

# REMS Express

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## Implementing Recommendations From the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans: A Practitioner's Perspective from the Orange County Department of Education

The Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) is a local education agency in Southern California that is recognized as a reputable resource for safe school protocols that are aligned with best practices in the field. Our agency provides support services to 27 school districts, serving more than 500,000 students. We also provide alternative educational opportunities and support for an additional 4,500 students in juvenile justice centers, special education programs, and home schools. Our agency employs more than 1,300 staff, including teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and clerical personnel. We offer educational services from more than 40 different facilities across the county, which requires great logistical consideration as well as the coordination of local resources. We considered all of these variables as we approached the task of revising our emergency operations plan (EOP).



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READINESS AND EMERGENCY  
MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS

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The 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown, Connecticut, had a profound impact on the nation. In response, on June 18, 2013, the White House hosted an event to announce the release of three significant emergency operation guides for K-12 schools, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and houses of worship. This was the first time in history that six federal agencies (the U.S. departments of Health and Human Services, Justice, Homeland Security and Education; the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and the Federal Emergency Management Agency) had collaborated to develop proven practices in emergency management for both educational facilities and houses of worship. At the event, Vice President Biden emphasized the importance of safeguarding our nation, stating, "...we will in fact improve the life and safety of all the children in America who should look at school as the safest place in the world they can be."

In order to create our school EOP, we formed a task force, composed of local cabinet representatives and auxiliary staff from all six divisions of our governmental agency, to review the federal *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (School Guide)* and determine how it could benefit and inform our plan. The task force members, who all had significant school emergency operations experience, found that the recommended **Planning Principles** and **Six-Step Planning Process** in the *School Guide* were similar to the existing California Department of Education guidelines for developing site-level school EOPs. As a result, task force members quickly adopted the steps proposed in the *School Guide* as the primary reference for updating our school EOP.

**Step 1** of the process recommends forming a core planning team and committing to the creation of an advanced schedule to outline the plan. Check! We had the right people around the table collaborating, representing the operations, facilities, risk management, legal, administrative services, and safe schools practice fields. Each team member committed to developing an updated plan by allocating their time and personnel resources each month. They also set a target date of June 30, 2014, to submit a first draft of the new school EOP to the OCDE superintendent's cabinet for approval.

**HIGH PRIORITY:**  
earthquake | violent intruder

**MEDIUM PRIORITY:**  
student violence

**LOW PRIORITY:**  
aviation event | wildfire | utilities disruption

**Step 2** directs planning team members to "understand the situation," meaning identify potential threats and/or hazards to the organization, assess the level of risk and vulnerability, and prioritize planning based on those results. The *School Guide* offers several examples of assessment tools and instruments to accomplish this task. Our group identified, assessed, and prioritized the threats and/or hazards to our 4,700 alternative education students first, then to the 200 adults who serve them, and finally, to the remaining 1,000 employees and support staff who provide a variety of administrative services, such as instructional services, legal services, IT services, food services. In doing so, we considered the historical data on past crimes and other emergency events, such as **earthquakes, wildfires, and utilities disruptions**. For example, student data on suspension/expulsion, number of violent assaults, and gang-related events informed decision-making on **student violence and led to it being identified as a priority**. Current gaps in our access to technology led to task force members identifying **communication, threat assessment, and security** issues as additional priorities. Our agency's central office, which hosts more than 300 employees and members of the public each day, is located adjacent to a large municipal airport that launches more than 200 commercial flights a day. Therefore, it was a "no-brainer" to develop a plan for an **aviation emergency**. All members strongly supported researching the benefits of the [Run-Hide-Fight](#) protocol, which is recommended in the *School Guide*, to address an event such as a **violent intruder. This protocol describes how those facing an active shooter situation should respond under certain circumstances**. In the end, our task force identified nine threats and hazards, which we prioritized as high, medium, and low. We reached consensus as a group that these were the most probable events and circumstances that could debilitate our agency if left unchecked.

Getting the right people in the room (Step 1) was easy; identifying our agency's specific threats and hazards (Step 2) took us three months, but we got it right.

**Step 3** of the planning process suggests developing three goals (as well as three objectives for each goal) for each identified threat and hazard, indicating the desired outcomes for before, during, and after the threat or hazard. This is where things got dicey for our group. Frankly, we found it difficult to distinguish goals from objectives, planning activities, and courses of action. They all seemed to blend together, and it was hard to address one without another. What we agreed upon was to write three goals for each specific threat or hazard following the **before, during, and after** format. Then, we expounded on the goals in detail, which we called our "**courses of action**," again following the **before, during, and after** format. The courses of action (**Step 4**) specified the "who, what, when, where, and how" we would reach our goals. (See example on the next page.)

# High Priority: Earthquake

## BEFORE

**GOAL:** Protect life and property by mitigating catastrophic impacts.

### COURSES OF ACTION

OCDE staff and students will receive training in mitigation practices, preparedness efforts, response protocol, and recovery procedures. These trainings will involve key identified personnel, include leadership; management; and certified, classified, and auxiliary staff. Trainings will include topics such as Incident Command System procedures; Emergency Operation Center (EOC) environment management; risk and hazard assessments; mitigation and risk management; CPR/AED/first aid; and Critical Incident Stress Management recovery protocols.

## DURING

**GOAL:** Protect life and property by responding effectively.

### COURSES OF ACTION

During an earthquake, OCDE staff will respond by using the Incident Command System detailed in the protocol. Leadership will employ any and all communication channels to support response operations. Cabinet-level staff will convene in the County EOC at Kalmus to begin initial assessment of immediate needs. Off-site management staff will communicate the status of the emergency to leadership at Kalmus as soon as possible. Identified OCDE staff will report to the County EOC to alert staff to assume their emergency school coordinator positions to support countywide response.

## AFTER

**GOAL:** Protect psychological, structural, and fiscal recovery by responding effectively in the aftermath.

### COURSES OF ACTION

After an earthquake, OCDE staff will initiate recovery practices, including structural assessment; restoration of utilities and businesses; extended educational opportunities; and psychological services. Communication technology will be used to send frequent updates to all staff regarding business and educational activities. OCDE staff assigned to the county EOC will monitor the status of immediate and long-term needs and communicate to the county EOC command and policy staff. Emergency school coordinator personnel will also report on the status of the emergency and the needs of all 27 districts and/or areas of greatest impact.

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Although Task Force members struggled with distinguishing between **goals**, **objectives**, and **courses of action**, we were quite pleased with the final results. At this point in the process, we had identified our nine specific threats and hazards; set three feasible, achievable, measurable goals for each; and engaged in an exhaustive discussion about how we were going to achieve those goals through our courses of action. This may not have been in strict accordance with the recommendations put forth in the *School Guide*; however, this approach worked for us and the group found great value in the process.

The development of our courses of action allowed us to have a critical discussion about the resources, personnel, community agency support, and other items needed to accomplish our goals identified for each of the prioritized specific threat and hazards determined in Step 2. This investigation of “who, what,

when, where, and how” was critical for our decision-making. Our courses of action began to inform our immediate and long-term training objectives, which included the consideration of the funding necessary to achieve our training objectives in pursuit of the stated goals.

*Finally*, the plan seemed to be coming together. With **Steps 3** and **4** behind us, we set our sights on wrapping up the document for the initial review and approval by members of the cabinet, the superintendent, and the county school board.

**Step 5** is all about just that. With the **specific threats and hazards** identified, **goals** set, and **courses of action** stated, a clear picture began to emerge regarding a training schedule, the identification of key personnel, and even the costs associated with all of these items. We also reviewed and

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revised our **functional annexes** as suggested in the *School Guide*. In fact, we aligned [functional annexes](#) to match our nine specific threats and hazards, which also became a part of our plan.

**Step 6** is all about communicating, maintaining, and working the plan. We set a training schedule to address our specific threats and hazards, identified who should be trained, considered outside support we might solicit to support our training, and allocated funding to pay for it all. As a result, Task Force members delivered a 45-page first draft of our school EOP to the cabinet and superintendent on June 30, 2014, one year after our initial investigation. It now awaits comments, revisions, editing, and ultimately, approval by the decision-makers.

## So what did we learn?

The *School Guide*

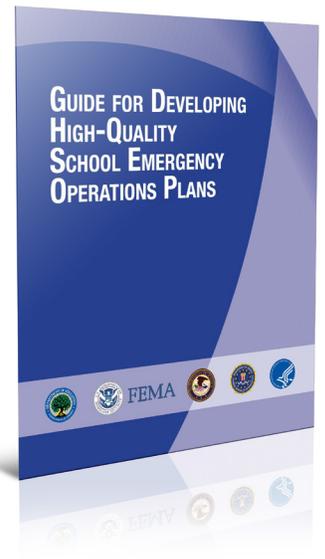
- was a useful resource to inform our planning;
- allowed us to gauge our current school EOP policies with **best practices**;
- gave us a **reference point** to discuss what we should be paying attention to in terms of student and staff support;
- gave us a **process** to follow to stay focused and ensure our success;
- helped us **prioritize** our specific threats and hazards;

- supported our thinking about how to accomplish each **course of action**; and
- allowed our agency to state, emphatically, that we consulted a **well-informed** reference guide that was developed jointly by six federal agencies.
  - Quite simply, and perhaps most significantly, the *School Guide* provides a process that can be replicated by any size agency—exactly what it set out to achieve!
  - All we know is that it worked for us.

## Where to Find Additional Resources

Additional information on emergency planning guidance for schools, a downloadable copy of the *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (School Guide)*, fact sheets, EOP development tools, and other resources can be found on the REMS TA Center website at <http://rems.ed.gov>.

Click on the picture to access an at-a-glance version of the *School Guide*, which provides details about the process and principles, as well as plan content, functional annexes, and threat- and hazard-specific annexes.



## Check out the REMS TA Center's Website and Resources at <http://rems.ed.gov>

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An icon showing a computer monitor with a network diagram of nodes and lines, and a smartphone next to it.

**State Emergency Management Resources**  
Access Information From Your State Related to School and Higher ed Safety

An icon of a computer monitor displaying a bar chart with an upward-trending line.

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An icon of a person sitting at a desk with a laptop, a certificate, and a folder.

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**EOP Assess Tool**  
Assess Your Understanding of High-Quality EOP Development

An icon showing a computer monitor, a glowing lightbulb, and a keyboard.