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START NATIONAL CONSORTIUM FOR THE
STUDY OF TERRORISM AND RESPONSES TO TERRORISM

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School Emergency Preparedness Survey Report:

It Takes A Village To Prepare Schools for Emergencies

Megumi Kano and Linda B. Bourque

Data in this report were obtained from 98 public school districts and 157 public schools located in 34 of the 58 counties of California. The survey was administered by mail between September 2005 and February 2006. The statistics are based on unweighted sample frequencies and are not representative of all school districts or schools in the State of California.

Numerous kinds of hazards can affect school campuses and the broader community. Recent events in the nation that underscore the need to strengthen school safety and emergency preparedness include:

- Extreme weather events (e.g., hurricanes, floods, snow storms, tornadoes),
- School shootings,
- Student walk-outs,
- Terrorism threats, and
- Emerging public health risks (e.g., pandemic influenza).

From a list of various hazards, survey respondents were asked to choose those that they felt their district or school was “not at all prepared” or “least prepared” to handle. The most frequent responses were:

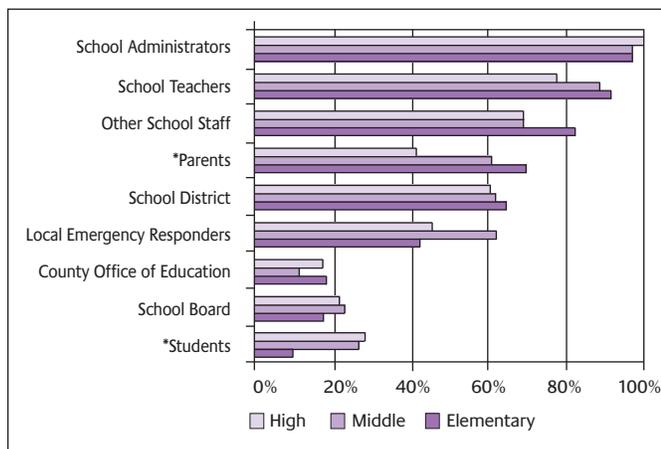
- Bioterrorism/terrorism event,
- Hazardous materials incident,
- Catastrophic earthquake,
- Airplane crash,
- School shooting, and
- Epidemic.

These events will impact not only schools but also the surrounding communities. An effective response requires swift and coordinated actions by multiple individuals, groups and agencies, both on and off school campuses. These people should be actively involved in maintaining a steady state of preparedness during non-crisis times.

Representation and Involvement

The school survey asked who developed the school's emergency preparedness policies, plans, and activities. While nearly all schools reported that school administrators (e.g., principal, assistant principal, etc.) were involved, fewer schools said that teachers and other school staff were included. Parents were also involved in over half of elementary and middle schools, but not in high schools. Students in secondary schools were more likely to have a role in developing their school's emergency preparedness program than elementary school students, but, in general, students were not involved.

FIGURE 1



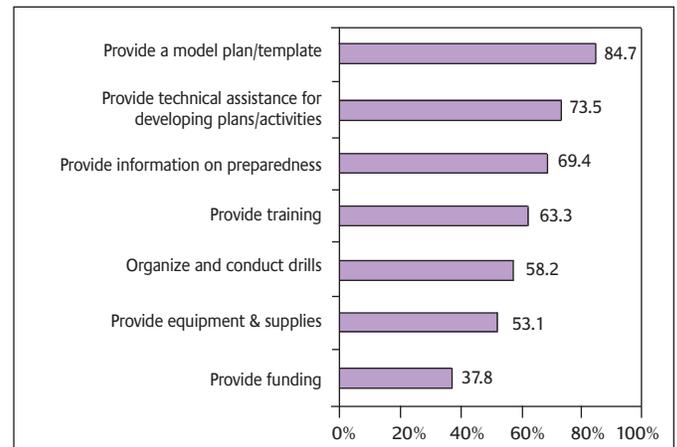
Involvement of Different Groups and Agencies in the Development of School Emergency Preparedness Plans and Policies, As Reported by School Representatives (N=153), by School Level, California, 2005

Note: Four schools were excluded from this analysis due to missing data. The differences between elementary, middle, and high schools noted by an asterisk (*) were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) using Pearson chi-square tests.

District-Level Support

School district representatives were asked what the district office does to promote emergency preparedness in their individual schools. The most frequently mentioned forms of support were to provide a model plan or template for schools to develop their own site-specific emergency plans, and to offer technical assistance for developing emergency response plans and preparedness activities. Districts were less likely to give training, equipment, supplies, or funding to schools. On average, districts reported that they provide four to five of the services listed in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2



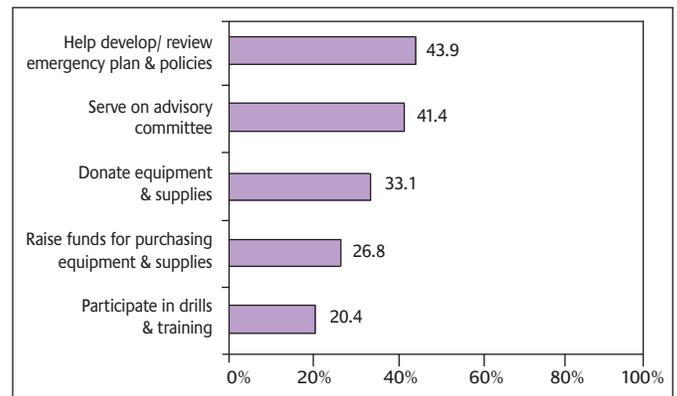
Ways in which District Offices Promote School Emergency Preparedness, As Reported by District Representatives (N=98), California, 2005

Note: Survey respondents could indicate more than one form of district-level support.

Parent Participation

Thirty percent of schools reported that parents were not involved in school emergency preparedness. In the 70% of schools where parents are involved, parents most often help develop and/or review the school's emergency plan and policies, and/or serve on advisory committees that oversee the school's safety and emergency preparedness activities. Only 20% of schools said that parents participate in emergency drills and trainings.

FIGURE 3



Ways in which Parents are Involved in School Emergency Preparedness, As Reported by School Representatives (N=157), California, 2005

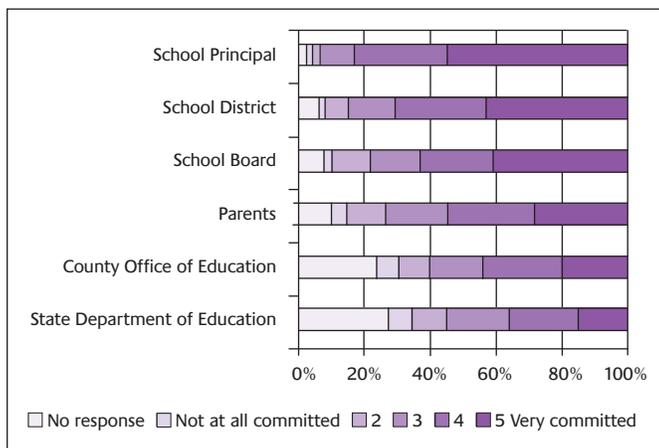
Note: Survey respondents could indicate more than one form of parent participation.

The commitment and action of multiple individuals, groups, and agencies are critical for a school emergency preparedness strategy to be effective.

Commitment to Improving School Emergency Preparedness

School administrators were asked how committed various individuals, groups, and agencies were to improving school safety and emergency preparedness, using a scale of 1 (Not at all committed) to 5 (Very committed). Between 40-55% thought their school principals, school districts, and school boards were “very committed” to this goal. In contrast, the County Office of Education and the State Department of Education were least likely to be perceived to be very committed, but many survey participants did not rate these two agencies’ level of commitment. The same question was asked of district representatives. The pattern of responses was similar, with school principals, school boards, and school districts thought of as being most committed, and the county and state agencies least committed.

FIGURE 4



Level of Commitment To Improving School Safety and Preparedness, As Perceived by School Representatives (N=157), California, 2005

Conclusions and Recommendations

- ▶ **Adopt an All-Hazards Approach.** An all-hazards approach is the norm in the emergency management community, where personnel are trained in standardized protocols (e.g., SEMS, NIMS).¹ This approach can enable schools to flexibly respond to a wide array of events, from high-probability, low-consequence events (e.g., extreme weather) to low-probability, high-consequence events (e.g., pandemic), instead of only preparing them for specific kinds of events.
- ▶ **Strengthen Commitment at Regional and State Level.** School officials perceive that higher-level authorities, such as the regional and state agencies, either are not as committed or not as visible in the effort to improve school emergency preparedness. Strong commitment and outreach from these authorities can be instrumental in promoting preparedness in schools, especially given their greater resource base.
- ▶ **Broaden Group Representation.** Studies have shown that a broad base of participation in planning processes increases the relevance of a project, and ultimately leads to better plans that are successfully implemented.² Schools should involve multiple individuals, groups, and agencies from both within and outside of the school community in all aspects of emergency preparedness. Student and parent participation are especially encouraged.
- ▶ **Sustain District-Level Support for School Preparedness.** District offices should assume a major role in maintaining a steady state of preparedness in schools. Districts should make every effort to actively promote and support the full range of school emergency preparedness activities, including plan development, training, procurement of material resources, and interagency coordination.

¹ SEMS: Standardized Emergency Management System; NIMS: National Incident Management System.

² Burby, R. J. (2003). Making plans that matter: Citizen involvement and government action. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 69(1), 33-49.

START NOW!

The National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities (NCEF)

[http://www.edfacilities.org/rl/statelocal_emergency.cfm] is a great place to start. It provides a list of resources, including plans, guidelines, manuals, and checklists developed by school districts and state education offices to assist schools in preparing for and responding to emergency and disaster situations.

ReadyCaSchools.org

[<http://www.readycaschools.org>] is a helpful website designed by the California Department of Health Services and California Department of Education to help California school administrators, teachers, students, and families plan for a potential pandemic influenza emergency.

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