

Incident Command Systems: Because Life Happens

Preparing for every possible contingency seems daunting, but with teamwork and some help from the government, it's almost do-able.



By Gayle Isaac, CPA, and Brian Moore, RSBS

Life happens. Yes, that sounds like a bumper sticker on the back of an old beat-up Volkswagen, but it's true. Life does happen. And it usually happens at the worst possible time, such as during state progress testing or in the middle of a final budget meeting.

So rather than just sit back and hope against hope that you will never go through an emergency during school hours, work together as a team to prepare for *when* emergencies happen in your schools.

Writing a plan to prepare for every possible contingency sounds intimidating and is indeed a daunting task. We are business professionals and educators, not folks who handle emergencies on a daily basis, so it can be even more difficult.

Thanks to some great teamwork and efforts on behalf of the federal government (that's right, the government was very helpful), there is a great system out there that will help you develop a strong, effective emergency preparedness plan.

Along Come NIMS and ICS

We've all watched the reports on television about the wildland fires in California. The news always does a great job of showing all the different fire engines and firefighters from across the country who are sent out to fight these huge fires. Have you ever wondered how people from so many different places come together and work as a unified force to fight such a large conflagration? Do they all use the same radio phrases? Do they all do the same jobs? The answer is this: They all use the same command system and yes, during an emergency, they all speak the same language.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, wildland firefighters began developing a system that would allow them to integrate all the different radio styles and command functions so when firefighters arrived from around the country, they could quickly and easily adapt to the command system being used at the wildfire. Thus, the Incident Command System (ICS) was born.

After 9/11, the president realized there was good reason not only to ask all emergency agencies to use a single ICS but also to require organizations that received federal funds to use the National Incident Management System (NIMS). A presidential directive was signed, and now we all must become NIMS-compliant.

Most of us have had to add lockdown procedures or active shooter scenarios to our checklists.

We can already hear the sighs and groans from our SBA readers. "Another unfunded mandate," some school business officials will say. But what if this program was actually effective and almost free to implement? What if the training was free and available online from the Federal Emergency Management Agency? There's no what-if. It's true!

Emergencies Don't Fit into a Box

Most of us remember the school crisis plan as one large checklist comprised of smaller checklists. Each list addressed a specific emergency—a fire or a hazardous materials issue. Most of us have had to add lockdown or active shooter scenarios to our checklists. This is all well and good *if* we practice our plan and *if* we let people know who does what on the checklist.

In the NIMS mind-set, we train people to perform certain jobs and regardless of the nature of the emergency, they perform those jobs. There is no checklist, just a list of roles that people assume during an emergency. What a huge difference over what we are all used to doing.

By training people to assume key roles, such as command, logistics supervisor, and reunification director, we allow them to function as a team regardless of the emergency.

No emergency ever fit perfectly into a checklist. In fact, sometimes we end up with two or three different types of emergencies simultaneously. It just doesn't work. If we train people to function as a team during any emergency, they can focus on their roles on the emergency team rather than on the emergency itself. It is a different mind-set. We are basing our response not on the type of emergency, but on how we respond to it as a team.

Understanding the principles of team training takes training, but a quick trip to www.fema.gov and a search for NIMS in the search bar will give you a tremendous head start. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has even created a great course for your emergency teams called ICS 200 for Schools. We told you there is a cost-efficient way to implement NIMS, and there it is. Even your state or local fire department and emergency management agency can help.

Form Your Team

It's easy to mandate who goes on an emergency team, but it's much better to find volunteers from within your organization. Most of the country is protected by volunteer firefighters who have an interest in serving the community, so why not look for volunteers who are interested in a little training and in helping during an emergency?

Once the team is formed, team members can take the online training. It takes a few hours, but afterward they will understand the terminology and the ideas behind ICS. Contact your local police and fire departments for additional help. They are the experts, as they use these systems every day. They will help you learn and understand the concepts.

Yes, you and the local emergency personnel will be using the same system. When the fire engine pulls up, it will have an incident commander and so will you; it will have an operations person and so will you! You will understand what is being said on the radio and you will easily integrate the two organizations because you now speak the same language, the language of NIMS ICS.

Remember to assemble a team that is willing to adapt to these new changes and train the rest of the staff to understand NIMS and how it can be used.

We can see the quizzical looks on your faces. You all thought we were just talking about emergency management! Well read on, good SBO!

ICS Is Not Just for Emergencies

ICS is a simple organizational tool that can be adapted for any event. Your state emergency management agen-

cies use ICS to plan presidential visits or NASCAR races. If you graduate from the Incident Command School in Anniston, Alabama, you might expect your last exercise to be a major fire or weapons of mass destruction release, but alas it is not. Your last exercise is planning a holiday parade. And yes, the system works well even when you are planning parades.

In one of our districts, elementary school staffs use ICS to plan a field trip. At the high schools, the ICS team plans graduation ceremonies. And yes, the rumors are true. An author of this article used ICS to plan his wedding to his beautiful bride—they were both emergency service chiefs at the time.

The tool helps break down tasks into areas of responsibility. That way the workload is spread out, as are the planning issues. Evacuating a school to another location is a major planning nightmare, but if those in charge of logistics and planning work together, the process can be divided into manageable steps. Again, that is the great part of ICS.

Because Emergencies Happen

Each day, we all are tasked with providing a safe learning environment for students. Each day, parents drop off their kids or watch them leave the house knowing that they are going to school and hoping the school has taken the responsibility for protecting their children seriously.

Have you done enough to help your schools prepare for the inevitable?

There has never been a better time to revisit the issue of emergency preparedness.

In school business, we constantly discuss the issues revolving around risk management. If you haven't done a good job of implementing a solid emergency response plan, you are opening yourself up to a vast amount of litigation and liability. There has never been a better time to revisit the issue of emergency preparedness and take advantage of the information that is out there to develop a solid plan to help protect you and your students in the event of an emergency.

Remember, the issue should never be *if* an emergency should happen, but *when*.

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