

# ***School Emergency Planning: Preparedness, Response, and Recovery***

Developed by:

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- Teacher Survey: Students Needing Special Assistance

# 1. Introduction

## Background

No one can predict when an emergency will occur. To ensure the safety of students, teachers, administrators and staff, **every school should be prepared** to handle and recover from an emergency.

The Department of Health (HEALTH), the Department of Education (RIDE) and the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency (RIEMA) developed *School Emergency Planning* to assist schools in emergency **planning, response and recovery**. The guidelines contained here provide a step-by-step model for individual schools to develop their own School Crisis Response Plan (SCRCP) and to evaluate plans that are already in place. Applying the information in this guide will help maximize the health, safety, and welfare of students, staff, and visitors when confronted with an emergency situation.

***For purposes of this guide, “emergency” is defined as a sudden, generally unanticipated event that has the potential to profoundly and negatively impact a significant segment of the school population.***

## Purpose of this Guide

*School Emergency Planning* serves two major purposes:

- 1) As a template for creating a comprehensive SCRCP, and
- 2) As a framework for addressing a range of other issues, such as violence prevention, that require a coordinated school response.

Rhode Island schools have been relatively well prepared for emergency situations such as fires and severe weather. Schools understand the need to evacuate buildings when a fire alarm is heard. They know procedures for calling 911 to report a fire, and know to seek shelter in the event of a severe weather warning.

Unfortunately, the recent wave of school shootings and other forms of interpersonal violence across the country has stunned the country and uncovered a need for preparedness for a much broader range of emergencies. National attention has focused on school violence in communities across the country.

Further, although schools may have established procedures for dealing with many emergency situations, most do not have these protocols collected in a coordinated, concise manner. More

so than ever before, schools are faced with ongoing challenges to be prepared for a wide range of emergency situations from medical emergencies to threats of violence, from severe weather to chemical release, and from sexual abuse to kidnapping.

Schools and districts must provide a safe, orderly learning environment for every child and every school. *School Emergency Planning* provides protocols for a wide range of crisis response situations, so that schools and districts can quickly and adequately restore the school climate to optimal learning conditions.

A strong School Crisis Response Plan also offers schools a framework for addressing a range of health and safety issues that require coordinated attention from school officials. Examples of these issues include school violence prevention and student mental health issues. In these cases, the same planning, response and recovery mechanisms can be used to effectively address these issues. Further, the relationships developed with community groups as part of emergency preparedness can enhance ongoing school health and safety programs. Thus, the considerable investment of time and resources in the planning process should be recognized as an important investment in building relationships and an infrastructure that will support school health and safety in general, not just during an emergency.

***More so than ever before, schools are faced with ongoing challenges to be prepared for a wide range of emergency situations from medical emergencies to threats of violence.***

***Many Rhode Island schools have a crisis response plan in effect, but want information about best practices in emergency planning to ensure that their plans are comprehensive and up-to-date.***

## **How this Guide was Developed**

To develop *School Emergency Planning*, interviews were conducted with schools and municipal emergency management directors in Rhode Island, and a review of key documents in school crisis response was performed.

Research findings indicated that many Rhode Island schools have a School Crisis Response Plan in effect, but want information about best practices in emergency planning to ensure that their plans are comprehensive and up-to-date. In addition, many schools want assistance in establishing relationships with local emergency management officials in their communities. HEALTH, RIDE and RIEMA, working with public health consulting firm Policy Studies Inc. (PSI), developed this guide in response to these findings. Content for this guide is closely based on the RIEMA emergency procedures guide, as well as several key sources in school crisis response planning, including:

1. School-Centered Emergency Management and Recovery Guide  
(© 2001, Kentucky Community Crisis Response Board – KCCRB. Developed with federal Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act funds.)
2. Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities  
(May 2003. Developed by The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Department of Education.)
3. Fairfax County Schools – Crisis Management Handbook
4. Picking Up the Pieces: Responding to School Crisis. (© 1999. By Mary Schoenfeldt, Marysville, WA.)

## **Emergency Preparedness and Response in Rhode Island**

In planning for and responding to emergencies, schools do not work alone. This guide is part of many ongoing efforts to protect the health and safety of our state's residents. The Department of Health is working with several partners including the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency; state and local police and other emergency responders; city and town officials; and hospitals to prepare to respond to major public health emergencies. In a major emergency, emergency responders will be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Emergency preparedness activities in Rhode Island include:

- **Training First Responders:** increasing the number of regional Hazardous Material (HAZMAT) and Terrorism Response Teams, and obtaining the most up-to-date equipment and training;
- **Mass Care:** preparing special treatment areas in hospitals, and planning to distribute vaccines and medications if necessary;
- **Incident Stress Management:** deploying regional teams of specially trained mental health and substance abuse treatment providers to reduce public panic; providing crisis intervention, referral and grief counseling when appropriate; and providing consultation and support to affected businesses, schools and community organizations;
- **Developing Local and State Plans:** creating and updating emergency plans in communities and state agencies, and building communication networks so that town leaders and others can communicate effectively in an emergency; and
- **Increasing Security:** identifying and increasing security around reservoirs, food sources and other possible terrorist targets; revising security measures and providing awareness training opportunities.

## *Partners in emergency response and recovery*

Some kinds of emergencies can be handled well by school and district personnel. These are “low level” emergencies that do not require assistance from outside agencies. For other emergencies, such as a bomb threat or a student death, local community emergency responders will assist schools in responding to and recovering from the incident. For large-scale emergencies that affect an entire community, such as a widespread chemical release or natural disaster, several agencies will handle response and follow-up, potentially including local, state and federal partners. It is important for schools to establish relationships with potential partners in emergency management and response *before* a crisis occurs. Refer to Preparedness Section (f) for detailed protocol for reaching out to local partners and the Response Section for responding to different kinds of emergencies.

***For certain emergencies, several agencies will be involved in response and recovery. It is important for schools to establish relationships with potential partners before a crisis occurs.***

## **How to Use this Guide**

This guide is designed to assist schools in the development of individually tailored School Crisis Response Plans. It is presented in three main sections: **Preparedness**, **Response**, and **Recovery**. These sections correspond to the major phases of emergency management:

- 1) **Preparedness** is the process of deciding what you will do *before* an emergency actually occurs. Preparedness involves the coordination of efforts between your school, the school district, and the community at large. This section contains tips and tools for establishing a crisis response team, collaborating with partners, and preparing an emergency toolkit and evacuation routes.
- 2) **Response** is the process of implementing appropriate actions *while* an emergency situation is unfolding. In short, responding means “doing what you planned to do.” In this phase, schools mobilize resources needed to handle the emergency at hand. This section contains steps for handling a wide range of emergencies, including Universal Emergency Procedures that may be implemented across a number of situations.
- 3) **Recovery** is the process of assisting people with the physical, psychological and emotional trauma associated with experiencing tragic events. This section contains follow-up measures and tools to effectively address the aftermath of an emergency situation. This collection of recovery measures is designed to assist teachers and other professionals as they help students begin the recovery and healing process.

***When all essential plan components have been addressed, schools will have a comprehensive, up-to-date Crisis Response Plan to meet specific local needs.***

**Mitigation** is another key phase of crisis response, but does not have its own section in this guide. Mitigation refers to actions taken to reduce the adverse effect of an emergency. Mitigation measures can be implemented *before* an emergency, *during* an emergency, or in *recovery* from an emergency. As a result, information about mitigation activities appears throughout the guide.

This guide offers information and tools to help schools fully address Preparedness, Response and Recovery from an emergency. When all essential plan components have been addressed, schools will have a comprehensive, up-to-date School Crisis Response Plan to meet specific local needs. Since each school has unique resources and unique risks, each needs a School Crisis Response Plan suited to its unique circumstances.

**Your school's crisis response plan is a living document.** To keep it fully functional, you must conduct regular drills to practice the plan, regular training to keep staff informed of their roles in an emergency, a regular review of the plan to make sure it is up to date, and obtain approval of the plan from official sources.

**The guide is being distributed in CD-ROM format** to facilitate customization by each school. Schools may find it useful to fill out and print certain sections of this guide. Some schools may want to laminate certain forms and keep them in classrooms or other areas of the school. Also, school administrators may decide to distribute specific sections of the document to staff and faculty while maintaining copies of the full guide in a central location or with key planning team members.

Many schools in Rhode Island have already undertaken significant emergency planning efforts in recent years. **For schools that have already developed and documented their crisis response plans,** this guide may be useful as a reference to best practices in school emergency response, and to identify any areas in the school's plan that need further attention or development.

**For schools that have not fully developed or documented their crisis response plans,** it is recommended that your school assemble a School Crisis Response Team (SCRT) to address each component of this guide. Consider scheduling regular meetings with the working group to make systematic progress in each area. See Preparedness Section (a) for recommendations on developing a SCRT.

To make the most of limited time and resources, consult with school district personnel and local emergency management officials about resources or plans that may already be available for development of your school's Crisis Response Plan.

### *The first step*

The first step in school crisis response planning is to establish a School Crisis Response Team (SCRT) to review any existing emergency plans, or to develop a new plan using this guide as a model. See Preparedness Section (a) for recommendations for developing a SCRT. Using the checklists, sample forms and protocols provided in this guide, the SCRT can create an emergency plan that includes a designated chain of command, specific roles for team members, and school specific procedures to implement in the event of an emergency.

New “best practices” for handling emergency situations become available on an ongoing basis, and new emergency situations emerge over time. Therefore, this guide should always be a “working document,” and after initial completion, should be updated and practiced on a regular basis.