



Implementing Physical Safety Measures Effectively at Schools: Communication Systems

Communication systems allow staff and students to communicate about advanced knowledge of a threat or the presence of an intruder and guide response actions during an emergency. In this document, we provide considerations for (a) what information is communicated, (b) when the communication should take place, (c) a process for ensuring that staff and students understand what is being communicated. There are a wide variety of communication technologies available to schools. In this document we do not suggest or endorse any specific technology instead we focus on establishing clear procedures for communication regardless of the type/s of technology used.

- ▶ **Communication Systems** — Clear communication is critical during school shooting events. Effective communication systems are designed to communicate both with students and staff within the school and with law enforcement during an emergency.
 - ▶ Clearly define active shooter notification procedures including a) who can initiate notification (e.g., administrator, administrator designee); b) when to initiate an active shooter notification; and c) what channels should be used to alert the administration if an individual determines an active shooting event is imminent.
 - ▶ Clearly define procedures for notifying law enforcement, the rest of the school community (e.g., other schools in the district), and other key local leaders (e.g., first responders).
 - ▶ Clearly communicate specific response actions that should be taken (e.g., shelter in place, evacuate).



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- ▶ Define procedures staff and students should follow in the event a fire alarm is activated during an active shooter situation (evacuation of staff and students into halls or outside in this case should not be immediate and be directed by administration or response personnel).
 - ▶ Formally teach and practice communication procedures during regular required safety drills and ensure that procedures are age appropriate, emotionally safe, and implemented consistently.
 - ▶ Ensure Public Announcement (PA) systems broadcast to all areas of the school and campus, not just classrooms, to ensure that emergency announcements are heard by all students and staff and ensure effective communication of emergency announcements to students and staff who are deaf or hard of hearing.
 - ▶ Ensure individuals can communicate with the administration or law enforcement while remaining safe and hidden by locating communication devices in safe spaces or other potential hiding locations.
 - ▶ Consider portable communication systems such as walkie-talkies so that key personnel (e.g., administrators, designated teacher leaders) can communicate from various locations throughout the school.
 - ▶ Keep communication systems always charged and powered on.
 - ▶ Regularly test communication systems to ensure that they are effective in all areas of the school campus.
 - ▶ Provide strong WIFI or ensure cellular reception is available throughout school buildings to allow individuals to communicate with law enforcement or first responders during an emergency.
 - ▶ Consider a campus-wide alert system so that all parties involved (staff, students, families) can receive accurate, up-to-date information in real time.
- ▶ **Cameras and Recording Devices** — Cameras may aid law enforcement response or other first responder partners if a shooter is on school grounds.
 - ▶ Consider placing cameras in locations that allow visibility to all relevant areas of the school and campus. District leadership teams should assess overall campus safety needs and community input to balance safety with privacy concerns when considering the use of cameras.
 - ▶ Use cameras that stream footage in real-time. If there is a delay, be sure that designated staff members know how long the delay is and share this information with law enforcement to facilitate accurate analysis.
 - ▶ Consider cameras that record continuously instead of those that are motion-activated. This helps to better confirm that certain areas are clear of individuals.
 - ▶ Develop clear district policies that define what data is shared and under what circumstances (during or following a school shooting event) to equitably protect student privacy.
 - ▶ As a reminder about the use of cameras in schools; schools have a responsibility to not to discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, age, or other protected classes when conducting surveillance and other security or safety activities using video systems. Furthermore, the schools must comply with all applicable laws related to record maintenance and retention, and with data privacy and limitations on disclosure and use. As a best practice, schools should develop the policy surrounding the use of video systems in consultation with students, their families, and educators so that uses of the video systems are widely understood and privacy concerns are considered in the development of the policy. For additional information regarding video and privacy policies, please see [“FAQ on Photos and Videos under FERPA.”](#)



- ▶ **Systems for Sharing Concerns** — Prevention efforts should include systems that allow school or community members to share concerns related to school safety.
 - ▶ Implement systems for sharing concerns in the context of a multifaceted, comprehensive school climate plan designed to improve student safety, health, well-being, and academic development and protect against bias.

- ▶ Ensure systems for sharing concerns are available to all students, staff, families, and community members.
- ▶ Ensure procedures for sharing concerns accommodate individuals with communication needs (e.g., students with disabilities, English language learners).
- ▶ Information shared should be monitored and concerns should be immediately addressed by a well-trained and diverse multi-disciplinary team to ensure individuals in need of help or additional resources are adequately supported.¹

Schoolwide Practices to Promote Effective Communication

- ▶ Develop a system to ensure that all school staff including short-term staff and substitutes are familiar with communication protocols.
- ▶ Include regular monitoring and reporting on the use of communication systems during required safety drills.
- ▶ Provide additional support to staff and students as needed based on monitoring data to ensure everyone is following expectations related to communication procedures.
- ▶ Engage community members and students in age-appropriate ways in caring for the school community by sharing concerns.

- ▶ Share communication procedures with law enforcement to ensure clear communication in the event of an emergency.

Communication procedures should be implemented within a larger preventative MTSS framework to ensure practice implementation is guided by a team, aligned with local conditions, and supported for consistent and effective implementation. [For more implementation considerations see *Implementing Physical Safety Measures Effectively*.](#)

Resources

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Endnotes

i — As a part of these efforts, schools should also provide early intervention and supports in a developmentally appropriate and preventative manner, to avert behavioral challenges before a potential threat of harm arises. This is especially important for underserved students which some research has suggested are more likely to be referred for threat assessments, such as students of color and students with disabilities. When implemented well, early intervention and supports prevent threats rather than solely respond to them. A school might consider reframing this approach as an “early response” or “early intervention” model. To do so, it is important that any schools implementing such a system have a strong MTSS in place, which may include implementing a PBIS plan schoolwide. These frameworks are essential to ensuring that students who might be struggling or at-risk of harming themselves or others receive appropriate supports, ser-

vices, and interventions before any potentially harmful or threatening behavior occurs. Finally, schools implementing threat assessment models must comply with all Federal civil rights and education laws, including IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Under IDEA and Section 504, the procedural safeguards and right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for a child with a disability must be protected throughout any threat or risk assessment process. States and LEAs should ensure that school personnel involved in screening for, and conducting, threat or risk assessments of a child with disabilities are aware that the child has a disability and are sufficiently knowledgeable about the LEA's obligation to ensure FAPE to the child, including IDEA's discipline provisions and Section 504's obligations applicable to discipline.

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These resources are provided to assist states, districts and schools in their gun violence prevention, preparation, response, and recovery to gun violence incidents. These resources are providing information based on published findings from past school incidents, experiences of state, local, and school-based personnel, families, and students, and emerging and promising practices.

This document contains resources that are provided for the user's convenience. The inclusion of these materials is not intended to reflect its importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of various subject matter experts as well as hypertext links, contact addresses, and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The opinions expressed in any of these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials.

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