

# Special Education Students and Emergency Plans

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School districts are always developing and refining emergency management plans for their general student population. However, very few plans include procedures for students with developmental disabilities. These students cannot always comfortably or safely use standard resources offered in emergency management plans, leaving them unprepared for a school crisis.

Improvement is needed to integrate students and employees with developmental disabilities into emergency management planning and readiness. Schools also need to increase their capacity to protect and respond to people with developmental disabilities in an emergency or crisis. A comprehensive planning process is needed to address the particular circumstances of those students.

Schools have been latecomers to the time-tested emergency management concepts articulated in the National Incident Management System (NIMS), including its four-phased interconnected approach to emergency planning: mitigation/prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

As schools implement this plan, awareness is growing that greater focus is needed to make sure that people with developmental disabilities are properly integrated within all four phases of school emergency management planning.

## **Mitigation, prepare, prevent**

Mitigation and prevention address what schools and districts can do to reduce or eliminate risk to life and property. Preventing an emergency is just as important as planning for one. Mitigation and prevention efforts benefit all students regardless of disability. These efforts should be structured, formalized, and purposeful.

For example, prevention actions may take the form of ongoing programs, such as violence prevention or anti-bullying programs to protect students with disabilities who may be subjected regularly to these behaviors. Both prevention and mitigation require the constant awareness of administrators, educators, and others to identify and act on ways to head off or lessen the impacts of a crisis.

Staff members who develop emergency management plans should meet with the special education directors and staff, who best understand and work with students with disabilities and their specialized plans. Special education staff should be included in the specific drafting and development of the school's emergency management plan to make sure that students and staff with disabilities are appropriately included.

Preparedness focuses on the process of planning for the worst-case scenario, and should include consideration of the effect an emergency may have on a student with a developmental disability, based on his or her specific needs.

When developing an emergency management plan, it is imperative to encourage students with developmental disabilities to take responsibility for their own safety and security. The risks associated with barriers and challenges can be reduced through preparedness and emergency planning that promotes self-sufficiency. However, a personal support team, made up of students and staff who are trusted by the student with a disability and who are aware of

the student's needs and capabilities, should be readily available to assist the student in an emergency.

Individual Education Plan (IEP) teams also should be encouraged to develop personal emergency plans and specifically incorporate them into students' IEPs. Students should provide input and participate in the development of their plans, in part, so that they do not assume that immediate assistance will always be available, and so they can let everyone know about their abilities and concerns.

When developing a personal emergency evacuation plan for students with developmental disabilities, schools should strive to make the plans easy to understand and to follow. If necessary, an emergency information card can be created for students to carry during school hours. The card reminds students of what to do during an emergency to alleviate any panic and confusion.

Additionally, special needs will arise as a direct result of an emergency and cannot be predicted. More students than expected may need assistance of different types and degrees. The emergency management plan should be flexible and make it possible to quickly and effectively respond to changing events.

During an emergency or crisis, fast and efficient evacuation is imperative. When planning evacuation routes or procedures, it is important to remember that physical damage to buildings may create hazards and obstacles to planned evacuations and can make it difficult to maneuver within a building.

Evacuation plans should consider the special needs of students. In addition to physical barriers, a student with a developmental disability may encounter communication and/or cognitive barriers to an efficient and successful emergency management plan. Loud noise, for instance, may severely impair a student's ability to react properly. Be aware of the capabilities, limitations, and needs of individual students to determine the type of emergency management plan that will keep them safe.

## **Response and recovery**

Response is devoted to the steps taken during a crisis. If an emergency occurs, how a school responds can save lives and protect property. The more prepared students and school are for an emergency, the more likely they will be able to respond to it effectively. When in danger, some students may lack the cognitive ability to assess the situation and react appropriately. Having a well-practiced emergency management system is crucial to a proper response, especially for students with developmental disabilities.

To successfully run an evacuation, regular practice and drills should occur. These practices and drills should include everyone, especially students with special needs. Three types of practices should occur: (1) walk-through procedures; (2) announced drills; and (3) surprise drills. Walk-through procedures can be used to practice evacuation techniques and other emergency management responses. Announced drills should identify the strengths and weaknesses of an emergency management plan. Debriefing sessions should occur after announced drills to modify and correct as necessary any part of the evacuation plan. Surprise drills should occur only once or twice a year and should be as realistic as possible. Performance reviews of surprise drills also should be given to participants and modifications made as necessary. No matter what type of practice is used, however, it is important that all participants, especially students with developmental disabilities, understand that it is only a drill and not a real emergency, thus eliminating any unnecessary anxiety.

Recovery deals with how to restore the learning and teaching environment after a crisis. The recovery phase is never easy, and the difficulties can be exponentially greater for students with developmental disabilities. Emergency management planning should consider how the recovery process will restore special education services to students with developmental disabilities in advance to ensure students continue to receive services in accordance with their IEP or 504 Plan.

By working together on an ongoing basis to develop a joint plan of recovery, school districts and their special education staff, with support from parents and families of students with developmental disabilities, will be better able to identify not only assets and capabilities, but also opportunities for improvement and cooperation.

## **Legal implications**

School districts also should be aware of the legal implications of their emergency management plans and how such plans support and address the needs of students with developmental disabilities. Several federal laws pertain to persons with developmental disabilities in a school setting, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1978 (Section 504).

IDEA guarantees that all students with disabilities receive a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE), which encompasses emergency management services. The ADA prohibits discrimination based on disability. A school district's failure to address the emergency management needs of students with developmental disabilities can be viewed as a form of discrimination, subjecting a district to liability.

Section 504 provides that "no otherwise qualified individual with a disability shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." This would include emergency management programs and activities.

Additionally, Executive Order 13347 -- Individuals with Disabilities in Emergency Preparedness, issued July 22, 2004, serves to ensure that individuals with disabilities are provided appropriate safety and security support in situations involving disasters and that they are considered in emergency preparedness planning. Executive Order 13347 supplements IDEA and ADA in addressing students with developmental disabilities. It specifically requires school districts to include students with developmental disabilities in their emergency management efforts.

Beyond federal law, state education statutes and school board policies commonly set forth requirements regarding students (and staff) with disabilities pertaining directly to school emergency management programs. Emergency management is a process in which all phases of the plan must be continuously reviewed and revised as the population and special needs of students change, especially those with developmental disabilities. Effective emergency management plans are evolving based on experience, research, and the changing needs of students.

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