

# Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center

## Earthquake Exercises for Schools Podcast

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**Duration:** 16 minutes

**Presenters:** Mark Benthien, Director for Communication, Education, and Outreach, Southern California Earthquake Center, University of Southern California, and Executive Director of the Earthquake Country Alliance; and Dr. Paul Myers, Director of Research and Development, Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center.

**Description:** This podcast presents information that schools and districts may want to consider when developing or implementing earthquake-related exercises, including how they can work with their local community to be better prepared for an earthquake. Also discussed is America's PrepareAthon and Great ShakeOut Earthquake Drills and where schools and districts can get more information on earthquake exercises.

The podcast recording is available in an MP3 file on the REMS TA Center website at <https://rems.ed.gov/Shakeout.aspx>

Dr. Paul Myers: Hello, everyone, and thank you for joining us today. I'm Dr. Paul Myers, and I'm the Director of Research and Development at the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center, also known as the REMS TA Center. The TA Center is administered by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Healthy Students. We support schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education with our community partners in the development of high-quality emergency operations plans, or EOPs, and comprehensive emergency management planning efforts.

I would like to welcome you all to the podcast Earthquake Exercises for Schools. This podcast will present information that schools and districts may want to consider when developing or implementing earthquake-related exercises. To provide some context, a core planning team at a school or district may identify that earthquakes are a hazard that needs to be addressed in an EOP as they progress through the six-step planning process. If an EOP or parts of an EOP are being written or reviewed, goals can be created to identify desired outcomes for before, during, and after an earthquake, and objectives can be established that are specific and measurable actions to achieve those goals. Courses of action are then developed to accomplish those objectives. After the EOP is developed and

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approved, schools can implement the activities described in the EOP, including conducting exercises, such as drills, in response to an earthquake. More information on the six-step planning process can be found on the TA Center's website.

I'm joined today by Mark Benthien. Mark, Director for Communication, Education, and Outreach for the Southern California Earthquake Center at USC, works to increase awareness, reduce losses, and save lives. Mark is also the Executive Director of the Earthquake Country Alliance, a public-private partnership that organizes the annual Great California ShakeOut Earthquake Drills. He was recognized as a White House Champion of Change for expanding ShakeOut participation worldwide. As of 2015, that's 43 million people in 70 countries.

Mark, thank you for joining us today.

Mark Benthien: Thanks, Paul. It's great to be with you.

Dr. Paul Myers: To kick things off, Mark, let's discuss America's PrepareAthon and Great ShakeOut Earthquake Drills. The PrepareAthon is a grassroots campaign for action to increase community preparedness and resilience, which is supported by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA. A major partner activity of PrepareAthon are Great ShakeOut Earthquake Drills, which are an annual opportunity for people in schools, homes, and organizations to practice what to do during earthquakes and to improve preparedness. The TA Center has taken an active role in both initiatives through activities such as hosting Twitter chats and facilitating dialogue in our Community of Practice.

Mark, could you please tell us a little bit more about PrepareAthon and ShakeOut and how schools can get involved?

Mark Benthien: Sure, Paul. Well, both of these are just national programs where people can take an action and be included in a kind of a national assessment of how many people are getting prepared and how many people are taking action for a number of hazards. PrepareAthon is really for all hazards. ShakeOut is specific to earthquakes. ShakeOut started in 2008 in California and was meant to be a one-time event, but expanded with interest from other states and even other countries to where we are now. And PrepareAthon started I believe in 2011, 2012 and has been also increasing in its participation.

ShakeOut participation also then is included into the national toll of people participating in PrepareAthon activities, which might be a community group

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organizing a preparedness fair. It might be a drill for a tornado. It might be all sorts of activities.

In fact, there are kind of ten ways. If you go to the PrepareAthon website at <http://www.ready.gov/prepare>, you can learn all about the ways that your actions for preparedness can be included. There's also a lot of information on many hazards, details about why those hazards occur, and what to do to prepare for them, and types of actions that you can do. Similarly, at <http://www.shakeout.org>, you can access your local ShakeOut drill which might be for your state or a multiple-state region, as we have in the Central U.S. and Eastern U.S., and you can find customized resources for your region's ShakeOut drill, how to participate, and what to do during an earthquake, which we call Drop, Cover, and Hold On.

Dr. Paul Myers: Great. Thank you. It sounds like a lot of the country is participating in PrepareAthon and the ShakeOut. You also mentioned there's regional exercises. Taking this back down to the local level, how can schools or districts work with their local community to be better prepared for an earthquake?

Mark Benthien: Well, it's always important to know your partners, know your neighbors, to make sure that your plans are not going to be impacted by your neighboring organization's emergency post-earthquake or other disaster plans, and that you involve your first responders, even your neighborhood businesses, in a coordinated effort to be better prepared. There are resources available from the community that might be able to assist a school, and the school may be called upon to be perhaps even a shelter location, and that usually gets worked out in advance, but there are these relationships. You have parents who are going to be wanting to come to pick up their children from schools, that may have to get off work, and may have obligations there as well. So just working with the entire community to understand what the policies are related to disasters and what is expected of both the teachers, as well as the parents, as well as those in the community. In the ShakeOut Earthquake Drills, we encourage multiple-organization drills, so you really can start to go through the process together and learn from each other.

Dr. Paul Myers: Thank you. So, you mentioned that it's important to know about your neighborhood and community responses, and you also touched on how parents and others may come to schools after an emergency. So I was wondering, could you maybe just talk a little bit about how is individual, family, school, and community preparedness for earthquakes related?

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Mark Benthien: Well, it's very important that the plans that each entity has are known by the others, and that may include that the level of preparedness of each group of families, of schools, of community organizations is also discussed together, so people understand the limitations as well as the opportunities that exist working together. One aspect that is always important to consider is when a teacher at a school—who in most places is required to stay there at the school until all the children have been picked up by the appropriate people, parents, or guardians, or others who have approval to do so—those teachers may have their own concerns of course for a big earthquake that's just happened or other disasters, and they're looking at, "I need to get home to take care of my own family, to know what's happened at my house. Has there been a lot of damage? Is there a lot of glass all over the floors?" All these issues that can happen.

What that means is, the better prepared you are and knowing how to secure things so they won't fall in an earthquake, communication plans that you have with your family, all these factors are important for being able to stay where you are as an emergency service worker, as a teacher after a disaster. The more you can do to be prepared at home, the less you have to worry about, and you can perhaps stay in your professional responsibility.

The other way around—of course important—that if you're at home and maybe it's a weekend and the earthquake happens and you've prepared the schools so that you're not too worried about, I don't know, a chemistry lab and having spills and all those things that ... or your own classroom, just what you have to deal with, and so, being prepared, having plans, having secured things so they won't fall in case of an earthquake, these are factors which will make the immediate response, and even begin the recovery, faster.

Dr. Paul Myers: Thank you. In your last response, you talked a little bit about different activities to help get better prepared for earthquakes. Moving back to a focus on schools, what type of earthquake exercises do you recommend schools or districts conduct?

Mark Benthien: Well, of course, the Great ShakeOut Earthquake Drills. The largest group of participants are schools in ShakeOut, and it's about three quarters of the participants worldwide are teachers, staff, and students in K-12 schools, and in some places, those drills are required—the Drop, Cover, and Hold On drills—and often, the school will include with that an evacuation to a field or such so they can be accountable for everybody being okay and doing that as part of their exercise. So all that information you can learn about at <http://www.shakeout.org/schools>, about how to have a drill if you haven't had one before of that type.

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Also, you can have seminars with your local community at your school so that you can have these discussions. You can have tabletop exercises among school officials, maybe at the district level along with leadership from schools. So there's many different types of activities that can be designed to be learning experiences, to practice what you need to do during a situation, and to share with each other.

**Dr. Paul Myers:** Thank you. You mentioned that a lot of schools worldwide participate in the ShakeOut, which is great, and that's in a variety of formats such as seminars and tabletop exercises. So my question now is, in your experience, what is one area that many schools need to improve on when conducting earthquake exercises?

**Mark Benthien:** Well, one issue that can happen is, you have earthquake drills, and really many types of drills, are often practiced with the ideal situation during class time. The students have been told there's going to be a drill perhaps, they know what they need to do, and they're at their desks, so doing Drop, Cover, Hold On. Drop to the ground so that you're not knocked down. Get on your hands and knees. Cover your head and neck. If you can, get under a desk or table, do so and then Hold On to it to protect you from things falling. That's really easy to do in a classroom and it's often what is done.

What's also important is to have your drill at times that are less convenient, where maybe in passing periods, at recess, during lunch, and perhaps even during drop-off and pickup times where you're going to have families involved and buses and other aspects. Those are really great ways of adding details, maybe even doing something different each year, having your drill at a different time.

It's also really important that schools are not ... well, let's just say that the teachers participate as well with the drills; that it's not walking around making sure every child is down on the ground, but that the teacher also demonstrates what they would do during an earthquake, because that's going to be a more realistic situation, not only the teacher but any other volunteers in the room, parents that might be there, really everyone to participate. That really is taken all the way through. If students are evacuated to a common area, that whole exercise should be considered to be important and the exercise should be conducted as if the earthquake is really happening, and right after the earthquake.

**Dr. Paul Myers:** Thank you. You've actually given us quite a lot to think about, including suggestions on where to go for more information. In closing, my final question is

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really, what are the three things a school can do right now to prepare for earthquakes?

Mark Benthien: Well, as I mentioned, really getting together with your community partners to prepare together. It can be as simple as a small meeting or a seminar workshop, participating in the Great ShakeOut Earthquake Drills, if you like for other types of hazards, learning more at <http://www.ready.gov/prepareathon>. For ShakeOut, go and register your school or district to participate at <http://www.shakeout.org>. You'll be counted and listed among the thousands of schools across the country.

Then always just be reviewing your emergency plans, making sure that you're factoring in the potential for earthquakes. Earthquakes may not be common where you are, but damaging earthquakes can happen in 35 states, and it's important to practice what to do because you may not have them where you live or work or where your school is, but your students or teachers or you may travel one day to somewhere where an earthquake may occur and having practiced what to do will make it more likely that you'll be safe.

Dr. Paul Myers: Mark, thank you for joining us today and for your comments. To reach Mark's team, you can email [info@shakeout.org](mailto:info@shakeout.org). As Mark pointed out, you can also learn more about the ShakeOut and earthquake preparedness for schools and some of the other topics discussed in today's podcast by visiting the TA Center's website at <http://remstacenter.org>. The website provides resources such as a Community of Practice, which includes a forum on exercises and drills. You can also contact the TA Center for other questions or requests for technical assistance at [info@remstacenter.org](mailto:info@remstacenter.org) or through the toll-free number 1-855-781-REMS or 7367. The TA Center's hours of operation are Monday through Friday, 9am to 5pm Eastern time. This concludes today's podcast. Again, thank you for joining us today.