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School Emergency Preparedness Survey Report:

Improving Coordination Is Vital for School Districts

Megumi Kano and Linda B. Bourque

Data in this report were obtained from 98 public school districts located in 34 of 58 California counties that participated in a mail survey conducted between September 2005 and February 2006. The statistics presented in this report are based on unweighted frequencies in the sample and thus are not representative of quantities in the total population of public school districts and schools in the State of California.

Between 2002 and 2005, over 75% of school districts reported emergencies involving:

- Power failures;
- Animals or insects on campus;
- Angry parents;
- Neighborhood crime;
- School violence;
- Weapons on campus;
- Gang activity; or
- Intruders on campus.

Between 2002 and 2005, over 50% reported emergencies involving:

- Fires;
- High winds or storms;
- Major motor-vehicle crashes; or
- Bomb threats.

As a result of these emergencies and disasters:

- 78% locked down schools;
- 75% of school districts evacuated classrooms;
- 60% experienced financial loss and damage to school buildings or other property;
- 40% suffered injuries and illnesses to students or staff; and
- 32% reported mental health problems among students or staff.

Impact can be reduced through preparedness and mitigation, including:

- Structural mitigation of school buildings;
- Disaster planning by districts and schools;
- Training of teachers and staff;
- Purchase of appropriate equipment and supplies; and
- Coordination with agencies and groups involved in emergency response.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Most school districts surveyed in California had experienced one or more emergencies or disasters since 2002. Many of these emergencies interfered with the district's normal functions, resulted in loss and damage, and negatively affected the health of students and staff. Districts can improve their ability to function during and after an emergency by increasing their ability to prepare and respond to emergencies and disasters.

▶ **Every school district needs an emergency preparedness coordinator.** This person should spend a substantial part of their time on preparedness and safety issues, and should have a stable position in the district. Frequent turnover reduces the district's ability to have a sustained preparedness strategy.

▶ **Standardized emergency management protocols need to be implemented.** Using idiosyncratic terminology and procedures can hamper communication and flow of resources between emergency response agencies. Compliance with government mandates is also important in order for schools to be able to recoup some of their emergency response-related costs.

▶ **County offices of education need to help small school districts be prepared.** Small school districts often have fewer resources and less information than larger districts. County offices of education should assume responsibility for providing assistance to these districts in developing plans, training, purchasing supplies and integrating them into a wider preparedness effort.

▶ **School districts need to be included in city and county plans.** School preparedness is one important component of community-wide preparedness. By being part of the larger community's preparedness planning, school districts can improve their coordination with local and regional agencies. This coordination can also expand the resources available to school districts for preparedness.

In addition to the data reported here, information was also collected on the contents of emergency/disaster plans; available emergency equipment and supplies; perceived levels of preparedness; perceived levels of stakeholder commitment; stakeholder involvement in school preparedness; and district support for, and monitoring of school site preparedness. Full information about the survey and its findings are available in: Kano, M. (2006). District- and School-level Preparedness for Emergencies and Disasters in California: The Effects of Demographic Characteristics, Resources, and Prior Experiences. University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA.

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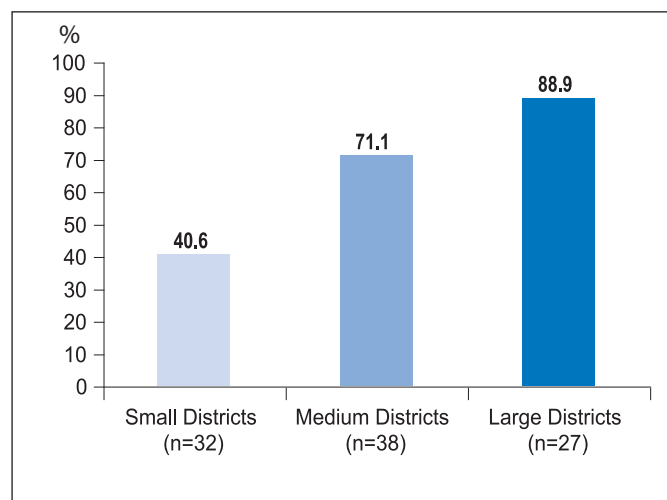
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This report highlights the importance of interagency coordination in improving California school districts' ability to protect children in future emergencies and disasters.

Using the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS)

Since 1993, California school districts and other government agencies have been required to use the Standardized Emergency Management System or SEMS. SEMS improves communication and coordination between local and regional agencies, including schools, school districts, and city and county agencies. When SEMS is not used, response during emergencies may be slow and ineffective, and schools are not eligible for government reimbursement of some of the costs associated with emergency response.

FIGURE 1 shows that use of SEMS varies with the size of the school district. While 88.9% of large school districts with 20,000 or more students enrolled used SEMS, only 40.6% of small school districts with less than 6,000 students used SEMS.



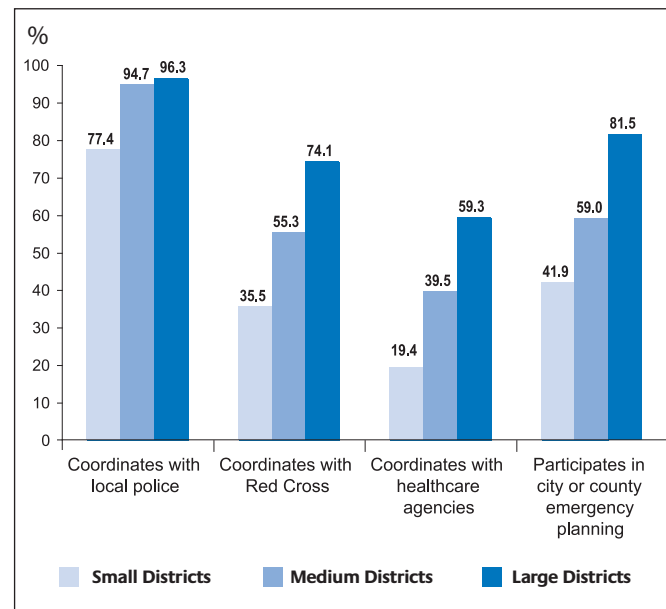
Percent of School Districts Using the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) by District Size, California, 2005

Note: Large Districts: $\geq 20,000$ students; Medium Districts: 6,000-19,999 students; Small Districts: $< 6,000$ students. Difference in proportions by district size were all statistically significant, Pearson chi-square = 15.91, $df = 2$, $p < 0.05$.

Coordination Between School Districts and Other Agencies

School districts can improve their level of preparedness for emergencies and disasters by working with governmental and non-governmental agencies at both the local and regional level. Over 90% of medium and large school districts have worked with their local police or fire departments. Coordination with these agencies is essential because they are the official "first responders" in many disasters and emergencies. But it is also important for schools to coordinate with other groups such as the Red Cross and health agencies. Best of all is for school districts to be an active partner in the development and implementation of an emergency preparedness strategy in their city or county.

In **FIGURE 2**, we see that less than 60% of medium school districts and substantially fewer small school districts in California work with the Red Cross and healthcare agencies, or participate in city and county emergency planning.



Percent of School Districts Reporting Interagency Coordination on Emergency Planning Issues by District Size, California, 2005

Note: Large Districts: $\geq 20,000$ students; Medium Districts: 6,000-19,999 students; Small Districts: $< 6,000$ students. Differences in proportions compared by district size were all statistically significant using Pearson chi-square tests, $p < 0.05$.

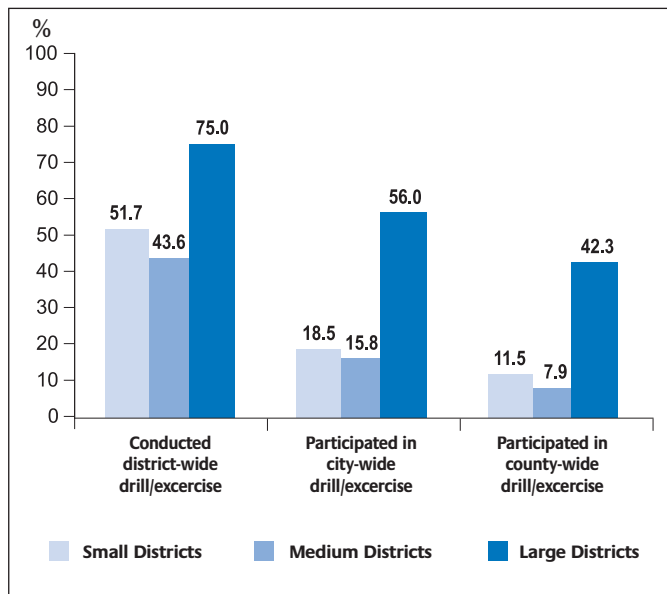
Regular Training to Improve Coordinated Response

Practicing emergency plans both within the school district and within the larger community increases a district's ability to respond quickly and effectively when there is a disaster or emergency.

In large districts with 20,000 or more students, 75% said that they conducted district-wide drills, while 56% participated in city-wide drills or exercises, and 42.3% participated in county-wide ones. Only 51.7% of small districts and 43.6% of medium districts conducted district-wide drills, and less than 20% of small and medium districts participated in either city or county exercises.

Our study does not tell us why school districts do not conduct or participate in drills and exercises. Probable reasons include lack of resources, competing priorities, being unaware of city and county drills, and being excluded from city and county drills.

FIGURE 3



Percent of School Districts that Conducted or Participated in District-, City-, and County-Wide Emergency Training Drills during the Prior School Year by District Size, California, 2005

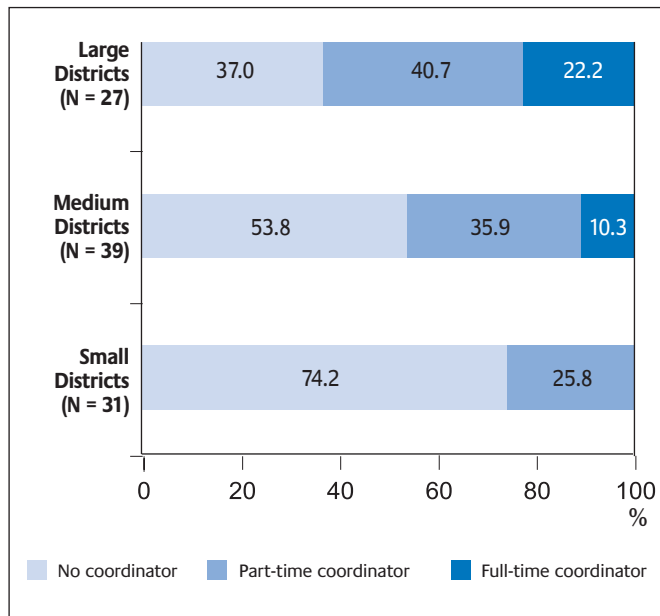
Note: Large Districts: ≥ 20,000 students; Medium Districts: 6,000-19,999 students; Small Districts: < 6,000 students. Differences in proportions compared by district size were all statistically significant using Pearson chi-square tests, $p < 0.05$.

School Districts Do Not Have Emergency Preparedness Coordinators

Every school district needs to identify one person who is given the authority and responsibility for maintaining an emergency and disaster preparedness strategy for the school district. This person can provide leadership, serve as a liaison to other agencies, and make sure that emergency preparedness stays on the district's agenda.

Only 22.2% of large school districts and 10.3% of medium-sized districts have a full-time emergency preparedness coordinator. No districts with less than 6,000 students have a full-time coordinator. Thirty seven percent of large districts, 53.8% of medium districts and 74.2% of small districts have no one that is designated as the emergency preparedness coordinator. The rest of the districts have a part-time coordinator, with many part-time coordinators spending less than half of their time on emergency preparedness.

FIGURE 4



Percent of School Districts that have Full-Time, Part-Time or No Emergency Preparedness Coordinator by District Size, California, 2005

Note: Large Districts: ≥ 20,000 students; Medium Districts: 6,000-19,999 students; Small Districts: < 6,000 students. Difference in proportions by district size were statistically significant, Pearson chi-square = 11.5, $df = 4$, $p < 0.05$.