

# Private Schools: Emergency Management Planning for All Settings

## READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

All schools, including private schools, are responsible for keeping students and staff safe at all times; this responsibility underscores the critical nature of emergency management planning in communities served by private schools. According to [Characteristics of Private Schools in the United States: Results From the 2019-20 Private School Universe Survey – First Look](#), private schools are defined as institutions that provide instruction for students in one or more of grades K-12, have one or more teachers, are controlled by a nongovernmental entity, and are financed from sources other than public taxation. The diversity in orientation and affiliation of religious and nonsectarian private schools is very broad. Religious schools represent 66 percent of all private schools in the United States, and nonsectarian schools represent 33 percent.

### A Comparison of Private and Public Schools in the United States, by School Characteristics: School Year 2019-20

School Characteristics	Private <sup>1</sup>	Public <sup>2</sup>
Number of elementary and secondary schools	30,492	98,469
Student enrollment	4,652,904	50.4 million
Average number of students enrolled	152 students	529 students
Full-time/Full-time-equivalent teachers	481,200	3,143,713
Graduation rate for the 2018-19 school year	96.4 %	86%
Pupil/teacher ratio	9.7	15.9
Schools in cities	10,445	28,078
Schools in suburbs and towns	14,146	45,322
Schools in rural areas	5,901	28,288

<sup>1</sup> Data for nonpublic schools were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report *Characteristics of Private Schools in the United States: Results From the 2019-20 Private School Universe Survey – First Look* (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Data for public schools were obtained from the NCES *Condition of Education 2022* (2022), NCES Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates, and NCES *Digest of Education Statistics 2021* Tables and Figures (2021).

With 4.7 million, or roughly 10 percent of all U.S. K-12 students enrolled in private schools, where classroom instruction, supervision, and safe shelter are provided, emergency management planning is just as critical as it is in public schools. Ensuring that private schools have the resources to develop, practice, and revise school emergency operations plans (EOPs) is vital to the safety and security of the approximately 5 million private school students and teachers across the nation. Collaborating with state education agencies (SEAs), area local education agencies (LEAs), and other community partners (e.g., local police and fire departments) in emergency management planning provides an opportunity to create effective and unified plans.

As outlined in the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) (School Guide), multidisciplinary planning teams — composed of school personnel and

community partners — can develop a comprehensive school EOP customized to the needs of the students, the staff, and the community that the school comprises. The *School Guide* and six-step planning process are for both private and public schools and allow for flexibility at the school level. Like public schools, private schools are susceptible to a wide range of threats and hazards, of which their core planning teams should be aware so that they address them in their EOP. These emergencies vary and include

- *Natural hazards*, such as tornadoes, hurricanes/typhoons, floods, and wildfires;
- *Technological hazards*, such as explosions, accidental release of hazardous materials, and power failure;
- *Biological hazards*, such as pandemics, infectious diseases, and contaminated food outbreaks; and
- *Adversarial, incidental, and human-caused threats*, such as criminal threats or actions, school shootings, and cyberattacks.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide considerations for private schools, including their administrators, core planning teams, and community partners, to incorporate in their emergency management planning efforts. This fact sheet presents challenges and considerations, points to consider when developing a school EOP, methods of engaging

the community and promoting partnerships in emergency management planning, and resources.

## Challenges and Considerations in Private Schools

Private schools face a number of internal and external challenges related to emergency management planning. One in four private schools in rural areas face additional challenges related to limited resources and geographical challenges, as well. In general, many private schools experience the following types of challenges in preparedness.

**Internal challenges** faced by private schools in emergency management planning include

- **Size.** According to *Characteristics of Private Schools in the United States: Results From the 2019-20 Private School Universe Survey — First Look*, private schools average 152 students per building and, of the 30,492 private schools across the nation, 31 percent enroll fewer than 50 students. While teachers may believe they know their students, it may be erroneously assumed that behavioral patterns that indicate violent tendencies might be detected more readily and that outside intruders would be easily identified and removed.



- **Complacency.** Between 2008 and 2017, there were 41 incidents involving students or former students using a weapon to carry out an attack on their school. According to a [report](#) published by the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) in 2019, only two of these incidents were at private schools. Another [NTAC study](#) from 2021 showed that out of 67 prevented attacks on schools, only one of those cases was at a private school. The small number of incidents may lead to a degree of complacency about the potential for emergencies and the need to engage in emergency management planning at private schools.

available to assist them in developing EOPs. For example, under Title IV, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), funds may be used for creating, maintaining, and enhancing high-quality school EOPs. Both SEAs and LEAs that receive funding under Title IV, Part A of the ESEA have the responsibility to provide equitable services to eligible private school children and educators consistent with the number of eligible children in areas served by such agencies. Private school officials should contact their LEA or [ESEA state ombudsman](#) for additional information about such assistance.

**External challenges** faced by private schools in emergency management planning include

- **Public perception.** The public may perceive private schools as safe environments that do not require emergency management planning initiatives similar to those in public schools. This perception is due to the lack of violent incidences that have occurred in private schools, as compared to public school settings.
- **Pre-negotiated memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with first responders and other area schools or agencies.** Private schools can be assured that local emergency personnel will respond to isolated emergency incidents. However, during a more widespread community episode, private schools may experience a delayed response from first responders that are obligated to serve other area schools or agencies with which they have pre-negotiated MOUs in the event of an emergency. Private schools can develop MOUs with first responders in advance of an emergency.
- **Private schools may be unaware of available resources.** Private school officials may not be aware of Federal, state, and local resources that are

## EOP Development in Private Schools

Emergencies are unpredictable; they can occur at anytime and anywhere, whether before, during, or after school hours or on or off campus. A school EOP can help private schools prepare for the variety of threats and hazards that may impact their community and that may occur during different times of the school day and within different settings. Creating a comprehensive EOP, regardless of whether it is required in your state, can help increase your school's preparedness capacity and prepare your school to respond to and recover from an emergency effectively. A high-quality school EOP should

- Address a range of threats and hazards;
- Include leadership support;
- Integrate data from community partners;
- Consider the whole school community, including stakeholders outside of the immediate school; and
- Outline plans for before, during, and after emergency incidents that can take place in a variety of settings and during different times of the school day.



The *School Guide* highlights the [six-step planning process](#) as a recommended approach for EOP development and implementation because it succinctly describes the activities that schools (including private schools) need to consider in their emergency management planning and who should be involved.

## **Step 1: Form a Collaborative Planning Team**



Schools identify the core planning team that will use its collective expertise to inform the development, implementation, and refinement of the school

EOP. Schools should consider diversity when forming the planning teams and include personnel from the school building, such as administrators, educators, facilities managers, transportation directors, school health staff, and food services personnel, among others such as parents and students as appropriate. Core planning teams should also include partners from across the community, including law enforcement officers, fire officials, emergency medical services personnel, public health officials, mental/behavioral health practitioners, faith-based organizations in the case of religious schools, and youth-serving organizations. Because of the unique characteristics of private schools in America, it is important to understand that many individuals on the planning team may serve in multiple roles or that volunteers may staff roles.

One consideration for private schools that may have fewer staff members is to partner with their neighboring public schools to share resources, including whether there is a need to fill any gaps in staffing limitations related to the planning process. Faith-based schools may want to include leadership from within the religious organization to serve as a steward to address the religious needs of the school community, including parents, in the context of emergency management planning.

## **Step 2: Understand the Situation**

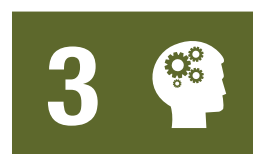


The core planning team identifies all possible threats and hazards that the private school community may face. In

this stage, it is critical to gather data from a variety of sources, including school assessments; input from local, regional, state, and Federal agencies; and information from the school community. Then the planning team evaluates the risks and vulnerabilities posed by threats and hazards and prioritizes them. Capacity assessments are particularly helpful sources of information that capture the capabilities and skills that already exist within the private school community and identify which services are lacking. Local hazard mitigation plans and historical databases from the local, regional, state, and Federal levels can also elicit data on threats and hazards that a school community faces. Additionally, site assessments examine the safety, security, accessibility, and emergency preparedness of school buildings and grounds and can help teams understand the potential impact of threats and hazards on facilities and the campus. The REMS TA Center offers a free site assessment tool, the [SITE ASSESS](#) mobile application, for teams to use.

It is important to know the unique threats and hazards for which the private school is at risk of and vulnerable. All areas, rooms, facilities, and equipment found within and attached to the private school should be considered as the team collects data. Examples may include residence halls or boarding facilities; barns and stables for equestrian and agricultural programs; religious buildings and worship areas; and equipment such as state-of-the-art technology for language immersion, arts, and other academic programs. Once the core planning team has a comprehensive list of threats and hazards, it should evaluate the risk and vulnerabilities. This activity can be completed by assigning a numerical value to each category and using a risk assessment, which will help the planning team prioritize threats and hazards.

## **Step 3: Determine Goals and Objectives**



In this stage, the core planning team selects threats and hazards identified in Step 2 to be addressed in the EOP and then develops

goals and objectives. The planning teams will also identify emergency management functions — such as evacuation, accounting for all persons, communications and warnings, family reunification, and continuity of operations — that may need to be

activated in response to a variety of the threats and hazards. Additionally, the planning team will develop goals and objectives for these functions, as well as addressing the before, during, and after phases. The SEA or state school safety contact may be a useful resource for private schools to help them create goals and objectives to consider as they address state-specific threats, hazards, and/or functions as a part of their technical assistance efforts.

#### **Step 4: Plan Development (Identifying Courses of Action)**



The core planning team assigns the courses of action that are required to accomplish the goals and objectives for before, during, and after potential

emergencies, as well as the who, what, when, where, why, and how. Courses of action will help outline the specific roles and responsibilities of the core planning team members and are ideally developed using scenario-based planning. In the planning phase, private school planning teams should identify the resources needed that are specific to each school. At this point in the planning, try not to focus on the availability of resources or lack thereof. Once the requirements and resources are identified, then the planning team can match its resources to its school's requirements or identify where shortfalls exist and then seek out targeted assistance to overcome those gaps. There are local, regional, state, and national networks that may be able to provide resources that are specific to the needs of private school communities. Private schools might consider reaching out to national and state private school organizations to inquire about support.

#### **Step 5: Plan Preparation, Review, and Approval**



Goals, objectives, and courses of action are formatted into annexes within the EOP; the [Functional Annexes](#) and [Threat and Hazard-Specific](#)

[Annexes](#) are formed; and the Basic Plan section is written. Members of the core planning team, including community partners, should review the plan and ensure that it is adequate, feasible, acceptable,

complete, and complies with applicable state and local requirements. It is critical to obtain insight and feedback from stakeholders before the plan moves to the approval stage. After the core planning team reviews stakeholder feedback, they should revise the plan as needed. Then, the team would obtain approval from appropriate private school officials and share the plan with the community partners and other stakeholders who have a role in the plan. While not all sections of the plan need to be shared publicly, the parts that involve the critical community of stakeholders must be shared with them. If mutual aid agreements or MOUs are set up with community partners (including neighboring schools, LEAs, or institutions of higher education), it is important to share those portions of the plans with partners to ensure that everyone understands his or her role and responsibility in the event of an emergency.

#### **Step 6: Plan Implementation and Maintenance**



All stakeholders are trained on the plan and then continually exercise, maintain, and revise the plan as needed. Effective EOPs require practice and

training so that the entire school community is more effectively prepared to act before, during, and after an emergency to lessen the impact on life and property. Scheduling regular and ongoing review of the EOP and [emergency exercises](#) will help ensure that the EOP will meet the needs of the private school community served by the plan. For example, conducting tabletop exercises or drills involving other service providers will help identify any areas of the plan that may need updating to ensure that their response and recovery efforts are coordinated. New information gleaned from exercises or even actual emergencies should be captured in [after-action reports](#) and used to update the plan or sections of the plan. Additional factors that may prompt a plan review or update are changes in leadership, changes in the school and surrounding community, changes in policies or personnel, changes in threats and hazards, or the emergence of new threats and hazards over time. Assessments will likely generate new information that should be considered on an ongoing basis by the core planning team.

## Engaging Community Partners in Emergency Management Planning

Whereas public schools are automatically connected to local public agencies, private schools might not be. This could necessitate that the private schools take a more proactive approach to becoming integrated into these networks. To do so, private school officials could begin by requesting a meeting with state and local authorities to discuss the school's assessed needs and ways in which safety could be enhanced by closer collaboration. This may require private schools to budget for emergency management activities and resources and identify areas of growth. Conducting site assessments, capacity assessments, and culture and climate assessments and using the data collected can help schools identify their preparedness needs.

Private schools can also collaborate with personnel at the nearby LEA(s) who serve on the district core planning team and are responsible for coordinating emergency management planning within the LEA's public schools. This could result in a more flexible administration of programs so as to account for the unique needs of the private schools in their jurisdictions and provide for the safety of all students in all schools. For example, adding the private schools in the same geographic area to the public school MOUs with first responders and community agencies may streamline emergency response services when an emergency occurs.

Forming [partnerships with community agencies](#), both public and private, can inform their EOPs and ensure effective response. Examples from the public sector where potential partnerships can occur include the local emergency management agency, law enforcement agency, fire department, emergency medical services agency, mental/behavioral health agency, public health agency, and municipality. Additionally, private schools might consider collaborating with other private and nonprofit organizations, such as other private schools, area businesses, [youth-serving organizations](#), shelters, food pantries, neighboring churches and faith-based organizations, the local chapter of the American Red Cross, and the state Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster. Private schools can enhance their preparedness capacity by building relationships with



these partners and determining ways that they are willing and able to support the before, during, and after phases of an emergency. Representatives from community partners might serve on the core planning team, observe school exercises and drills, and/or provide training on emergency management topics to the school community among other activities.

By combining their efforts, sharing resources, and working collaboratively, private schools and their partners can help ensure that the whole school community, including its students, staff, and families, are prepared for an emergency. In addition to the six-step planning process for EOP development and implementation, it is important to note that one of the most valuable resources in emergency management planning is the partnership between the private schools and the local agencies, organizations, and entities within their communities.

## Resources

### Further Reading — REMS TA Center

- [Building Blocks to School Safety: A Toolkit for K-12 Schools and School Districts for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#), Publication
- [The Planning Process At a Glance](#), Web Page
- [Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Practice and Validate Emergency Operations Plans](#), Fact Sheet

- [EOP Interactive Tools](#), Web Page
- [Topic-Specific Resources to Support Your Emergency Management Planning](#), Web Page
- [Tool Box](#), Web Page

### Training Opportunities – REMS TA Center

- [Developing Emergency Operations Plans \(EOPs\) K-12 101](#), Online Course
- [School EOP Planning 101: Creating High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans That Address All Threats, Hazards, Settings, and Times](#), Webinar
- [Developing Emergency Operations Plans \(EOPs\) K-12 101](#), Virtual Training by Request
- [Developing Emergency Operations Plans \(EOPs\) K-12 101](#), Live Training by Request
- [Exploring the REMS TA Center At a Glance: Safety, Security, Emergency Management, and Preparedness Services and Supports for Education Agencies](#), Webinar

### Further Reading – Collaboration and EOP Development

- [Building Private-Public Partnerships](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [IS-660: Introduction to Public-Private Partnerships](#), Online Course (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Emergency Management Institute)
- [IS-662: Improving Preparedness and Resilience Through Public-Private Partnerships](#), Online Course (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Emergency Management Institute)
- [Restoration and Recovery: Guide for Private-Public Partnerships](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency)
- [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans \(School Guide\)](#), Publication (U.S. Departments of Education; Homeland Security, led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency; Justice, led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and Health and Human Services)



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