brochures are accessible at http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/brochures/elsec.html.



The ERCM TA Center was established in October 2004 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS). The center supports schools and school districts in developing and implementing comprehensive emergency and crisis response plans by providing technical assistance via trainings, publications and individualized responses to requests. *Helpful Hints* provides a quick overview of school emergency preparedness topics that are frequently the subject of inquiries. For information about the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools grant program, contact Tara Hill (tara.hill@ed.gov), Michelle Sinkgraven (michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov) or Sara Strizzi (sara.strizzi@ed.gov).

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