



OREGON  
DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION

# Emergency Plans and Drills Guidance: Assessments and Their Utility for Schools

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# School Safety and Emergency Management



## Assessment Types and Their Utility for Schools

Assessments are a necessary component of school emergency preparedness. They identify potential dangers that require planning (also known as threats and hazards). Assessments also test components of a school's Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). Without the necessary assessments, schools will not know what to plan for, if a plan will work during a real disaster, or what to correct. Because of this, it is both useful and necessary to explain what assessments should be conducted, how they can improve a school's emergency preparedness, and where to find additional information on how they can be conducted.

In this fourth of six guidance sections, the necessary assessments for a well-prepared school will be identified and explained. This guide is a reference for both new school leaders and for those who want to improve their existing school EOP.

This guidance will cover the following:

- Local and regional threats and hazards: what they are, how to find them and how to determine risk with each threat and hazard.
- Site safety assessments.
- Capacity assessments.
- Culture and climate assessments.
- Behavioral safety assessments—commonly referred to as threat assessments.
- Table-top and full-scale exercises: practical assessments of a school emergency operations plan.

# Emergency Plans and Drills Guidance: Threat and Hazard Assessments

## Threat and Hazard Assessments

There are six steps to developing a high-quality Emergency Operations Plan for a school or district. The first step is to form a collaborative planning team. The first part of this six-part Emergency Plans and Drills Guidance addressed [community collaboration](#) and it included considerations for assembling a school EOP planning team. The second step in the planning process is to understand the situation. This second step requires that the planning team know and understand the threats and hazards that are present within their school community.

Understanding the situation by identifying the local and regional threats and hazards is necessary for the remaining steps of the planning process. A planning team cannot plan effectively without first knowing what it is they are planning for. A school could face catastrophe if a critical threat or hazard is not first identified, planned for and routinely exercised.



Taken from the *Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (link available in the Resources and Guides section of this document).

Start the second step by identifying known threats or hazards that your school has experienced in the past. Threats and hazards are broken down into three main categories:

1. Natural: acts of nature. These include incidents such as an avalanche, earthquake, flood, or winter storm.
2. Technological: accidents or the failures of systems and structures. These include incidents such as a utility disruption, a traffic accident, or a hazardous materials release.
3. Human-caused: the intentional actions of an adversary. These include threats such as an active shooter, a cyber-attack, or a bomb threat.

The categories help us better understand what systems or capabilities will be stressed should we experience an emergency from them. Once the threats and hazards have been identified, then a school or district must assess the risks associated with each one in order to prioritize their planning, training, drilling and exercises. Risk is assessed based on the probability of a threat or hazard and the severity of

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the same threat or hazard. A rainstorm may happen frequently, impacting school operations. But rainstorms are typically a low severity event even if they happen frequently. However, if a school does experience frequent rainstorms and is situated in a flood plain or an area prone to landslides, then the risk may go up substantially. The table below is an example of how risks can be rated. A link to an excel workbook with the below table is located in the Resources and Guides section at the end of this document, along with an explanation of how to use it and a separate table for determining risk.

### Risk Level\*

Probability/ Severity	Unlikely	Possible	Likely	Highly Likely
Catastrophic	Medium	High	Extreme	Extreme
Critical	Low	Medium	High	Extreme
Limited	Negligible	Low	Medium	High
Negligible	Negligible	Negligible	Low	Medium

*\*Dependent on the likely warning time prior to the event*

The following are some considerations for threat and hazard assessments and for conducting a risk assessment:

- First, identify the known threats and hazards that your school or district has experienced and is aware of.
- Second, contact your county emergency management office to find out what their assessed threats and hazards are. The county emergency management office will already have conducted a comprehensive threat and hazard assessment and will know what your most likely and most catastrophic threats and hazards are. Contact information for county emergency management offices is in the Resources and Guides section at the end of this document.
- Third, conduct a risk assessment of all identified threats and hazards. Prioritize your planning and preparedness activities based on the risk assessment. The extreme and high risks should always have plans and should take priority when developing a training plan and scheduling exercises.

### Site Safety Assessments

A site safety assessment is used to identify safety, accessibility and procedural deficiencies that require corrective action or mitigation through planning. A school with a good safety culture will have every member looking out for safety risks throughout the school day. Such risks could be an unlocked or propped open door, an extension cord running across a traffic area, or an unfamiliar visitor without visible identification. It shouldn't take school leadership to call out or correct every safety concern.

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Making sure everyone participates in and feels involved with their school's safety efforts will pay dividends in the long run.

Conducting deliberate site safety assessments is a good way to set up a school safety culture. The SSEM program has a site safety assessment checklist that can be used to guide school staff through what to look for at their school. A link to that checklist is available in the Resources and Guides section of this document. Whether a school uses the SSEM checklist or another checklist or guide from a different resource, the site safety assessment should be deliberate and followed up on. Site safety assessments should be conducted at least once per year and should be done with key members of the school planning team, including your first responders. When a deficiency or shortcoming is identified, it should be recorded and a responsible person should be notified. Have a plan to follow up on deficiencies after the assessment. Do not just wait and see what the identified safety deficiencies look like again next year.

### Capacity Assessments

Capacity assessments identify what a school or district is capable of responding to. A capacity assessment will help the planning team conduct step 3 of the planning process: determine goals and objectives. A well conducted site safety assessment will include much of what a capacity assessment should be looking for. A goal or objective in an EOP should be achievable based on the capacity of the district. For example, a goal of evacuating all students and staff to safety in response to a tsunami will require objectives based on real capabilities that the school or district has: are there clear and accessible evacuation routes both on school grounds and away from the school? Are relocation and reunification sites available year-round and are they outside the inundation zone? These are not all the questions that should be asked for this particular hazard, but they should be considered if the planning team expects goals and objectives to be achievable.

Another reason to conduct a capacity assessment is to identify areas that need improvement. Using the previous example of planning for a response to a tsunami, if a needed capability is lacking, such as obstructed evacuation routes on school grounds or poorly selected reunification sites, then one of the objectives that supports the goal of the response should be to remediate that capability. If we know we need to evacuate quickly and safely to the cafeteria building on the hill behind the main building, but the sidewalks are cracked, or the primary route is up too steep a grade, then the corresponding objective should be to improve the path between the two buildings such that all students and staff can safely and quickly get to where they need to.

The following are some considerations for a school or district capacity assessment:

- Identify people in the school or district with applicable skills such as first aid, search and rescue training, counseling and mental health expertise, knowledge of and ability to assist individuals with access and functional needs.
- Necessary equipment and supplies including evacuation aids and medical supplies.
- Transportation capacity for the school and district.
- Other community resources and capabilities including access to reunification sites, first responder capability and proximity, and other community resources that could aid in response and recovery.

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Remember that a capacity assessment should not just be used to inform emergency planning but should also be used to identify key capabilities that should be improved and maintained if the school expects to keep everyone safe in an emergency. When a necessary capability is both identified and is deficient, the planning team should call that out and school leadership should prioritize those capabilities first.

### Culture and Climate Assessments

Schools with a positive culture and climate will be more resilient when a disaster does strike. Culture and climate assessments can help school leaders better understand student and staff relationships, their perceptions of safety, and what behaviors or activities are disrupting the learning environment and safe school environment. Culture and climate surveys should be done confidentially with student privacy of the utmost importance. A culture and climate assessment won't tell a planning team everything it will need to know, but a school with students who feel safe and welcomed will likely also have staff who care about the safety and well-being of their students enough to actively participate in their school's emergency preparedness activities. And a well engaged school is a safer school.

### Behavioral Safety Assessments

A school behavioral safety assessment (commonly called a threat assessment) analyzes communication and behaviors to determine whether or not a student, staff member, or other person may pose a threat. These assessments must be based on fact, must comply with applicable privacy, civil rights, and other laws, and be conducted by multidisciplinary Behavioral Safety Assessment Teams (BSAT). While a planning team may include the creation of a BSAT in its plan, the BSAT is a separate entity from the planning team and meets on its own regular schedule.

The purpose of the BSAT and the assessments they conduct is to identify and intervene before a threat develops into an incident. ODE's School Safety and Prevention System helps schools with safety-based crisis interventions, suicide prevention services, and behavioral safety assessments that promote a positive school culture and climate. A link to that program and its resources is in the Resources and Guides section at the bottom of this document.

### Exercises as Assessments

We have addressed many of the assessments that a school will conduct before a threat or hazard becomes an emergency—assessments that are used in developing a high-quality school EOP. We have also briefly discussed some of the steps in developing and implementing that same EOP. Check the Resources and Guides section to find the REMS guidance documents to get a more detailed description of those steps and how to implement them.

The sixth step of the planning process is the one that keeps a school EOP alive and the school safe. Step six is plan implementation and maintenance. It involves training school staff, conducting exercises, and improving and maintaining the EOP based on lessons learned from those exercises and changing conditions.

No plan is complete without testing it and assessing what works, what doesn't work and what needs improving. Focus on the safety and preparedness measures within our schools must be constantly maintained. One of the most effective methods for ensuring readiness in the face of emergencies is

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through a table-top exercise (TTX). These exercises provide a powerful platform for testing, refining and reinforcing response plans, ultimately bolstering the safety and preparedness of students and staff.

TTXs are structured, discussion-based sessions where key decision makers gather to simulate various emergency scenarios in a low-stress environment. Unlike full-scale drills involving large groups of people and equipment (think of a movie set simulating an emergency event, only without the cameras), table-top exercises rely solely on conversation and hypothetical scenarios to evaluate preparedness.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when planning and conducting a TTX:

- Include your first responders in your TTXs: It is okay to occasionally conduct a scenario-based exercise internally with just your staff. But the point of emergency planning and preparedness is to know how everyone will respond. That includes the people who will put out the fires or stop the crime.
- Keep an open mind and permit critical discussion: Don't let the discussion devolve into a finger-pointing session, but do make sure to use the session to identify improvement points.
- Revisit past events: If your school had an event or near miss this last year, revisit your response to that event. What happened? What went well, what went right and what can you do better next time?

### Summary

Below is a quick recap of the points discussed in this guidance document:

- First determine your local and regional threats and hazards—ones that have happened and are expected. Remember to connect with the local or county emergency management office to get their threat and hazard assessments.
- Determine the risk to your school or district based on the severity and frequency of the identified threats and hazards. Prioritize planning for the extreme and high-risk events.
- Assess your school or district's capacity to respond to the threats and hazards.
- Don't forget your school or district's culture and climate. Perceptions of safety and inclusion are a good indicator of a safe school environment.
- Have a Behavioral Safety Assessment Team to identify and intervene in potentially threatening behaviors before they become a problem.
- Routinely assess your school or district's EOP with table-top exercises and assessments of drills and incident responses.

Links to additional information on assessments of all types can be found in the Resources and Guides section at the end of this document.

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## Resources and Guides

### Organizational Resources

- Oregon Department of Emergency Management’s page on Hazards in Oregon:
  - <https://www.oregon.gov/oem/hazardsprep/Pages/Hazards-in-Oregon.aspx>
- Oregon Department of Education’s School Safety and Emergency Management Program (SSEM):
  - <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Pages/School-Safety-and-Emergency-Management.aspx>
- ODE’s School Safety and Prevention System (SSPS):
  - [https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/equity/Pages/School-Safety-and-Prevention-System-\(SSPS\).aspx](https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/equity/Pages/School-Safety-and-Prevention-System-(SSPS).aspx)
- Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans—including the six-step planning process (downloadable document):
  - School-level: [https://rems.ed.gov/docs/School\\_Guide\\_508C.pdf](https://rems.ed.gov/docs/School_Guide_508C.pdf)
  - District-level: [https://rems.ed.gov/docs/District\\_Guide\\_508C.pdf](https://rems.ed.gov/docs/District_Guide_508C.pdf)

### Threat and Hazard Assessment Resources

- SSEM’s Resources for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans including Risk Assessment, Site Safety Assessment and Table-Top Exercise Resources:
  - <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Pages/Resources-for-developing-high-quality-Emergency-Operations-Plans-%28EOP%29.aspx>
- Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Resource page on Understanding the Situation—Step Two of the Planning Process:
  - <https://rems.ed.gov/K12PPStep02.aspx>
- REMS one-pager Examples of Threats and Hazards (downloadable form):
  - [https://rems.ed.gov/docs/Example\\_Threats\\_Hazards.pdf](https://rems.ed.gov/docs/Example_Threats_Hazards.pdf)
- REMS Resource page on Using a Six-Step Planning Process and Scenario-Based Planning to Support Emergency Operations Plan Development:
  - <https://rems.ed.gov/Resources/Specific?Topic=EOPDevelopment>

### Site Assessment Resources

- School Safety Clearinghouse Resources on Site Safety Assessments:
  - <https://www.schoolsafety.gov/foundational-elements-school-safety#site-assessment>
- SSEM School Site Safety Assessment Resources:
  - Checklist: [https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Documents/Office%20of%20School%20Facilities/SSEM/Training/Site\\_Assessment.pdf](https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Documents/Office%20of%20School%20Facilities/SSEM/Training/Site_Assessment.pdf)
  - Training Presentation: [https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Documents/Office%20of%20School%20Facilities/SSEM/Training/Site\\_Assesment\\_Presentation.pptx](https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Documents/Office%20of%20School%20Facilities/SSEM/Training/Site_Assesment_Presentation.pptx)



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### Capacity Assessment Resources

- Sample capacity assessment form—downloadable reference from FEMA:
  - <https://training.fema.gov/programs/emischool/el361toolkit/assets/staffskillssurveyinventoryform.doc>

### Culture and Climate Resources

- Schoolsafety.gov School Climate Resources page (downloadable form):
  - [https://www.schoolsafety.gov/sites/default/files/2024-03/SchoolSafety.gov\\_School%20Climate%20Resources\\_Infographic.pdf](https://www.schoolsafety.gov/sites/default/files/2024-03/SchoolSafety.gov_School%20Climate%20Resources_Infographic.pdf)

### Behavioral Safety Assessment Resources

- School Safety Clearinghouse Resources on Threat Assessments:
  - <https://www.schoolsafety.gov/foundational-elements-school-safety#threat-assessment>

### State Contacts

- Oregon Department of Emergency Management Local and Tribal Emergency Managers List:
  - [https://www.oregon.gov/oem/Documents/locals\\_list.pdf](https://www.oregon.gov/oem/Documents/locals_list.pdf)
- Oregon State Fire Marshal's Directory of Deputy State Fire Marshals:
  - <https://www.oregon.gov/osfm/fire-service-partners/pages/deputy-state-fire-marshals.aspx>
- Oregon Health Authority, Local Public Health Authority Directory:
  - <https://www.oregon.gov/oha/ph/providerpartnerresources/localhealthdepartmentresources/pages/lhd.aspx>