Armed Assailant Response for Schools: Concepts and considerations for options-based responses

by John Czajkowski, MA

IN THIS BRIEF:

▸ Options based response defined

▸ Implementation and best practices of options based response

▸ Sample questions for board members

▸ Relevant guidance and resources

▸ Relevant board policies and administrative regulations

What is an options-based response?

Sometimes referred to as options-based protocols, options-based responses are safety and security procedures that provide a combination of clear guidelines and flexible options to apply to situations requiring localized or organization-wide responses. These options may be scaled alongside risk potential and overall situational awareness.

Evolving approaches to responding to armed assailants

The historic process of public and school safety improvement — both prevention efforts and in response to natural disasters such as tornadoes, earthquakes, or fires, and man-made threats such as school shootings — is commonly initiated by notable precipitating incidents. Deadly school fires, such as the 1958 fire at Our Lady of the Angels School in Chicago, Illinois, that killed 58 people, or the 1908 fire at Lakeview School in Collinwood, Ohio, that killed 175 individuals all helped spur profound fire safety improvements in building materials, ventilation, fire suppression, fire alarms, egress protocols, and additional safety measures codified in building codes and state-level safety mandates.[1]

In recent decades, school mass shootings have arguably caused some of the highest levels of school safety concerns. These school massacres have elicited deeply emotional, complex, and varied reactions across sectors of education, law enforcement, behavioral health, and communities. Despite a growing body of knowledge and guidance about how to prevent and respond to a school shooting, local education leaders are faced with a high-stakes environment where many may still feel ill-prepared.

Board of education members play a critical leadership role in reviewing Comprehensive School Safety Plans (CSSPs) and district policies that contain logistical and administrative aspects of responding to security threats and incidents. Additionally, new legislation, Senate Bill 553, requires all employers with more than 10 employees to establish, implement, and maintain a Workplace Violence Prevention Plan (WVPP). Best practices for LEAs include continuing to coordinate and collaborate across departments, staff, and with partners to ensure that both the CSSP and the new WVPP are written, edited, and updated in tandem. More information on SB 553 is available in the resources section of this document.

Given the complexity of situations that involve active assailants, it is helpful for board members to familiarize themselves with key concepts of incident response and recommended preparation.

This brief discusses how informed governance teams can facilitate robust conversations with district staff, educational partners, and the appropriate agencies associated with keeping students and staff safe.

Columbine and a new emphasis on lockdowns

The 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Colorado shook up long-held school safety beliefs. This tragedy spurred critical new research on targeted violence prevention and helped reshape law

enforcement responses to mass casualty incidents. The shooting also ushered in a new era of tactical responses to school security incidents beyond the earthquake and fire drills historically conducted throughout California school systems — making lockdown protocols rehearsed more consistently across education sectors.

Lockdown drills were met with mixed criticisms. Parents, students, advocates, and psychologists among others viewed them as a new form of apocalyptic Cold War-era fallout shelter drill that increased psychological stress without a commensurate guarantee of safety from an armed assailant. Unlike earthquake and fire guidelines expressed via legal mandates for education-related building codes and drills, the early 2000s featured only a very loose network of recommendations and guidance from education and law enforcement authorities for these evolving active shooter protocols.

Although the Columbine attack quickly spurred an emphasis on rote lockdown drills, additional lessons (targeted violence prevention and armed assailant organizational response) were documented that would take more than a decade to be felt throughout education sectors. The lengthy Columbine after-action report(s) provided a range of useful information.[2] To this day, the Columbine attack continues to serve as a dark touchstone for a small subculture, often obsessed with mass shooters, admiring them as a source of dark symbolism and, worse, inspiration for new attacks. Columbine remains important today as a dual cautionary tale with parallel lessons in targeted violence prevention (see related brief on Behavioral Threat Assessment [link] and armed assailant organizational response.)

Sandy Hook as a catalyst for options-based response

Although there would be a gradual increase in school attacks in the years after Columbine, the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School attack touched a national nerve.[3] The ensuing post investigation was supported and accompanied by a rigorous ongoing federal and academic study of a multidimensional problem.[4] The resulting federal options-based response guidance (often termed "Run-Hide-Fight") was the culmination of a broad analysis of school attacks by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and related criminological scholarship.

Sandy Hook spurred a re-examination of lockdown protocols that, from their inception, were rarely fully envisioned, taught and rehearsed with much nuance, flexibility, and rigor at school sites. Implementation of these new options-based protocols has been a complex, gradual, and uneven endeavor across education sectors in the years since 2013–14. Although these options-based recommendations have evolved in the past decade, the core themes have remained consistent with some variations in terminology and tactics, including some terms associated with commercial branding. This document will generally refer to the combination of guidance as "Run-Hide-Fight" while acknowledging that the guidance and terminology continue to evolve.[5]

Again, the detailed discussion below of the options-based protocols are provided to inform governance teams in preparation for safety planning conversations.

Reviewing the options-based responses

Some local educational agencies (LEAs) have embraced the challenges of adapting these recommendations into a standardized local protocol that is developmentally appropriate for students and acceptable to the local community. According to best practices, the protocol should be development at the district and county levels in coordination with education and law enforcement partners.

Options-based approaches to managing and responding to incidents provide more flexibility and, therefore, opportunities for success. To adequately empower leaders and staff, however, they must be adequately trained and supported. Throughout all tactical response protocol development and training, education leaders should remain focused on at least three major educational and implementation parameters —what is developmentally appropriate; what constitutes basic, intermediate, and advanced skills; and what are areas where real capacity can be built versus those that will only provide exposure to concepts and techniques in the scope of education settings.

"Hide" builds on traditional lockdown basics

Training in these federal options-based concepts often reiterates that the terms run, hide, and fight are not intended to be a strictly sequential order. The key concept in the "hide" portion, seeking shelter in a safe location, may be the easiest to envision as an organization-wide strategy in education settings, so it will be discussed here first. This is particularly important in primary and secondary settings with wide ranges of ages and developmental levels.

The "hide" portion reinforces lockdown basics with enhancements beyond securing entrances to protecting occupants from forced entry with barricades, which requires specific training and practice. Additional emphasis is placed on attention to light and noise discipline, tactical concepts such as available "organic armor" (e.g., a flipped desk), avoiding "fatal funnels of fire" near doorways and/or windows, and many other practical details. Even with these additional concepts, the "hide" directive is still the most basic and fundamental component of an organization-wide response with a high return on investment. It is the area that can be most widely practiced and effectively implemented in a developmentally appropriate manner across a wide range of age and ability levels.

Training for hide options: Developmental progression towards building capacity

Although moving to safety and moving away from a threat may seem simple on its face, in a secondary education setting it should be seen as an intermediate skill, highly dependent on developmental levels. Moving to safety may be more straightforward for

a single adult with good situational awareness. It is exponentially more complex for an employee to determine when to attempt to move a classroom of students. Nevertheless, it is a skill that can be trained in a progression that can build capacity gradually across an organization.

In primary school settings, moving to safety may be more complex because of multiple staggered breaks such as recess and lunch, but still necessary to consider because an attack can occur at all phases of the day. Therefore, it is recommended that LEAs endeavor to train and drill staff and students in these more dynamic options-based strategies, consult the most current guidance, and work together with law enforcement authorities to plan and implement appropriate strategies at the local level. It is highly recommended that more intermediate training occurs after the basics of "hide" have been successfully implemented. Establishing a confident progression of training goals can help contextualize conversations with those eager to quickly move to more intensive ideas. That progression can also redirect ideas that are not developmentally appropriate for students and/or education staff and may be better suited for first responders.

Training employees to act quickly and decisively to protect their students and themselves is essential. However, the decision to train students, and on what methods will be used should be formed over time, through a collaborative process with local education and community leaders.[6]

Drill documentation: Encourage, support, and capture the process

Educators are well equipped to appreciate the merit of systems that build in a progressive manner, require sequential instruction and assessment, and offer opportunities for feedback from all participants to better identify strengths and areas for growth. Educators are also mindful of the need for differentiation and formative assessments that drive next steps and potentially reinforce basics before progressing. Therefore, the LEA's security drill documentation forms should help support and capture this sometimes non-linear trajectory in a process of centralized LEA training support and centralized accountability.

The most useful documentation forms will indicate the objectives, methods, key leadership participants (education, law enforcement and other partners), assessment and verification, and, most importantly document, the lessons learned through the after-action review and shared through an open, transparent process with staff to drive a cycle of improvement. Drill forms that merely verify if the drill was done or not done are as useful as a classroom assessment that merely documented whether a student did or did not take the test.

Site surveys for a better hide: Know your strengths and vulnerabilities

Tactical response planning for the hide, or lockdown, option requires specific facility assessment to identify and adapt to a range of known vulnerabilities: door types, internal door configurations, locksets, glazing (windows), drapes/blinds, availability of barricade materials, etc. These assessments can be conducted with local and/or federal partners at no cost or by trained employees. Since many

main office areas, counseling centers, libraries, and sometimes classrooms are constructed with large amounts of glass on or near the door locking mechanisms, identifying options for nearby safe rooms should be considered. If classrooms have excessive glass on or near the doors that cannot be barricaded, then further assessment and planning may be considered to reinforce those specific entrance locations with clear Mylar shatter-resistant film to slow a forced entry. In an office setting, it may be advantageous to have planned safe rooms equipped with public address, phone, and any other emergency signaling technology so site leaders can simultaneously move occupants to safety while initiating all emergency signals and ongoing communications from a protected location. Some site survey formats can be overwhelmingly complex and not clearly distinguished between low-to-medium cost elements versus those requiring facility modernization or even new construction.[7] So rational return on investment and cross benefits should be a consideration throughout.[8]

When it's time to run: How to move to safety

Although primary and secondary education leaders may emphasize the "hide" and other associated elements of a reinforced lockdown as described above, there are numerous conditions where one must move individually or even with others to a more secure location and/or away from the threat. For example, the Columbine attack was initiated during a lunch period. The multiple considerations of how to move to safety are too varied for this document; however, it is worth emphasizing that staying in a known unsafe location or intentionally moving towards a threat are universally unsound when there are still better options.

An example of moving toward safety could be a group of students in an outdoor area during an organized educational activity being successfully led off campus by a staff member in a direction away from the threat. Another common-sense example is occupants of an open office area, counseling center, or similar administration area with offices featuring glass on or near the doors moving quickly to known safe rooms that have additional levels of protection. More chaotic, and more difficult to train for, is a mixed scenario such as an attack initiated during a passing or lunch period (such as the Columbine scenario). In this more complex setting, individuals must be trained in the poor choices to avoid and the more optimal ones to seek out in the confusion and stress of the moment.

When is it time to fight? Last resort for survival

The "fight" component of national response guidance is the most controversial and anxiety provoking, particularly in the education sector. This is best viewed as a last-resort option when suddenly trapped and confronted by an armed assailant and no other course of action remains. Part of the beauty of public education is the diversity of employees that reflects our complex communities. Whereas some staff may have an innate competitive and protective mindset and may embrace the concepts of a last resort defense and escape,

many others may find it exceedingly difficult, if not inconceivable, to envision attempting to distract and/or disable an armed attacker.

As outlined above in the general training considerations, this final option will be an area where it is most difficult to build organizational capacity in an educational setting. Thus, it will most likely remain an area of exposure to concepts. Moreover, responsible minds must prevail when considering whether to expose any of the concepts to students to ensure all concepts and training are developmentally appropriate and backed by the most current guidance from multiple sources.

Preparing for school incidents

Trauma care basics: Stop the bleed

School nurses are essential members of the school safety team, bringing a wealth of compassion, knowledge, and awareness of everyday routine medical situations for students. They are also familiar with areas of inappropriate and even illegal health-related conduct. During the chaos of an active shooter incident response, the school nurse will most likely be locking down or moving to safety — like all other employees and students.

Fortunately, many gunshot wounds are survivable if blood loss is rapidly managed with trauma care basics and followed by expedited transport to trauma care units. It is highly recommended that staff are trained and equipped with basic trauma care skills so lives can be saved despite severe injuries. School nurses can be powerful subject matter experts to help initiate, coordinate, and sustain this life-saving training that could also be useful in shop accidents and even outside of school for automobile accidents or other emergencies.

There's an app for that: Buyer beware

With a flood of new technologies for both learning and school safety, great care should be taken when assessing and choosing between the expanding school safety communications applications, emerging products, and artificial intelligence. It continues to be a best practice to seek references, use pilots, and patiently assess the effectiveness of products leading up to full adoption. Hurrying towards wide adoption immediately in the wake of a widely publicized school shooting or similar tragedy is ill-advised. Some vendors have claimed their apps would call 911, but it actually wouldn't when more closely scrutinized. Others couldn't be easily tested in drills as claimed. School safety apps may have a suite of additional, redundant features without scalable options. This is a place where governance teams, with their role as fiscal stewards for the LEA, can contribute by asking informed questions.

Considerations do not end at the point of purchase. Use of any security featured apps will require a clear clarification of user levels and authorities, and most importantly, standardized expectations for their use on a daily basis in the context across a spectrum of incidents — from routine and less critical to the most infrequent

and critical. User access will need to be routinely updated to reflect new hires and departures. Organizations must be mindful of the extremely wide range of comfort and familiarity employees have with mobile apps and overall tech savviness. Apps will almost inevitably require users to voluntarily use a personal device. Lastly, if there is any expectation that the app will also be used by local law enforcement, the standard must be clarified between school resource officers (SROs), patrol and dispatch, and it is recommended this be documented in a memorandum of understanding. General caution is advised when selecting any app where there are organization-wide expectations for life safety.

Crisis communications planning

Communicating clear, accurate, timely information to either alert or to inform parents/guardians and the community will pose tremendous challenges in the ongoing aftermath of a school shooting or crisis. Careful advanced communication planning with all partners will help increase the chances for the most coordinated, controlled, and professional flow of information in a crisis. For more information on this topic see the crisis communications brief (**insert hyperlink**).

Secure campus: Something less than lockdown

For the numerous non-life-threatening situations where additional control and protection is needed, LEAs are encouraged to develop an organization-wide security posture short of full lockdown where education routine can be maintained indoors behind locked doors and a controlled perimeter.

This protocol may be employed for scenarios such as:

‣ dangerous animals/insects on/near campus;

‣ police activity in the vicinity not requiring lockdown; or

‣ searching for persons at risk.

It may also be used as one of several options and/or layers to a suspected weapons possession or bomb threat response. This is a simple, but highly valuable tool to meet the strategic objective of balancing physical and psychological safety — particularly when the situation does not warrant bringing the normal education routine to a complete stop.

A Secure Campus protocol takes time and refreshing to be absorbed into local law enforcement departments that are unaccustomed to it. Coordination with supporting partners is essential to ensuring smooth operations that both increase physical control and lessen

> The terminology varies for this less-than-lockdown protocol, but as an example, it is referred to as "Secure Campus" across the 42 districts in San Diego County as a standardized protocol.

anxiety. After developing and coordinating any new protocol with partners, it must be trained and rehearsed along with other drills to ensure that staff, students, media points of contact, and community are all familiar with the change, purpose, common terminology, and anticipated language when used.

Responding to school incidents

Suspected weapons possession: Discreet, coordinated options

Any time a weapon (firearm or bladed, edged weapon) is brandished, the best option is to activate a lockdown/armed assailant response. However, the response to a suspected weapons possession should generally be viewed as a broader options-based scenario, where ideally: 911 is rapidly called and provided all available information from the person most knowledgeable — clarifying that it is suspected and not brandished; loud, organization-wide responses that could escalate the situation are avoided as an automatic step; and the potential armed person is discreetly monitored. When law enforcement partners arrive, a rapid assessment of all available information will then help determine the most prudent (usually joint) response given a host of variables. Therefore, it is recommended that LEAs develop protocols for these more nuanced situations with local law enforcement and train employees to conduct a more discreet and restrained response than in a "loud" or overt lockdown, or similar.

Employees should not be expected to search for weapons alone. A lack of clear protocol can place well-meaning employees in dangerous situations when trying to solve emergent problems without proper guidance, training, and resources. There are examples of administrators and campus security staff being shot or stabbed while attempting to conduct a weapons search alone, without support from law enforcement partners who are specifically trained and equipped to manage the many foreseeable weapons outcomes. SROs are appropriate support in these situations, when available, since they are familiar with the education environment, staff, students, and organizational sensitivities, and the risks posed by public embarrassment.

Bomb threats: Joint decision-making when time is essential

Many LEAs may still be operating with a rigid bomb threat protocol that essentially provides only one option — full evacuation. In recent years, the options-based strategic view has also begun to encompass more varied, flexible coordinated responses to bomb threats, where evacuation may in fact be deemed warranted; however, it may not be en masse as in an earthquake or fire response.[9] Even this basic response option may be modified to occur in stages and coordinated with searches with law enforcement agency partners.

It is relatively complex to assemble a functional bomb, but relatively easy to acquire firearms, so a known evacuation protocol, or an evacuation without law enforcement partners first assessing and providing exterior security, could inadvertently expose the evacuees to a shooting threat with the bomb threat as a ruse. Although anonymous online threats and recorded messages with spoofed numbers have become far more common, staff should still be trained on how to manage and report a phoned threat with a caller still on the line.[10] It is recommended that county offices of education and districts partner with local law enforcement partners, review current guidance, and establish a matrix of options and processes that can be selected according to assessed risk.

Hoax threats

Anonymous hoax threats have become a worsening trend in recent years, creating a painful thorn in the side of the collective school and law enforcement community. There is not often clear guidance for how to best manage these incidents, which have the potential to cause deep community concerns when the threats are communicated overtly, on social media, or other means that receive wide attention. The following are some key considerations for school leaders.

Imminent risk or time to assess further?

Ultimately, principals and law enforcement must treat every threat as potentially real and credible until they can objectively determine otherwise. There are no easy answers for how best to manage these cases. As with any school safety-related investigation and/or response, a unified decision process should ideally assess if there is an imminent risk that must be addressed, or if there is more time to step back and assess further. In many cases, the nature of hoax threats do not make this distinction clear. Behavioral threat assessment, addressed further in a companion brief, is usually a discrete process conducted quietly in the background to gradually determine threat potential. However, assessing what may appear to be hoax threats (to experienced law enforcement and educators' eyes) often occurs in a more overt, emotionally charged, and faster pace environment. Administrators and law enforcement working together need latitude to assess, communicate, and respond as they deem appropriate to their local situation.

Unseen costs of hoaxes

Schools and LEAs who have experienced repeated threats feel the enormous cost that may be discernable in cumulative stress, erosion of trust, and lost attendance. Hoax threats victimize the collective school community and may unnecessarily feed into a pessimistic narrative that experiencing a school shooting is an inevitable part of life. The impacts of school threats, including hoaxes, are addressed in a separate companion brief [**insert link – impacts of safety threats brief**].

There is an increased expectation for transparency in public education, and issues with investigative and tactical options should be communicated transparently when able, but clearly when more appropriate. Public communications can remind the community that all threats are taken very seriously and fully investigated by school administration and law enforcement partners, with reminders of how to submit tips. At the same time, it may also be cautioned that information must be limited for details of ongoing investigations and other sensitive tactical options. The latter can seem emotionally unsatisfying to community members that desire more real-time details, but this is an expectation that cannot be met on a consistent basis. Ultimately, principals should be supported by LEAs to consider communicating more assertively about overly communicated threats that have the potential to be disruptive without feeling pressured to take actions that are not warranted by the facts.

Removing the veil of anonymity and providing consequences

Sometimes, administration and law enforcement investigating in close cooperation can learn the identity of the anonymous threat makers, but oftentimes they cannot without reaching out to social media platforms. Emergency Disclosure Requests (EDRs) are a powerful tool that can sometimes be used by local and federal law enforcement agencies to obtain identifying information about anonymous threat makers from social media providers, but there must be a higher level of potential risk communicated in the online posting to warrant this process.

Reunification

Following safety incidents, LEAs are often tasked with reunifying students with their parents or legal guardians. Planning reunification strategies in advance can lessen the stress and confusion often associated with such incidents. Below are some considerations for governance teams to understand when discussing safety plans.

LEA-supported remote reunification

Although reunification is a relatively straightforward concept — to reunify children with their authorized parents or guardians — even reunifying due to a relatively low-stress situation may pose several unique administrative, logistical, supervision, and access-control challenges. All schools should be prepared to conduct reunifications for low-intensity (lower stress) events at their own site, and without considerable additional support from the LEA beyond normal support such as transportation. A common low-stress incident could be an extended power outage on a sweltering day.

However, for higher-intensity incidents such as a fire or a school shooting, a school should not be expected to support its own reunification. Moreover, the reunification for a critical incident should ideally be held several miles from the incident location, but not so far as to pose additional challenges to families without cars. It

is understood that bringing anxious parents and guardians into a crisis area that will likely be crowded, if not blocked, by numerous responding agencies is ill advised. Therefore, LEAs must invest in a thorough LEA-supported remote reunification process for critical incidents. During these worst-case scenarios, the impacted school will be concerned with supervising students on buses and then at the reunification area if able. In the ongoing aftermath of a school shooting, the LEA owes the public the most organized, safe, well-communicated process it can provide. It is highly foreseeable that the anxiety and unknowns present will test even the best, most well-rehearsed, and coordinated plan.[11]

Identify and study reunification sites in advance

It is highly recommended that LEAs identify several suitable LEA facilities across the region that can accommodate the full logistics anticipated for a remote reunification, up to the very largest schools. If the reunification locations are other school sites, then ideally, they consist of a large capacity gym and access features that will help manage the anticipated vehicle and foot traffic. There may be cases where alternate non-LEA facilities must be considered as well. After sites are identified, these sites should be surveyed by the leadership teams from the LEA who will be running the reunification operations there so they can hone the plan on paper into one that is practical and workable on the actual site. Consultation with experts and emergency responders during the comprehensive school safety planning process is essential for such decisions.

Transportation

The transportation planning process should prepare multiple options for pick-up locations nearby each site with a safe standoff distance determined by the LEA and local law enforcement. Some police departments have prepared the option to have specially trained officers drive the buses from the pre-established safe locations near the school (within a half-mile) to the actual incident location. Advanced planning can help review all relevant details (on paper and at the actual locations) for the safe area, near the incident location, and reunification site away from the incident location, such as:

▶ safe paths of travel;

▶ bus turning radiuses;

▶ additional rooms for command centers;

▶ special education needs; and

▶ parent/guardian crisis notification, etc.

Logistics should be optimized to maintain the strongest chain of custody for students as possible. Safety and accountability will be the primary objectives, so there should be systems put into place that are redundant and can keep accurate records of who was picked up and dropped off.

Putting systems in place

Incident Command System

The Incident Command System (ICS) is a "standardized approach to the command, control and coordination of on-scene incident management, providing a common hierarchy within which personnel from multiple organizations can work."[12] A comprehensive reunification plan requires a coordinated command, control, and communications process utilizing the standardized terminology, concepts, and processes per the federal National Incident Management System (NIMS) guidance.[13] Some educators have more familiarity with NIMS than others, as it is commonly an area requiring additional training.

Shared, or unified, command is a common concept when coordinating a complex response where authorities are shared between multiple agencies. However, there will also be many elements of the response exclusively controlled by law enforcement, as the incident location will become an active crime scene under law enforcement tactical control. Staff, students, and visitors may be evacuated from the impacted site before it is entirely secured by a rigorous SWAT [special weapons and tactics] team sweep or similar and there are numerous possibilities that must be coordinated with law enforcement partners in advance to clarify who oversees what, when, and where.

There are also many command and control aspects that will remain the responsibility of the LEA — particularly the reunification process, safely away from the incident location. Nevertheless, law enforcement support at the reunification location will be highly sought to help manage transportation, traffic, and on-site security. It is easy to understand why the main law enforcement focus will be at the incident location, but through careful coordination and planning, they can also appreciate the needs of the LEA away from the incident.

Emergency operations center

The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is the physical or virtual hub, or centralized location, of all coordination of emergency response and recovery operations. EOC uses the ICS to coordinate and communicate with multiple agencies and partners in an emergency. Smaller LEAs may choose to engage LEA emergency command and control functions from existing board conference rooms or similar facilities. Larger LEAs commonly prefer to establish dedicated (or dual use) EOCs. Local law enforcement partners and employees with formalized operational emergency management experience from government, military, law enforcement, utilities and related fields can be helpful in tailoring a new EOC that is aligned with an LEA's size, needs, and foreseeable natural disaster and emergency response requirements. When setting up an EOC, LEAs should identify all local, county, and even state and federal authorities/partners to establish clear lines of communication and authorities within advance. This recommendation is easy to add to a document, but it requires a dedicated, ongoing effort to build these partnerships and relationships so that they are as robust as possible prior to a major incident response.

Staffing and training

LEAs that have invested in an emergency management response may find it to be a years-long process to feel adequately prepared. Staff from an LEA's student support services, special education, and mental health teams, as well as nurses and campus security may form the central ICS leadership of the reunification team, and the LEA will likely draw on employees suited for this critical work from a variety of other departments. Periodically, these teams will need to be restaffed and retrained. It is critical that all school staff are trained on the site's safety plans, and that staff understand their roles and responsibilities in following the safety plan.[14]

Changes in local law enforcement leadership, policy, and staffing can bring improvements and adjustments to previous plans as well. It is recommended that when LEAs feel ready, they conduct tabletop exercises in a joint environment with the partners and departments involved with the planning process as well as a range of employee units who will need to respond and communicate (or not) throughout all phases of the response operation.

Preparation pays extra dividends

Developing, coordinating, training, and exercising an LEA-supported remote reunification plan can be a complex, albeit rewarding, process with multiple cross-benefits that can enrich many other aspects of an LEA's disaster and emergency management capabilities. Even if an LEA is never called upon to activate this plan in a real-world emergency, it can still pay multiple dividends during calmer times.

Athletics event safety and security

Athletics events present an additional consideration for safety planning. The California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) has published a wealth of resources to help LEAs safely conduct a spectrum of athletic events. The past decade has seen innovation and development of several athletic safety resources — from simple checklists to products associated with the national program, Emergency Action Plan. The broadly comprehensive nature of athletics — ranging from preventing and responding to injuries, sportsmanship, student behavior (e.g., harassment, hazing, etc.), and many others — requires guidance beyond event security and crowd management; therefore, LEA support may be a joint venture between athletics, student support services, school safety and more. Moreover, it should be clear where all related athletic guidance is housed to ensure information is disseminated in a coherent manner.

The substantive CIF Game and Crowd Management Guidelines may be included as an annex within the CSSP.[15] Structured planning is recommended prior to all athletic events — large or small — to establish coordinated supervision, access, crowd management, and contingency response capabilities. Even with smaller games, clear command, control, and communication expectations should be established in this pre-event planning. Some LEAs have pro-grammed all school radios with common special event channels to ease coordination for athletic events and other activities between two or more different LEA schools. Contingency plans must be in place for a range of scenarios, such as fighting, weapons (suspected and brandished), or even dangerous criminal activity. No event planner wants to be caught flat-footed without adequate response options for these and other scenarios. Simple acts like preparing planned public address scripts or supplying extra radios or extra sets of keys for egress or shelter options can be useful in many situations.

If LEAs intend to hire local law enforcement to provide event support, it is recommended law enforcement are a part of, or at least privy to, the pre-event planning process. Ideally, law enforcement will have school radios and be fully integrated into the contingency planning. When LEA leaders use the standardized language and concepts of the NIMS and ICS with law enforcement (e.g., "Ms. Sanchez will serve as the school's Incident Commander"), it helps establish an increased expectation of unified command, control, trust, and communications between partners.

Athletics provide invaluable experiences and life lessons that may be hard to provide in the classroom alone. Therefore, providing these extracurricular opportunities in the safest manner possible is essential. LEAs are encouraged to develop ongoing relationships with their regional CIF directors to stay abreast of the latest safety resources and guidance and remain attentive to new changes.

Questions for governance teams to consider

One way in which governance teams can support effective planning for their LEAs' options-based protocol is to ask informed questions during the development and review of comprehensive safety plans, during policy adoption, and in meetings in which safety topics are being discussed. Below are some questions board members may consider asking:

▸ **Staffing and internal coordination**
  ▸ Are LEA administrative and staff leaders identified with operational decision-making authorities clarified?
  ▸ Are site administrative and staff leaders identified with authorities clarified?
  ▸ Are thresholds established for internal and LEA notifications, law enforcement notifications, and ICS activation?

▸ **Partnerships and external coordination**
  ▸ To what extent are relationships established with local law enforcement (SROs, etc.), local county office of education, city/county/state offices of emergency services, local media, and neighboring/feeder/destination LEAs?.

▸ **Protocol**
  ▸ Are protocols developed in accordance with local partners with considerations from Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools and other federal guidance?
  ▸ Is there documentation to satisfy a range of training, drill, student support, criminal and civil law expectations?

▸ **Implementation**
  ▸ To what extent is there adequate training for all staff (per California Education Code Sections 32280–32289.5)?
  ▸ Does the LEA prioritize an annual or periodic cycle of training for the Comprehensive School Safety Committees or designee teams (e.g., principal, assistant principal, school psychologist, counselor, nurse, teacher(s), campus assistant/security, custodial, administrative assistant(s), etc.)?

Relevant resources

California Legislative Information

Senate Bill 906 (2021–22) — School Safety: Homicide threats

SB 906 requires LEAs to annually notify parents and guardians of proper firearm storage and laws related to the safe storage of firearms. The entirety of text of the bill can be found here: SB 906 School safety: homicide threats (ca.gov).

SB 553 (2023–24) — Occupational safety: workplace violence: restraining orders and workplace violence prevention plan

SB 553 requires an employer to establish, implement, and maintain an effective workplace violence prevention plan, to provide training for employees on the plan, and to provide additional training when the plan is updated, or a new workplace violence hazard has been identified. The entirety of text of the bill can be found here: SB 553 Occupational safety: workplace violence: restraining orders and workplace violence prevention plan (ca.gov).

Active shooter/armed assailant response resources

U.S. Department of Education Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Guidance

U.S. Department of Homeland Security Preparedness

SchoolSafety.gov

NASP and NASRO Best Practice Considerations for Armed Assailant Drills in Schools

Physical infrastructure security

REMS K-12 Site Assessment Resources 2021

Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) K-12 School Security Guide 3rd Edition 2022

Whole Building Design Guide. Active Shooter: A Role for Protective Design. 2021.

Official school shooting reports

The Report of Governor Bill Owens: Columbine Review Commission 2001

Virginia Tech Review Panel 2007

Report on Sandy Hook Investigation 2013

Reunification

US Department of Education Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Guidance for Reunification

REMS Fact Sheet for Reunification

Bomb threats

FEMA Weapons of Mass Destruction Training Manual: "Understanding and Planning for School Bomb Incidents" Participant Guide.

DHS Bomb Threat Checklist

Athletic event management references and key resources

California Interscholastic Federation (CIF)

CIF Game and Crowd Management Guidelines

CIF Administrative Oversight Plan

CIF Sportsmanship Checklist

CIF Emergency Action Plan

Relevant CSBA board policies and administrative regulations

CSBA GAMUT Policy and Policy Plus subscribers have access to sample policies. The following are sample policies and administrative regulations that are relevant to options-based responses.

- BP 0400 - Comprehensive Plans
- BP/AR 0450 - Comprehensive Safety Plan
- BP 1100 - Communication with the Public
- BP 1112 - Media Relations
- BP/AR 1114 - District-Sponsored Social Media
- BP/AR 3515 - Campus Security
- BP/AR 3515.2 - Disruptions
- BP/AR 3515.3 - District Police/Security Department
- BP 3516/ AR 3516 - Emergency and Disaster Preparedness
- AR 3516.1 - Fire Drills and Fires
- AR 3516.2 - Bomb Threats
- AR 3516.3 - Earthquake Emergency Procedure System
- BP 3516.5 - Emergency Schedules
- BP/AR 3517 - Facilities Inspection
- BP 3540 - Transportation
- BP 4131 - Staff Development
- BP 4231 - Staff Development
- BP 4331 - Staff Development
- BP/AR 5131.7 - Weapons and Dangerous Instruments
- BP 5131.8 - Mobile Communication Devices
- BP/AR 5144 - Discipline
- BP/AR 5144.11 - Suspension and Expulsion/Due Process
- AR 5144.2 - Suspension and Expulsion/Due Process (Students with Disabilities)
- BP/AR 6145.2 - Athletic Competition
- BP/AR 6159.1 - Procedural Safeguards and Complaints for Special Education
- BP 6159.4 - Behavioral Interventions for Special Education Students
- BP/AR 6164.4 - Identification and Evaluation of Individuals for Special Education
- BP/AR 6164.5 - Student Success Teams
- BP/AR 6164.6 - Identification and Education Under Section 504

Endnotes

1   National Fire Protection Association: US School Fires, Grades K-12 with 10 or More Deaths. https://csba.pub/49W2yXU

2   The Report of Governor Bill Owens' Columbine Review Commission: Hon. William H. Erickson, Chairman. (May 2001). https://csba.pub/3TkbRJN

3   Virgina Tech Review Panel. Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech: Report of the Review Panel. (4-15-2007). https://csba.pub/3IEuTpo

4   Report of the State's Attorney for the Judicial District of Danbury on the Shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Office Of The State's Attorney Judicial District Of Danbury. Stephen J. Sedensky III. (11-25-2013). https://csba.pub/3Ta6m0o

5   US Department of Education Readiness and Emergency Management. Active Shooter Situations: Responding to An Active Shooter Situation. (4-19-21). https://csba.pub/3PlwQuM

6   National Association of School Psychologists and National Association of School Resource Officers: Best Practice Considerations for Armed Assailant Drills in Schools. (April 2020). https://csba.pub/4awpcpJ

7   Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools. K-12 Site Assessment Resources. (2021). https://csba.pub/3VdrDcd

8   Whole Building Design Guide. Active Shooter: A Role for Protective Design. (4-30-23). https://csba.pub/3wWTfbx

9   The Federal Emergency Management Agency. Publication 1. (2016). https://csba.pub/3VfJCyz

10   DHS Bomb Threat Checklist. (2014). www.cisa.gov. https://csba.pub/49Q32i7

11   U.S. Department of Education Readiness and Emergency Management. Creating, Practicing, And Implementing Plans for Family Reunification Before, During, And After an Emergency. https://csba.pub/4awpInF

12   National Incident Management System (NIMS). (October 2022). Emergency Operations Center How-to Quick Reference Guide. https://csba.pub/3PjSzDa

13   U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency. National Incident Management System. https://csba.pub/3TB8EqE

14   California Legislative Information. School Safety Plans. https://csba.pub/3Tkd0RB

15   California Interscholastic Federation. Game and Crowd Management Guidelines. (12-2-2012). https://csba.pub/49W2mIa