

# SCHOOL IS BACK IN SESSION! IS YOUR EMERGENCY PLAN READY?



Emergencies often occur without warning, catching us by surprise — scenarios that we simply cannot avoid. These unexpected events pose multiple risks and may be harmful to schools and their students. With dependent populations that can be large or small in number and range in age, elementary, high school and post-secondary institutions are vulnerable.

As of December 2015, 128 British Columbian schools were identified as requiring seismic upgrades to provide building stability during an earthquake event. Although these upgrades are a positive step to mitigate risks associated with this type of event, it is but one component of the planning process when preparing for large scale emergency situations.

Identifying the risks your students and staff could be exposed to will help you properly plan and prepare for response and recovery. In some cases, you may even prevent a scenario from occurring. The risks can come in many forms, from natural disasters like landslides, floods and earthquakes to pandemics and intentional acts of crime.

This raises the question — is your school prepared for such an emergency? Do you have a well-written and well-practiced emergency response plan? Do your staff and students know what to do in the event of an emergency?

Here we explore the top 8 elements you need to consider when reviewing your emergency plan for this school year, to help determine if your school is ready.

## 1. HAZARD IDENTIFICATION & RISK ASSESSMENT

Any good plan has its foundation in hazard identification. Assess your school for potential hazards; engage partners in municipal government and emergency services to help identify not just the risks, but the likelihood of occurrence and appropriate responses.

Reassess the risks and probable situations: Ensure your plan accounts not only for the major risks but also any new threats that may have arisen since the last review. Ask yourself:

- Has anything changed in the surrounding environment?
- Are there regional changes that may affect your location?
- Have new students arrived with different or more significant vulnerabilities?

Update your plan to account for any new threats and focus on preparing for the scenarios with the highest risk and highest impact before moving on to those with moderate risk and impact.

## 2. ACCESS AND EGRESS

In the event of an emergency situation, access to, and egress from, the school site could be a concern for numerous reasons including damage to roads or bridges, preventing parents and/or guardians from arriving at the school.

After any emergency the children will have to be returned to their parents or appropriate guardians. Ensure that you have a capable system in place for this. Parents will be just as distraught as their children after an emergency and could converge in masses at the school at a time when you are still managing the impacts of the incident. Having a repatriation plan and reception centre could bring a measure of order to a distressed group.

PREPARE. RESPOND. RECOVER.

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## 3. CHECKLIST

Create a list of responsibilities and a map of the facility for staff. Staff in any organization want to know what they are accountable for. In chaotic situations such as an emergency, even the most basic check-list of responsibilities is helpful. The list may include:

- Closing the door when leaving the classroom
- Exiting to the muster point
- Completing classroom roll call
- Reporting to the emergency lead on site

Remember, responsibilities may vary depending on the location of staff and their role at the school. Provide the list to educators to keep handy and grab, even when they are in their classrooms.

## 4. PARTNERS

Plans cannot be built in isolation. Include partners in your plan such as the local police and fire departments and paramedics. Ensure they are aware of their role and responsibility noted within your plan and consider inviting them to review the final version.

Work with local police and municipal emergency services on enhancing plans, including the responses to criminal acts. The nightmare of an active threat is sadly a reality that cannot be ignored. La Loche, Saskatoon in January 2016 serves as a horrible indicator as to the reality of this risk. Engaging the police for safe responses to this sort of hazard can mean the difference between keeping your students and staff safe, and tragedy.

You may also want to look at building partnerships with neighbours. They may be able to provide options to support your plan, such as providing shelter in the event weather is unstable and people cannot be clustered outside for long periods.

Include a phone list of these partners in your emergency plan appendix and ensure to touch base with them annually to confirm contact information and determine whether original agreements are still active or need to be updated. No one wants to be in a situation where their back-up option is no longer available during an emergency.

## 5. PRACTICE! PRACTICE! PRACTICE!

A plan is nothing when sitting on the shelf. In order to ensure your students and staff are comfortable with the plan drafted, it is important to schedule regular exercises and drills. This will help to ensure individuals who are assigned key roles are confident and allow the opportunity for staff and students to practice their roles and develop familiarity with the process.

Divide the plan into sections to enable your team to practice simple scenarios initially. Try to include one drill early in the school year to ensure basic foundations are in place for everyone's safety.

## 6. COMMUNICATION

If your school's primary method of communication is via telephone, have you identified an alternative method of communication should the phone lines become unavailable? For example, the telecommunications line or internet might be damaged. If not, consider the use of social media as a communication tool during an emergency. Additionally, would parents and/or guardians know where to look to obtain relevant information?

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Updating and keeping people informed on the latest emergency plan in your location does not need to be time-consuming. Breaking it into smaller sections when presenting the plan to staff can empower and encourage ownership. Review it often. Encourage questions and discussion. A well laid out, well-practiced emergency plan can help to minimize chaos, support clearer communication, and save lives when a crisis occurs.

## 7. CREATE A HANDOUT FOR PARENTS

Following any drill, children will likely go home to explain their day to their parents. Take advantage of this opportunity to send children home with a one-page overview of emergency procedures and directions for parents should an emergency occur at school. Include information such as finding incident information – be it a phone number parents should call or a web-page, the emergency pick-up location for children and other pertinent information. You may also want to include a small map. Have a template included in your plan's appendix that you can easily update and send out through the year.

## 8. EMERGENCY KITS

Have each child build his or her own emergency kit. This can help prepare them mentally and aid in keeping them a little calmer. Including some treats, a toy, a game or a book and a comfort item will help keep them occupied. Importantly you could have each child enclose a picture of them with their parents or guardian as well as emergency contact details.

## NEXT STEPS

This is not an exhaustive list, but provides some key areas a school's emergency plan should consider in order to minimize distress and to reassure both the parents and the students that your school has planned and prepared for emergencies.

Check out the [\*\*BC Emergency Planning Guide for Schools\*\*](#) as a great resource and [\*\*contact CCEM Strategies\*\*](#) today to find out how we can help meet your needs for emergency planning in education.

CCEM Strategies has continuously proven to be a leader for delivering scalable services which include analysis & assessments, planning & program enhancement, training, exercises and strategic facilitation. We design and implement innovative emergency management and business continuity solutions to enhance resilience and complement existing procedures and business processes, while aligning with legislative requirements, industry standards and best practices.

With diversified backgrounds and extensive technical knowledge, the team brings emergency, business continuity and security management experience to CCEM Strategies. And, it's truly the collaborative approach of our experienced emergency management professionals who are sensitive to complex multi-stakeholder responses, which sets us apart.

Interested in working together? Let's get started!  
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