

Chapter IV – Prevention & Mitigation

A. Introduction

1. Mitigation/Prevention is intended to eliminate hazards and vulnerabilities, reduce the probability of hazards and vulnerabilities causing an emergency situation, or lessen the consequences of unavoidable hazards and vulnerabilities. The Federal Emergency Management Agency defines Prevention/Mitigation as “acting before a disaster strikes”. Prevention/Mitigation is also used just as effectively after an incident to reduce the risk of repeat incidents or further damage.
2. The benefits of effective Prevention/Mitigation include the following:
 - a. Saving lives and reducing injuries.
 - b. Preventing or reducing property damage.
 - c. Reducing economic losses.
 - d. Maintaining critical facilities in functioning order.
 - e. Lessening legal liability.
 - f. Providing positive outcomes.

B. Types of Incidents

1. If one had to list all of the incidents that can potentially affect school districts/schools, it would be a daunting task. However, in its simplest form, there are really only three sources of incidents.
2. The first is nature. While nothing can be done to change nature from striking, actions can be taken to lessen or mitigate the impact of nature on your facility. These actions may include availability of weather alert radios, snow removal equipment, hardening the facility (retrofitting, weather-proof windows, etc.), school delays, early dismissal and closure. Recognition of the danger and monitoring the weather situation is paramount to taking timely and proper action.
3. The second source is a human-caused accident. These events can be prevented perhaps through conducting routine safety and security audits, training personnel on procedures and properly maintaining equipment. An electric space heater resulting in an accidental fire may fall in this category. Prohibiting the use of space heaters could prevent it and conducting fire drills could mitigate the consequences of the fire.
4. Finally, the last source of disasters involves human-caused intentional acts. These are criminal or terrorist acts. Effective monitoring and security controls can prevent such acts and a facility lockdown procedure can mitigate the effects of such acts. For example, a football rivalry game is scheduled for Friday night with a credible threat for fights and civil disturbance. Mitigation or prevention examples might be to cancel the game, bring in additional security or reschedule the game from Friday night to Saturday afternoon.

Include in this section the general characteristics of the school district/school such as incidents experienced in the past, geographic {e.g., flood prone area, proximity to major highway, high crime area} and demographic data. Describe resources available both internally and externally.

5. School District/School Description Example:

_____ School District/School is located in an agricultural community but on a major highway that is a main artery between Harrisburg and Hershey. Historically, incidents that have affected the school district/school typically include winter snowstorms, loss of power, and bomb threats that turn out to be pranks.

C. Formulating a Prevention/Mitigation Program

Describe in this section how the school district/school is going to identify the hazards that could affect their facilities. The second part of this section should describe how the school district/school will carry out an inspection of the school district/school for structural and nonstructural vulnerabilities.

1. The first step in formulating a Prevention/Mitigation Program is to identify the hazards that could affect the school district/school and the likely results.
2. The second step is to inspect the school district/school for both structural and nonstructural vulnerabilities. Structural evaluations and upgrades are best conducted by qualified contractors and engineers. Make sure your buildings have been constructed to code. Structural upgrades might include bolting or tying down the roof to the building. Eliminating hazards from nonstructural areas can reduce injuries significantly and cut down on property losses. Examples of nonstructural mitigation might be to check the condition of drains, gutters, and downspouts of each building regularly or before each heavy rain.

D. Risk and Hazard Vulnerability Assessment

Provide the results of any previous and current risk and vulnerability assessment efforts. A Sample Risk and Hazard Vulnerability Assessment is located in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

Risk and Hazard Vulnerability Assessment Example:

_____ School District/School has assembled a Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Team made up of { ____ }. This Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Team meets annually to review the events from the past year to determine if changes need to be made to the assessment. In addition, _____ School District/School has had a security, and safe review conducted by the Pennsylvania State Police, comparable law enforcement agency, or other qualified agency, _____ Fire Company, and _____ municipal Emergency Management Coordinator. As a result of these reviews, improvements are made in the identified areas, such as physical security and emergency responder interface. Fire drills are conducted on a monthly basis followed by a safety and security review of emergency kits and emergency alarms.

1. Prevention and mitigation requires taking a comprehensive inventory of the hazards in a school district/school and community and identifying what to do to prevent and reduce injury and property damage.
2. One of the most important actions that a school district/school can take is to perform a risk and hazard vulnerability assessment. This can be accomplished by bringing in an outside party or utilizing school district/school personnel. Utilizing contractors can bring in best practices and experiences that may be new to the school district/school, but is more expensive and often they are not familiar with the local concerns and history. Ideally, a multi-disciplinary team made up of school district/school personnel, emergency management, and first responder personnel should perform this risk and hazard vulnerability assessment.

A Sample list of personnel that should be considered to join the Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Team is located in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

3. There are resources in every community that can help with this process. Firefighters, police, public works staff, facilities managers, and the school district's/school's insurance representative, for example, can help conduct a risk and hazard vulnerability assessment. That information will be very useful in identifying problems that need to be addressed in the preparedness process. Rely on public health agencies and school district/school nurses to provide their perspective into this assessment process.
4. Mitigation requires assessment of local threats. Work with the municipal emergency management director to assess surrounding hazards. This includes the identification and assessment of the probability of natural disasters (tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes) and industrial and chemical accidents (water contamination or fuel spills). Locate major transportation routes and installations. For example, is the school district/school on a flight path or near an airport? Is it near a major highway or railroad tracks that are used to transport hazardous materials?

5. Crises experts encourage school districts/schools to consider the full range of what they can do to avoid incidents (when possible), or lessen their impact. Assessing and addressing the safety and integrity of *facilities* (window seals, HVAC systems, building structure), **security** (functioning locks, controlled access to the school), and the *culture and climate of school districts/schools* through policy and curricula are all important for preventing and mitigating possible future incidents.
6. The risk and hazard vulnerability assessment process should look into past hazards that have affected the school district/school, hazards that may occur in the future along with their consequences and likelihood of occurrence. Consideration should be given to the physical security of the facilities and administrative controls as well as safety, geographical and architectural issues. Done properly, the risk and hazard vulnerability assessment should give the school district/school an idea of which hazards require additional protective measures compared to those that are well protected against. After completing a risk and hazard vulnerability assessment, the school district/school will gain insight as to where to focus limited staff and resources.
7. School Districts/Schools are also encouraged to have teachers and students conduct an All Hazards Classroom and Building Hunt. The students may identify hazards in these areas that are not readily visible to Administrators and emergency personnel.

The Resource Section at the end of this chapter provides a Sample Classroom and Building Hazard Hunt Form.

8. The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency and the Pennsylvania State Police can provide technical assistance to School Districts/Schools on how to conduct a risk and hazard vulnerability assessment.

The Resource Section at the end of this chapter provides a Sample School District/School Hazard Vulnerability Assessments Outcomes list, typical findings and recommendations from several organizations that have conducted assessments.

E. School District/School Threat Assessment Team

Describe in this section what provisions are in place to address school violence threats. Include a general description of the facility lockdown procedure, how a threat of violence is handled and what the School Districts/Schools are doing to promote a violence free environment.

School District/School Threat Assessment Team Example:

_____ School District/School has a Threat Assessment Team made up of the administrator and three trained staff members. This team is assembled at the request of the administrator or the district superintendent when a security related threat surfaces. The team evaluates the nature and credibility of the threat as well as the urgency to respond. The administrator, or designee, is empowered to unilaterally and immediately take action when conditions warrant, such as a bomb threat that is perceived to be specific and credible.

1. Creating a safe, welcoming and orderly learning environment should not be new to any school district/school. Identifying individuals who may pose a danger to themselves or to others should be considered in performing a “threat assessment”. The U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secret Service released a guide, *Threat Assessments in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates* that may be useful in working through the threat assessment process. The results of a threat assessment may guide prevention efforts, which may help avoid an incident.
2. Many school districts/schools have curricula and programs aimed at preventing individuals from initiating harmful behaviors. Social problem-solving or life skills programs, anti-bullying programs, and school-wide discipline efforts are common across the nation as a means of helping reduce violent behavior. Pennsylvania promotes an aligned system of academics and social and emotional learning through the implementation of environmental and individual protective factors based on a resiliency approach. The staff in charge of prevention in a school district/school (counselors, teachers, health professionals, administrators) should be part of the School District/School Safety Committees.

Information on effective and promising prevention programs is on the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools web site listed in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

3. Security threats surfacing at school districts/schools can take many forms such as bomb threats, bullying or threatening behavior by students, staff, or outsiders. A School District/School Threat Assessment Team is another tool in the toolbox to help school officials evaluate the nature, urgency and credibility of the threat and determine what course of action is appropriate for each threat. Members of the School District/School Threat Assessment Team can come from those that performed the risk and hazard vulnerability assessment, but at the very least should include the administrator, law enforcement, school police or other trained security staff. Guidance on the Safe School Initiative from the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education is available to assist the School District/School Threat Assessment Team with this evaluation and with the conduct of a threat inquiry.

The Resource Section at the end of this chapter provides a Sample Threat Assessment Inquiry based on guidance from the Safe School initiative. School District/School Threat Assessment Teams might find it useful in evaluating various security threats.

Additional guidance can be found at the U.S. Department of Education website listed in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

F. Legal/Insurance Issues

Provide in this section information on the school district's/school's legal representation and insurance policy or policies.

1. Mitigating incidents is also important from a legal standpoint. If a school district/school or state does not take all necessary actions in good faith to create safe school districts/schools, it could be subject to civil liability. It is important to make certain that the physical plant is up to municipal codes as well as federal and state laws.
2. In order for the school districts to be comprehensive in their planning they need to consider insurance coverage. It is important that the school district/school do an annual review of its policy or policies to ensure adequate coverage.

The Resource Section at the end of this chapter includes a Sample Insurance Review Checklist that the school district/school can consider when reviewing their insurance.

G. Prevention/Mitigation Considerations

Include in this section the features and procedures that exist in the school district/school to prevent or reduce the effects from an incident such as access control, emergency generators, steps taken to reduce the damage from floods and hazardous material incidents such as shelter-in-place and evacuation procedures.

1. Physical security, for example, may have surfaced as an area that the facility is especially vulnerable. Consideration, with input from experts, can be given to various protective measures along with the costs and potential benefits. In many cases all that may be needed is tightening up some administrative controls as opposed to purchasing expensive equipment.

2. School Districts/Schools in flood prone areas can mitigate the impact of a possible flood by ensuring equipment that is critical to operations is stored above flood levels. Identify potential hazards on campus. Conduct regular safety audits of the physical plant. Be sure to include driveways, parking lots, playgrounds, outside structures, and fencing. A safety audit should be part of normal operations. This information should feed into Prevention/Mitigation planning.

A Sample School District/School Compliance Checklist is located in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

3. Consider programs that cultivate an environment that encourages students to come forward to faculty members with potential threats and to not tolerate bullying. Examples include an anonymous tip line and visible enforcement actions that are taken seriously by all students and staff. As per Act 61 of 2008, each school/district in the commonwealth is required to adopt a bullying prevention policy and incorporate that policy into their code of conduct.
4. Staff should be trained on early warning indicators of violent behavior or suicidal tendencies. Random unannounced searches to identify weapons, drugs, and other contraband may be conducted. Relationships built on trust should be established between staff and student body. School Climate Surveys should be conducted periodically for students, staff and faculty.

A Sample School District/School Climate Survey is located in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter. This example was developed by Safe Havens International. ***Please note:** Your school/district may be participating in the Pennsylvania Youth Survey Program or another risk behavior survey program which may provide much of the same information. If participating in one of these programs, coordinate your data collection with them.

5. Be aware of specific words used by students, body language and other indicators that suggest violent or suicidal behavior. Programs are implemented to deter bomb threats and false fire alarms. These programs include communicating criminal penalties, recording phone calls, CCTV cameras, developing policies that enforce restroom supervision, securing non-student areas, and having the students make up lost time due to false alarms in order to place peer pressure on the instigators. Consider implementing after-school programs that promote positive school climate between students, staff, parents/guardians, and the community.
6. An outcome of a good risk and hazard vulnerability assessment is to ask the question “If there is a reasonable chance that this disaster could happen.....can we reasonably do anything today to prevent it from happening?”

7. School Districts/Schools cannot always prevent fights, bomb threats, and school shootings. However, they can institute policies, implement violence prevention programs, and take other steps to improve the culture and climate of their campuses. Evidence-based program models that have been proven to reduce violence, delinquency, and other problem behaviors should be utilized where appropriate to insure effectiveness. Information and technical assistance on these programs is coordinated through the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency Resource Center for Evidence-Based Prevention and Intervention Programs and Practices as well as listed on the Pennsylvania Department of Education safe schools websites. School Districts/Schools can take immediate actions to investigate threats before they are acted on and strictly and uniformly enforce their code of student conduct.
8. Examples of Prevention/Mitigation include:
 - a. Conducting drills/exercises can reduce injury to students and staff because they will know what to do to avoid harm.
 - b. Conducting an After Action Review following an actual incident or exercise can help to improve responses to future events thereby mitigating the effects of the disaster.
 - c. Developing an Improvement Plan to identify responsibilities for corrective actions identified in the After Action Report.
 - d. Having a shelter-in-place procedure and training for incidents involving hazardous materials are important for school districts/schools.
 - e. Having an emergency generator and routinely testing it cannot prevent a loss of power, but it can make it easier to continue operations.
 - f. Establishing access control procedures and providing identification for visitors and staff might prevent a child's abduction. However, these measures are useless unless they are strictly enforced and followed by all staff, students, and visitors.
 - g. Performing safety and security audits may uncover hazardous or vulnerable conditions that, if corrected, can prevent an accident or criminal attack in the future.
 - h. Employing a school resource officer, using random locker searches for weapons or contraband, and implementing bullying abatement programs can all help to prevent an incident.
 - i. Establishing a climate in school districts/schools that is conducive to students reporting to an adult about a threatening situation.

H. Collaboration with the Community

1. Mitigating or preventing an incident involves both the school district/school and the community. Contact the municipal or county emergency management office to help get started and connect to efforts that are under way locally. School Districts/Schools should be active partners in community-wide risk assessment and Mitigation/Prevention planning.

A list of contact numbers and e-mail addresses for the county emergency management agencies is on the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency website. This website is listed in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.

2. Bring together regional, municipal, and school leaders, among others. Mitigation/Prevention efforts are community activities, leadership and support of Mitigation/Prevention activities are necessary to ensure that the right people are at the planning table. Again, leadership begins at the top. School Districts/Schools will face an uphill battle if state, county, and municipal governments are not supportive of their mitigation efforts.
3. Establish clear lines of communication. Because Mitigation/Prevention planning requires agencies and organizations to work together and share information, communication among stakeholders is critical. In addition to communication within the planning team, outside communication with families and the larger community are important to convey a visible message that school districts/schools and government are working together to ensure public safety.

A Sample Tips for Parents/Guardians to Help Create Safe School Districts/Schools Sheet is included in the Resource Section at the end of this chapter.