

Ohio School Safety Center

Newsletter
Fall 2021

Best Practices Spotlight

Many schools assemble their staff for planning meetings prior to the start of each new school year. Take advantage of this pre-scheduled time to hold a district-wide tabletop exercise (TTX).

Earlier this year, Shawn Riley of the Hamilton County ESC facilitated a Pandemic TTX for a local school district.

*All schools are required to complete rapid evacuation (fire) drills (6 or 9, based on the presence or absence of smoke detectors and sprinklers), tornado drills (one per month April-July, when students are present), three other functional drills and **one tabletop** during the school year.*

Advantages to holding a district-wide TTX:

- Allows all district entities to complete a required drill simultaneously.
- An efficient use of time and resources.
- Provides an opportunity for First Responders to participate with the whole district in one setting.
- Facilitates the sharing of ideas and experiences.
- Provides an opportunity for frank discussions.
- Allows scenarios to be addressed that may be difficult with student participation.
- Since it is a discussion, there are no boundaries on where the scenario can go.

Here is what happened...

After much planning, District Administration, Staff, Principals, Teachers, and a Health Department representative met in a space large enough to support social distancing. Using a prepared PowerPoint, Shawn presented an emergency scenario. Using this information, the group initially discussed:

- How district policies and procedures would apply to the scenario.
- How they would be carried out in the schools.
- What actions would be taken, in what order, and by whom.
- Possible responses or results.

After this initial discussion, Shawn staggered additional “injects” (side bar) throughout the exercise. Each inject presented a new issue or topic for discussion. After each inject, individual schools broke-out to discuss the unique conditions or procedures applicable to their site. After these breakout sessions, participants came back together to discuss the inject on a district level. Participants talked through each inject until the hypothetical emergency was resolved.

What is an “inject”?

Simulated information, actions, or conversations that offer a new set of facts, a new problem, or a novel situation that must be dealt with in addition to the original scenario.

When the exercise concluded, a “hot-wash” session provided participants with an opportunity to discuss identified issues or lessons learned, the realism and effectiveness of the exercise, and identify parts of their emergency operations plan to be updated.

Steps to plan your district's exercise...

District-wide exercises do not occur without sufficient planning. Schools should allow for a minimum of 6-8 hours of planning time over about a month. Planning steps should include:

1. Identify a functional content area (FCA) or protective measure (i.e., evacuation, communication, lock down, etc.) that could benefit from practice.
2. Keeping your chosen FCA in mind, invite local agencies to participate in the planning and tabletop exercise. Agencies could include the fire department, law enforcement, EMS, county Emergency Management Agency (EMA), and/or other community partners. Be respectful of their availability - they may only be able to attend one planning session and the tabletop.
3. Identify a day, time frame, and facility that will meet the needs of the presentation.
4. Identify a threat or hazard that will facilitate the practice of the FCA.
5. Create a scenario and injects. Secure and test AV equipment prior to the exercise.
6. Hold a dry run with planning committee before the day of the event.

Best Practices:

- Plan 1 to 1.5 hours total for the exercise. This includes 15 minutes for introductions and exercise instructions, 30-45 minutes for content, and 15 minutes for the "hot wash" session. Keep in mind that a shorter "hot-wash" session may omit important information, while a longer session may disengage participants. It is up to the moderator to keep things moving.
- Outline the exercise and expectations to the participants ahead of the exercise.
- Create a PowerPoint to show the scenario and inject. The initial instructions, background, and scenario generally cover 5-7 slides. Each inject should have their own slide.
- Seat all the participants from a single school or program together to facilitate discussions at their site.
- Assign a scribe for the group presentation and one for each individual group. Scribe should report their findings during the hot wash.
- Provide microphone(s) that can be passed to participants so all responses can be heard.
- Make sure conditions outside the building are addressed in the discussion (i.e., first responder vehicles, traffic, media, etc.)
- Upon completion, planners should immediately record their impressions for use in future exercises.

TTXs provide an excellent opportunity to practice emergencies that are difficult to emulate (i.e. contagious disease/pandemic, inclement weather/tornado, hazardous materials, earthquake, rolling bomb threat, etc.). A TTX completed per the above steps could be reported as an EMT if the after-action report (EMT) is entered into the School Safety Plan Portal within 30 days of the event. Visit the OSSC's [Emergency Management Test](#) webpage for more information.

Our thanks to Shawn for sharing his experience and expertise.

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Would you like to have your school featured in the next Ohio School Safety Center Newsletter? Do you have a best practice to share with other K-12 schools or institutions of higher education?

Send an email to OhioSchoolSafetyCenter@dps.ohio.gov with your school's information and program details that you would like to feature. We will reach out to get additional details and help you share your story.



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