

BEST PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS FOR ARMED ASSAILANT DRILLS IN SCHOOLS



Executive Summary

The National Association of School Psychologists, the National Association of School Resource Officers, and Safe and Sound Schools have partnered to provide this guidance on armed assailant training. This document provides guidance on factors schools must take into account when conducting armed assailant drills. It updates our guidance released in 2014 and reflects unique considerations within the school environment, including protecting both physical and psychological safety. It does not constitute an endorsement of a particular approach to training nor a specific training program.

OVERVIEW

Schools have engaged in armed assailant training for decades, most traditionally with an emphasis on the nonsensorial, no role-play lockdown approach. Over the past decade or so, however, there has been an increased push for schools to engage in more options-based training, similar to the “Run, Hide, Fight” model (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). While these drills have the potential to empower staff and save lives, if not implemented correctly, they can cause harm. Available research supports the effectiveness of nonsensorial lockdown drills (i.e., drill done by calmly walking and talking through the procedures, with no simulation of a real-life event) implemented according to best practices. Especially with younger students, we recommend avoiding highly sensorial drills that involve simulation activities to mimic a real experience as they can be traumatizing.

DRILL APPROACHES AND PLANNING

- A. Nonsensorial lockdown drills should be the foundation of an options-based approach to active assailant training, which allows participants to make independent decisions in evolving situations.
- B. Exercises should be considered in a hierarchy. Simple discussion-based exercises should take place before complex operations-based drills.
- C. Schools should not use simulation techniques with students, and exercises should be appropriate to the participants’ developmental level and physical abilities.
 - *If sensorial exercises are conducted* with staff, they should consent and be informed of the tactics being used, mental health supports must be available on-site during the exercise and after the exercise, and adult participants must be informed of the use and purpose of props and simulation aids prior to the drill. Drills should never involve props that interject or simulate physical harm (e.g., paint balls, rubber bullets) or physical contact with participants.
- D. Regular practice, using a nonsensorial approach, helps participants develop readiness and quickly access and apply knowledge, while reducing the potential of trauma impact.



DEVELOPMENTAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

- A. The threat perceptions of children are typically based on adult behavior, so effective drills include the presence of staff who inspire calm and confidence in students.
- B. It is critical that participation in drills be appropriate to developmental level and physical abilities, and take into consideration prior traumatic experiences, special needs, and temperaments.
- C. School-employed mental health professionals should be involved in every stage of preparation.
 - *Prior to the drill*, staff should be trained to recognize common trauma reactions.
 - *During the drill*, adults should monitor participants and remove anyone exhibiting signs of trauma.
 - *After completion of the drill*, staff and students should have access to mental health support.
- D. Participation should never be mandatory, parental consent should always be obtained, and alternative methods to teach skills should be provided.

STEPS FOR CONDUCTING SAFE, EFFECTIVE, AND APPROPRIATE DRILLS

- A. Create a multidisciplinary school safety team (including an administrator, school mental health professional, school nurse, school resource officer [SRO], security personnel, teachers, parents, and students where appropriate) that coordinates with law enforcement and emergency responders.
- B. Conduct a needs assessment of the school community.
- C. Implement a cost-benefit analysis that considers ALL emergency preparedness needs and options.
- D. Tailor drills to the context of the school environment.
- E. Create a plan that builds from simple, lowest cost training; identifies obstacles and goals; and establishes a timeline.
- F. All drills must ensure physical and psychological safety as well as knowledge/skill acquisition.
- G. Develop a communications plan that gives participants advance warning and the ability to opt out or provide feedback.
- H. Establish a long-term follow-up plan to support sustainability that includes assessing ongoing or changing preparedness training needs.

Best Practice Considerations for Armed Assailant Drills in Schools

INTRODUCTION

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), and Safe and Sound Schools (SASS) represent key stakeholders in school safety and crisis planning, preparedness, and implementation. This includes school-employed mental health professionals, school security and law enforcement, school administrators, other educators, and families. We have expertise and extensive first-hand experience with the most effective approaches to keeping students and staff safe on a daily basis and in crisis situations. We are committed to supporting school communities' understanding and implementation of best practices related to school safety, school mental health, and crisis response.

This document updates and builds on the guidance released by NASP and NASRO in 2014. Neither this document nor the author organizations endorse a specific approach to armed assailant training or any particular training program. **We do, however, oppose any training that has the potential for student or staff physical or psychological harm.** Furthermore, we believe that lockdowns should form the foundation of any such training and that there should be a hierarchy of training that offers a variety of safe and appropriate options.

Our goals in this document are to provide best practice information that will **help schools (a) determine to what extent they need armed assailant training and (b) conduct trainings that make best use of resources, maximize effectiveness, and minimize physical and psychological risks.** We acknowledge that training includes everything from orientation activities, workshops and tabletop drills, to full-scale drills. For many schools, full-scale drills may not be necessary or desirable. Equally important, this document is not intended to provide specific guidance on how to conduct armed assailant drills; rather, we strive to provide guidance on issues that must be considered when planning for and implementing such training. The specifics of any training should be determined at the local level by appropriately trained school leadership, school safety and mental health personnel, and law enforcement.

Please note that the appendices in this document contain very important decision-making information, in addition to guidance on how to conduct developmentally appropriate armed assailant training. They are referenced within and at the end of the document.

PART I: OVERVIEW

Schools have a responsibility to protect the physical and psychological well-being of students and staff. This includes supporting positive school climates, preventing negative behaviors such as bullying and harassment, and being prepared to respond to threats such as weather emergencies, fires, and acts of violence. Effective crisis prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery actions are essential for schools to meet this responsibility (Cowan et al., 2013). While an armed assailant on school property is rare, schools are increasingly being required to consider how to best prepare for and respond to these events.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2008) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Blair & Schweit, 2014) an *armed assailant* is defined as an armed person who attempts to use deadly force on others, typically in a confined and populated area. A related term, *active shooter*, refers to those assailants who use firearms, as opposed to knives or other weapons. In this document, we are using the broader term of armed assailant. In the United States, some states have mandated armed assailant drills for schools, but have offered little to no implementation guidance. Furthermore, they typically do not make a distinction between sensorial and nonsensorial drills, causing some educators to erroneously conclude that these drills must mimic the actual armed assailant events to meet local mandates.

Effective school safety and crisis response must include a common understanding of purpose and procedures among all participants, a respect for each other's roles and perspectives, and a shared commitment to ensure school safety and well-being. Schools should plan for the rare possibility of an armed assailant as part of a comprehensive crisis preparedness effort; however, the nature and extent of those preparedness activities must be based upon a risk assessment of the crisis events a given school is most likely to confront. How this training is conducted must carefully account for students' developmental levels, physical abilities, school culture and climate, and features specific to each school community (such as geography, weather, crime, and environment). While one of the primary goals of crisis preparedness is to develop a sense of empowerment and control, poorly conducted armed assailant drills may cause physical and psychological harm and negatively affect the overall learning environment. It is critical that administrators, school-employed mental health

professionals, school resource and police officers, and crisis response team members work closely together to develop staff and student training protocols that follow the best practice considerations offered below.

A. Background

The 1999 Columbine High School shootings ushered in heightened attention to the need for schools—and law enforcement—to be better prepared to respond to armed assailants. Subsequently, schools focused primarily on lockdown practices (which involved simply confining students and staff to behind locked classroom doors), while law enforcement focused on improving tactics to find and stop assailants as quickly as possible. Following the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting, the U.S. Department of Education (2013) recommended expanding the lockdown-only approach for schools to an options-based approach that allows school staff to make more independent decisions about how to protect their students depending on evolving circumstances (e.g., evacuate the building rather than stay locked in a classroom). These approaches include adapting the “Run, Hide, Fight” model that was originally developed for adults in response to workplace violence. This expansion spurred a range of approaches to armed assailant training and increased the number of schools conducting drills with varying degrees of intensity and involvement of school staff and students. In some instances, drills are conducted with insufficient consideration of the potential psychological impact or appropriateness of a particular drill given the developmental level of students or participants' psychological risk factors.

B. Benefits and Concerns Associated With Armed Assailant Drills

Costs versus benefits. School-associated homicides are extremely rare, accounting for only about 1% of all such deaths among school-age youth (Wang et al., 2020). While an attack by an armed assailant on school grounds is possible—and can have significant psychological and educational impact if it happens—it is not as probable as other types of crises. Schools must consider the cost of some types of drills (e.g., full-scale simulations), and whether such investment affects resources available for other critical safety activities such as first aid training, environmental design measures, and staff development focused on comprehensive school safety efforts.

Empowerment versus potential harm. The primary purposes of an armed assailant drill are to provide law enforcement and relevant school leadership and staff the opportunity to practice skills and protocols; and to identify and correct areas of weakness in knowledge, communication, coordination, and decision-making. The goal is to empower participants, to prepare professionals and staff for this role and responsibility, and ultimately to save lives. As the focus of such drills expands to include all staff and students, the potential for causing harm also expands. Drill intensity (e.g., use of simulated gunfire and role play), extent of a drill's warning, and whether participation is required or voluntary, will all affect reactions to the experience. Additionally, an individual's cognitive and developmental levels, personality, history of adverse or traumatic experiences, and psychological makeup are among the many factors that influence the potential for harm.

It is essential to include parents in discussions of their child's developmental level, education, and readiness for armed assailant drills. Highly sensorial armed assailant drills for students in preschool and elementary classrooms should never be conducted, are not recommended, and should never be mandatory. In general, these types of drills are highly advised against for middle and high school students as well.

Available research. Practicing disaster response procedures has been found to increase the probability of adaptive behavior during a crisis (Jones & Randall, 1994; Miltenberger et al., 2005). Specifically, lockdown drills that do not involve a sensorial experience, and are implemented according to best practices, have been suggested to increase knowledge and skills of how to respond appropriately without elevating anxiety or perceived safety risk (Zhe & Nickerson, 2007). At present there is no empirical research supporting the benefits school-based armed assailant drills that involve a sensorial experience.

Potential lawsuits. The manner in which some armed assailant drills (e.g., unannounced) have been conducted in the workplace has led to lawsuits imposed on employers due to the psychological and physical harm sustained by participants (Frosch, 2014; Sawchuk, 2020). Schools need to determine to what extent sensorial armed assailant drills are even necessary. If sensorial drills are to be conducted with carefully selected and willing adult or student participants (i.e., student volunteers who are members of the drama club and are playing the victim roles), they

need to be carefully constructed to avoid physical and psychological harm. Regardless of the projected benefits and perceived concerns, the fact remains that there is a lack of empirical research to support the use of sensorial armed assailant drills with students and/or staff in schools. Schools that decide to conduct a drill should use a multidisciplinary safety team (including parents) that educates and trains all participants in relevant curricula and protocols. With careful planning, data collection, and continual review of these programs, schools can begin to develop an approach that minimizes negative effects and improves preparedness.

PART II: DRILL APPROACHES AND PLANNING

A. Traditional Lockdown Versus Options-Based and Live Simulation Drills

Lockdown drills have been conducted for decades, *do not* involve play acting or sensorial components, and have been documented to be effective. **They are an essential part of school safety preparedness.** When done appropriately, they align with fire or dangerous weather drills in how they are conducted and should not elevate anxiety. Specifically, lockdown drills involve sheltering in a secure location, locking the door, moving students out of sight, and requiring students to remain quiet within the room. In practice, lockdowns have a well-established history of keeping students and school staff members safe when presented with real threats of harm. These drills are intended to teach and practice basic skills regardless of the specific imminent threat, starting with following the instructions of the trusted adult in charge. All participants should know ahead of time that the drill will take place and what to expect, including what announcement will be made or what bell will sound to start the drill. It is recommended that parental caregivers be notified before lockdown drills. Additionally, caregivers should be offered the opportunity for their child to receive alternate teaching and training if they feel it necessary for their child's well-being. For example, if a child, group of children, or school community has experienced trauma due to school violence, alternate teaching and training may be necessary to avoid further trauma exposure. While schools may call this an "opt-out" policy, it is important to clarify that this option should not be regarded as an exemption from safety preparation, but rather an opportunity for appropriate substitute activities. Emergency responders and law enforcement (other than the SROs) are not typically part of the on-campus drill, but

they may be invited to observe the drill depending on state laws. These drills are appropriate for most students and staff members when done properly. However, attention should always be paid to students who might present specific vulnerabilities, such as those with previous trauma history or disabilities.

Options-based drills provide students and staff with a range of alternative and additional strategies to save lives (i.e., evacuation, barricading doors). **These are not lockdown drills** (rather, lockdown is one element of an options-based approach). The premise of options-based drills is to allow participants to make independent decisions depending on the situation such as the nature of the threat, time of day, and the location of students. Options-based drills are appropriate as long as careful attention is given to age, developmental appropriateness (see Appendix 3), and any trauma risk factors, as well as the physical layout of the school campus (e.g., ease of access to outside doors and proximity of places to hide other than classrooms). If a school determines to teach optional responses to a specific threat, such drills should be conducted in a nonsimulated, nonsensorial way. Strategies can be offered as classroom lessons, wherein students are told about the different options that adult staff members may consider as they strive to ensure student safety. All participants should know when a drill will take place, and potential participants (and parents) should be offered alternative options for obtaining knowledge and skills if they deem it necessary for their well-being. School leaders, SROs, and local law enforcement may be involved in teaching techniques. At no point should students be given the instruction or impression that they are expected to act as heroes (i.e., fight, defend, counter) in a life-threatening situation.

Full-scale simulation drills, or live exercises, are complex, costly, and involve play acting and highly sensorial components. They were originally designed for emergency responders and law enforcement, members of the school crisis team, and other school leaders responsible for implementing a response to an imminent threat. The primary purpose should be to help these adults test their protocols and identify possible gaps, as well as to equip crisis responders and school leaders with the skills required to lead a response. It is not appropriate for most students, in particular younger students and those with histories of traumatic stress, to participate in these drills. **Any staff or students involved should be volunteers and**

must be carefully selected. For example, persons with histories of exposure to extreme traumatic stressors should not participate. Student volunteers must have parental permission. These exercises should be conducted during nonschool hours, and the school and broader community should be informed ahead of time that they are taking place.

Being clear on the differences in these drill types and how to mitigate unnecessary negative consequences helps decision-makers focus on the appropriate drills for the purpose and participants intended, ultimately safeguarding the physical and psychological safety of all students and staff.

B. Hierarchy of Education and Training Activities

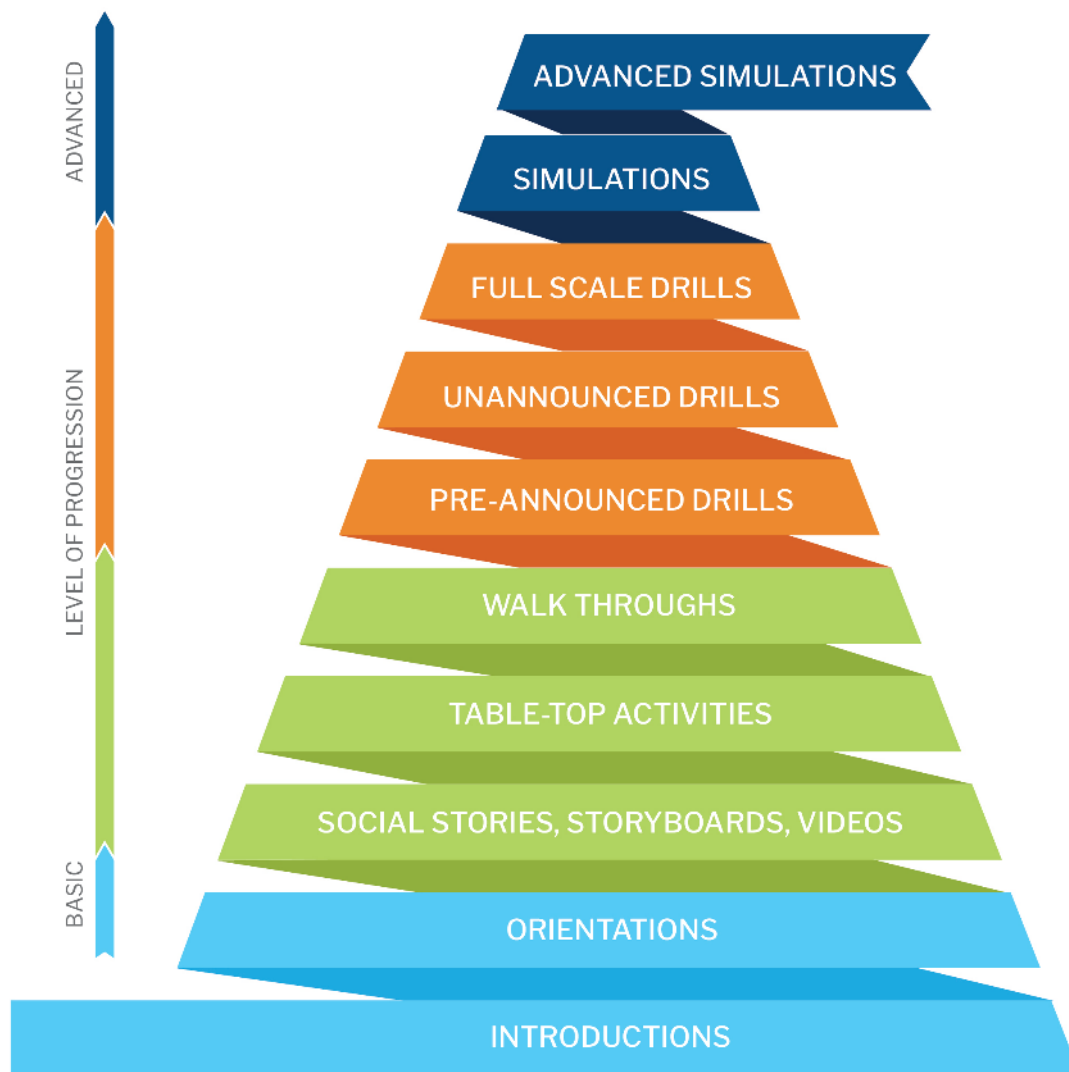
Crisis preparedness exercises and drills should be conducted in a progression of steps that begin with basic activities and progress to more advanced drills and exercises as needed (with advanced simulations being a more advanced type of crisis preparedness activity; Reeves et al., 2020; Safe and Sound Schools, 2016c; see Figure 1). Schools should start with simple, low-cost, discussion-based exercises (e.g., introductions to crisis responders, orientation activities, use of approved instructional media, or tabletop drills) and, if the school safety team determines it appropriate, work their way toward more complex and expensive, operations-based exercises (e.g., walk-throughs, specific emergency drills, and crisis simulations; NASP, 2013; U.S. Department of Education REMS Technical Assistance Center, 2006a). *Appendix 1 summarizes this hierarchy of education and training activities (Safe and Sound Schools, 2016c) and provides an example of how armed assailant preparation could occur at each level.*

C. Considerations

Schools must carefully consider the decision-making protocol for people to engage in a strategy other than lockdown. For instance, run/escape may lead to safety for some, but it might inadvertently lead to danger for others as students unknowingly run into the path of an unknown threat, expose them to the sight of injured or deceased classmates and teachers, or result in students trampling each other to get to the exit door. These concerns need to be addressed when planning and practicing active assailant drills. Students should be taught to first and foremost follow the direction of their teacher, and how to make decisions if that teacher is incapacitated. Helping students and staff understand the decision-making criteria is crucial. It is also important to consider the special needs of students with disabilities, both in terms of a drill

FIGURE 1. HIERARCHY OF EDUCATION & TRAINING ACTIVITIES

There are many forms and methods of educating and training students and staff to respond in an emergency. The following are examples of several models, beginning with the most basic and progressing to the most advanced.



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and the expectations for their functioning in the event of real emergency (U.S. Department of Education REMS Technical Assistance Center, 2006b). *Appendix 2 provides additional information on students with disabilities.*

D. Regular Practice

As part of the initial planning process for crisis preparedness, schools should identify how to integrate

and reinforce the concepts taught during the drills. Introductions, orientations, walk-throughs, and tabletop exercises should continue to be integrated into yearly crisis preparation activities so learned skills are refreshed, rehearsed, and generalized. Varied practice, training, and discussion activities aid the development of readiness, providing staff and students the means to quickly access and apply their knowledge. School leaders also must balance

the need for reviewing knowledge and practicing skills with other types of safety training and, most importantly, the primary purpose of schools, which is teaching and learning. Conducting drills too frequently both unnecessarily disrupts learning and can create the impression that a threat must be real or imminent enough to warrant so much time and attention.

PART III: DEVELOPMENTAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

A. Impact of Adult Behavior on Children's Behavior

The behavior of an adult in an emergency directly affects the physical and psychological safety of students in crisis. Therefore, the effectiveness of armed assailant drills relies on educating and training adults carefully, responsibly, and continually. Students look to faculty and staff—the designated trusted adults on site—for direction and guidance. When adults are well-trained and stay calm, the students are more likely to follow and gain confidence and ability.

B. Developmental Levels of Safety Awareness

Developmental levels of safety awareness must be addressed (Safe and Sound Schools, 2016a). If schools opt to conduct an options-based or more advanced armed assailant training, it is critical that those planning and facilitating the training consider the cognitive and physical abilities, as well as the emotional development of all those involved. Safety and security professionals (e.g., SROs, police officers) often have a leadership role in conducting drills but must work collaboratively with school administration and school-employed mental health professionals in joint planning to ensure best practice guidelines are followed. School districts, educators, and parents are encouraged to adapt policies and training programs that consider their unique situations. Grade levels are not an absolute determinant. Individual levels may vary greatly due to cultural, developmental, educational, and personal profiles within a community or classroom. It is also imperative that schools consider the individual psychological backgrounds, previous trauma experiences (including community trauma history), special needs, and personalities of students and staff. Regardless of training level, some individual personality types are better able to respond assertively than others in moments of crisis. *Appendix 3 offers developmental levels of awareness and understanding to assist schools*

in determining the capabilities and readiness of students and staff to participate in armed assailant drills (Safe and Sound Schools, 2016a). Each level has a corresponding age range and examples of appropriate types of activities and instructions to provide general guidance when preparing for an armed assailant training.

Schools must carefully consider developmental appropriateness of safety vocabulary and verbiage. Terminology should be clear, direct, and developmentally appropriate. As an example, opting for vocabulary such as “go,” “get out,” and “evacuate” (depending upon developmental maturity) instead of “escape” or “run” may help support calm and orderly action, and mitigate psychological impact of crisis. See Safe and Sound Schools (2016c) for additional guidance on developmentally appropriate language.

C. Mental Health Support and Considerations

School-employed mental health professionals should be a part of all stages of armed assailant drill preparation.

Before an armed assailant drill or simulation. Drills may lead to stressful or traumatic reactions. If the drill will involve a sensorial experience, then participation should never be mandated for staff or students. Staff should also be taught to recognize common trauma reactions to help identify when students, fellow staff members, or they themselves need to be removed from the drill. Additionally, drills should be conducted early enough in the day to allow for debriefing participants afterward and assessing any adverse reaction.

During an armed assailant drill. Educators should monitor the reactions of themselves, each other, and students during the drill and have a means to quickly notify drill coordinators if a person exhibits physical (e.g., asthma or panic attack) or emotional (e.g., hysterical) reactions. Such reactions would necessitate removal from the drill and immediate support. School-employed health and mental health professionals must be present during the drill and available for assistance.

After an armed assailant drill. Emotional or physical reactions can be delayed following a highly intense simulation drill. School staff and students should have access to school-employed mental health professionals after the event to provide additional assistance if needed.

D. Balancing Requests to Opt-Out With the Need for Universal Preparedness

Participation in a highly sensorial armed assailant drill should never be required for students or staff. Yet it is important to have all staff and students understand emergency procedures and that staff are operating with this shared understanding in an emergency situation. In cases where participants choose not to participate in a more advanced armed assailant drill for their personal well-being, schools should provide the essential information and training through alternative, less sensorial methods. For staff, this can include training exercises, such as a tabletop activity, as outlined in the hierarchy of education and training activities (Safe and Sound Schools, 2016c).

E. Parent Consent

All forms of armed assailant drills should require parent consent. This may be in the form of:

- Parent permission – parents return a permission slip allowing their child to participate.
- Passive consent – parents return a form only if they do NOT want their child to participate; no form returned implies permission.
- Parent notification – parents are notified, but no consent form is used; thus, schools assume participation is granted unless parents assertively state otherwise.

Regardless of the type of consent, parents must always be fully informed of how the armed assailant drills will be conducted and how their child will receive alternative methods for learning emergency procedures if they deem it is not in their child's best interest to participate. Again, it is imperative that an alternate form of preparation is provided for students whose parents choose to opt their child out of any safety drill or related activity.

PART IV: STEPS TO CONDUCTING SAFE, EFFECTIVE, AND APPROPRIATE DRILLS

1. Create a school safety team:

- Include on the team an administrator, at least one school mental health professional (i.e., school psychologist, school counselor, school social worker), school nurse, general education teacher, special education teacher, school resource officer or security personnel, facilities/custodial staff, and IT representatives. A parent and student representative, or a venue for parent and student input, must be incorporated.

- Identify a lead person to coordinate school safety efforts, including drills.
- Establish and communicate the roles and responsibilities during drills and in real-life crisis situations.
- Identify the most appropriate preparedness activities for the school.
- Provide ongoing professional development and training as needed.
- Ensure that the school's policies are in compliance with state laws and school board policies.

2. Conduct an assessment of the school community to:

- Identify the types of crisis events most likely to occur.
- Determine the current school culture and climate.
- Map existing resources and capacities of school personnel or school safety teams, and identify any related policies that should be considered in the planning of drills.

3. Implement a cost-benefit analysis to:

- Consider financial costs in relation to the likelihood and potential impact of a particular crisis.
- Prioritize what resources, activities, or preparedness training must be conducted to address the crisis situations mostly likely to occur based on the assessment (e.g., if suicidal ideation rates are increasing, then active shooter drills should not be conducted at the expense of investment in suicide prevention programming).
- Balance the need to empower school staff while minimizing potential harm.
- Consider the current knowledge and identified needs of the staff.
- Consider legal requirements (e.g., state law) related to conducting active assailant drills and to what degree drills are required to be highly sensorial simulations versus nonsensorial drills. While many states have passed laws requiring active assailant/shooter drills and/or lockdown drills be conducted, the laws do not specify these drills must be conducted in a highly sensorial manner, nor is that a requirement to meet state legal mandates.

4. Tailor drills to the context of the school environment, taking into consideration:
 - The primary goal of the drill (e.g., training for law enforcement versus staff and/or students);
 - Age, cognitive, physical, and developmental levels of awareness of students;
 - Students with physical, sensory, or other disabilities who may require unique instructions or accommodations during a drill or real-life event;
 - The capacity, comfort level, and trust among staff;
 - Administrative support;
 - Optimal timing, including time of year, day of the week, and time of the day;
 - Relationships with external partners, law enforcement, and other first responders; and
 - The layout of the school building and campus.
5. Create a plan of progression that:
 - Considers whether any previous activities have been conducted in the school;
 - Starts with simple, low-cost, discussion-based exercises;
 - Considers all available types of drills;
 - Identifies specific objectives and goals for the drills; and
 - Identifies a timeline and metrics to help determine whether more complex exercises are needed.
6. Prepare for logistics of the drill to ensure that:
 - Previous traumatic experiences of those involved are considered;
 - School staff learn to recognize stressful reactions to drills;
 - Methods exist to opt out (for staff and students) or remove someone from a drill, including parental consent/permission if students are involved;
 - Methods exist for alternate education and preparation for students and staff who are opted out of drills;
 - School-employed mental health professionals are available to provide support to those experiencing negative reactions to the drill;
 - Adequate follow up is available for students or staff with questions; and
 - Appropriate methods to evaluate outcomes are implemented.
7. Develop a communications plan that:
 - Informs members of the school community of planned drills and what they will entail;
 - Facilitates open communications with families, including translated materials and the opportunity for family members to talk with relevant staff about concerns;
 - Provides opt-out options for staff and students; and
 - Encourages feedback and evaluation by participants after the fact.
8. Establish a long-term follow up plan to support sustainability that considers:
 - What additional training is required;
 - How the drill integrates with other school safety and crisis prevention efforts;
 - How current and previous training and knowledge can be maintained and built upon; and
 - When follow-up should be conducted and how often.

CONCLUSION

Training exercises and drills to prepare for active shooters or other armed assailants should be based on the specific needs and context of each school and community. It is critical that schools recognize that this type of drill is just one specific component of comprehensive crisis preparedness and response that includes prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery. Schools should consider the most cost-effective method of preparing students and staff for an armed assailant situation while balancing the physical and psychological risks associated with such drills. Regardless of the nature of the drills a school chooses, the school resource officer and school-employed mental health professionals must be integrally involved in the planning and evaluation process to ensure appropriate implementation. *Appendix 4 offers a list questions to guide decision making when considering armed assailant drills.* Lastly, it is imperative that schools have a clearly defined evaluation process that identifies areas of strength and areas in need of improvement as the school community continues to refine ongoing comprehensive crisis preparedness and response plans.

LIST OF APPENDICES

- Appendix 1: Hierarchy of Training and Education Activities
- Appendix 2: Considerations for Students With Special Needs
- Appendix 3: Developmental Levels of Safety Awareness
- Appendix 4: Questions to Ask When Considering Armed Assailant Training

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Author Organizations

National Association of School Psychologists

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) represents 25,000 school psychologists throughout the United States and abroad. NASP promotes children's healthy development and learning through programs and services that prevent academic, social–emotional, and mental and behavioral health problems. NASP advocates for policies and practices that ensure equitable access to services for all children, support necessary systems and resources for effective service delivery, and advance professional standards and ethics for training, credentialing, and practice. School psychologists work with families, educators, and community partners to create safe and healthy learning environments, promote wellness and positive skills development, provide direct supports to students, and reduce stigma and improve access to school mental health services.

www.nasponline.org

National Association of School Resource Officers

NASRO is a nonprofit organization for school-based law enforcement officers, school administrators and school security/safety professionals working as partners to protect students, school faculty and staff, and the schools they attend. NASRO's national offices are in Hoover, Alabama. The organization was established in 1991. For more information, visit

www.nasro.org.

Safe and Sound Schools

Safe and Sound Schools is a national nonprofit school safety advocacy and resource center founded in 2013 by parents who lost children at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012. For nearly a decade, Safe and Sound Schools (SASS) has been a trusted resource for school communities across the nation, providing research-based tools, training, and support for crisis-prevention, response, and recovery. As a national leader in the field of school safety and security, SASS has developed a professional network of subject matter experts, practitioners and collaborative partners at federal, state and local levels. An active member of this community of practice, SASS continues to be intimately engaged in the development and review of policies, establishment of best practices and provider of high-quality training to create a safe and supportive school culture and climate to fulfill its mission to protect every school and every student, every day.

www.safeandsoundschools.org

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Please cite as: NASP, NASRO, & Safe and Sound Schools. (2021). *Best practice considerations for schools in active shooter and other armed assailant drills. Updated [Brief]*. National Association of School Psychologists. www.nasponline.org/armed-assailant-drills

APPENDIX 1. HIERARCHY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING ACTIVITIES

Based upon an assessment of risk and preparedness priorities, crisis drills and exercises should be conducted in a progression of steps that begins with basic activities and, if needed, progresses to more advanced drills and exercises.

DISCUSSION-BASED EXERCISES		
	DESCRIPTION	ARMED ASSAILANT TRAINING EXAMPLE
Introductions	Brief reviews of the school's crisis response procedures appropriate for all developmental levels (students as well as staff). Activities involve simply introducing and familiarizing the school community to professionals who will help them during a crisis, what they might look like, what they do, and what kinds of tools they carry as helpers.	Introduce students and staff to a police officer who would discuss (a) how they would keep students and teachers safe in the event of an armed assailant situation and (b) how the school can best support their actions.
Orientations	More involved and concrete reviews of the school's crisis response procedures, which can be made appropriate for all developmental levels. All students and staff should have some familiarity with all parts of the school campus, even (as indicated) with areas that are typically off limits during normal school days (such as the staff lounge, behind the front office counter, and other connecting halls and doors that may be needed for evacuation or shelter during an emergency).	Teachers use orientations when they tour the classroom and building with students or hold scavenger hunts to familiarize students with school exits, the location of the telephone, first aid materials, light switches, Go Bags ^a , and bathroom passes (all of which provide resources that may be needed in an armed assailant situation). Building and campus field trips can be used to orient students and new staff members (including substitute teachers) to the layout of the school and campus.
Seminars/ Workshops	Instruct staff on safety protocols and crisis response procedures and provide safety information in an objective and calm manner to children. Instructional media can also be used. It is critical when developing any materials for students that a multidisciplinary team is involved in developing the visual materials, representations, or dramatizations of emergency scenarios, and that there is agreement on the content and appropriateness of the material. Materials that may be appropriate for adult staff members will not be appropriate for younger students. Further, parents should be given the opportunity to preview these materials and allowed to opt their children out of such presentations.	Reading the students a storybook, telling a social story, or showing a video that incorporates crisis response messages. Appropriate for the armed assailant training would be messages linked to the so-called "stranger danger" concept.
Tabletops	Low-stress opportunities to talk through safety scenarios in small discussion groups. Tabletops may assign roles to each group member using a vignette, requiring them to cooperatively discuss, solve problems, and report back to the larger group. Tabletops can be used by crisis team leaders and teachers and are easily modified for a variety of developmental levels that can span from elementary-age children through to adult staff members.	Young children's tabletops can be formatted like a game, such as "What Are Sammy's Stay-Safe Choices?" Young adults can engage in more intensive strategic discussions. A seated discussion format enables participants to brainstorm and solve problems in a small group, allowing mental preparation, improved awareness, active discussion, and evaluation of readiness for potential emergencies.

OPERATIONS-BASED EXERCISES

	DESCRIPTION	ARMED ASSAILANT TRAINING EXAMPLE
Drills	Walk-Throughs A way to act out the steps or actions that might occur during an emergency. School crisis teams and local emergency professionals can conduct a joint walk-through to understand each other's roles. This is not a timed or rushed activity. A walk-through can be thought of as a slow-motion drill, one that allows for questions and discussion along the way. Schools commonly use walk-throughs to prepare students for fire drills.	Students walk through and/or rehearse the actions they might take if a person entered the building that was a risk to their safety. They are given permission to ask questions. Evacuating to an off-campus evacuation site can also be practiced during this walk-through.
	Preannounced Drills This type of drill is an announced rehearsal of emergency responses and protocols, and it occurs in real time. All participants are notified that it is not a true emergency.	Armed assailant drills should be disclosed to all participants as there is too much risk for students and staff to believe an unannounced drill is real, causing unnecessary fear or strong physical reactions to defend oneself. These drills should always be preceded by an announcement such as: "This is an emergency drill. It is not an actual emergency. This is a drill. We are now pretending that there is a person with a weapon in the middle hallway, please lock down and take the appropriate actions." This should be practiced in a nonsensorial manner.
	Unannounced Drills This type of drill is unannounced in order to rehearse real-time responses and protocols (e.g., fire drill or earthquake drills). It is not as complex as a functional exercise, as it does not involve emergency responders. While students and staff are not informed of the specific time the drill will occur, they are informed during the emergency notification this is a drill. At the end of the drill, all participants are reminded it is not a true emergency. For schools with a trauma history, it is recommended that unannounced drills of any type (e.g., fire, shelter in place) are replaced with announced drills to avoid the potential of trauma. Even a fire drill can serve as a trauma trigger, thus resulting in physical and emotional harm.	Armed assailant drills should NEVER be unannounced. Unannounced drills can cause unnecessary fear and strong emotional and physical reactions (e.g., students texting their parents saying they are going to die, jumping out of windows, mistaking—and potentially harming—a perceived attacker).

OPERATIONS-BASED EXERCISES

	DESCRIPTION	ARMED ASSAILANT TRAINING EXAMPLE
Advanced Simulations and Exercises	Simulation Drills The most advanced type of training involves simulated emergency conditions and stimuli to condition participants to the emergency environment, as well as to rehearse emergency response. Advanced simulations are designed for highly trained emergency responders, and they simulate the emergency conditions and stimuli they may encounter in a real emergency. While these drills can be part of overall preparedness, they require careful planning and should be conducted in a manner that minimizes physical and psychological harm. These drills should always be preannounced and never be mandated for staff or students.	Armed assailant exercises are typically considered to be options-based trainings, which give participants permission to make independent decisions when necessary. The local police department assigns an officer to role-play an armed assailant who has entered the building. Actors may be told to scream to simulate real emotions, and PA or electronic communications may involve graphic information and delivered in a way that ensues panic. For some participants, this intense exposure and practice may empower them with experience, options, and a sense of control. For others, this type of drill may be emotionally traumatic (Frosch, 2014), and lawsuits have been filed for physical and emotional harm. Thus, disclosure must be provided on the types of sensorial methods to be used and participants must be carefully screened to ensure there is no trauma history for which the simulation experience could be a trauma trigger. Select students may be involved only if they are of high school age and are serving a specific purpose (e.g., a student actor playing the role of victim), and their parents have been fully informed of the sensorial methods to be used, and full consent is given.
	Full-Scale (Advanced) Simulation Exercises Involve schools and also include multiple emergency responder agencies (e.g., police, fire, EMT, local departments of emergency planning) and district-level support. Often multiple emergency protocols are practiced within the exercise (e.g., armed intruder, hostage situation, and a bomb threat). These often take months to plan and are costly. If school staff and students are going to be involved, they need to volunteer and be carefully screened to ensure they are emotionally stable enough to participate (see simulation drills above).	The school district and first responder agencies plan the complexity of the scenario and advertise students, staff, and the community the date of the exercise to avoid confusion with a real scenario. Volunteer actors play the role of the armed intruder, injured students and staff, and multiple first responder agencies practice their response protocols. Full-scale exercises typically involve school, police, fire, first responder, and community response agencies (including mental health).

Note. Adapted from Hierarchy of Education and Training Activities, (2013,2016c) Safe and Sound Schools: A Sandy Hook Initiative.

^a Go Bags include essential materials a classroom would take with them (e.g., student medications) if forced to evacuate the classroom.

APPENDIX 2: CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

When planning for armed assailant drills, it is critical that the school crisis planning team consider the unique needs of students with disabilities. If available, the school crisis team should consider including a disability specialist as a member of the team, or as a consultant when planning for these types of drills. School psychologists who are members of crisis teams can provide both mental health and disabilities expertise. There are several Federal policies (e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act; Individuals with Disabilities in Emergency Preparedness, Executive Order 13347; Individuals with Disabilities Act) that require public entities, including schools, to consider the needs of individuals with disabilities in any type of crisis preparedness training. Considerations include:

- Physical disabilities that might impede mobility;
- Physical disabilities that might impede access to instructions (e.g., hearing or sight impairment);
- Sensory disabilities that might heighten a distress reaction and/or impede response to instruction (e.g., autism);
- Cognitive disabilities that might impede understanding a situation and/or instructions.

The resources below may be helpful; however, school teams are urged to consult district leaders to ensure compliance with local, state, and federal requirements.

ADA Best Practices Toolkit for State and Local Governments Emergency Management Checklist, <http://www.ada.gov/pcatoolkit/chap7emergencygmtadd1.htm>

National Association of School Psychologists. (2020). *School safety drills and exercises for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD): Tips and resources for educators*. [https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-resources/school-safety-drills-and-exercises-for-students-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-\(asd\)-tips-and-resources-for-educators](https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-resources/school-safety-drills-and-exercises-for-students-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-(asd)-tips-and-resources-for-educators)

Readiness for Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. (n.d.) *Integrating the needs of students and staff with disabilities and other access and functional needs*. <http://rems.ed.gov/TrainingPackage.aspx>

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Safe and Sound Schools: A Sandy Hook Initiative. (2016c). *The hierarchy of education and training activities*. <https://www.safeandsoundschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Straight-A-Safety-Toolkits-ACT-5-Hierarchy-of-Education.pdf>

APPENDIX 3. DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL SAFETY PROCEDURES, ACTIVITIES, AND DRILLS

Schools must target crisis training activities to the developmental and awareness levels of students and also take into account the role and awareness levels of staff. Awareness levels are for general guidance purposes only. Individual awareness and capacity will vary depending on individual factors.

		What individuals at this developmental level typically <i>know and understand</i> about school-associated dangers	What individuals at this developmental level are typically <i>able to do</i> in response to school-associated dangers	Appropriate school safety <i>explanations, procedures, activities, and/or drills</i> for this developmental level
<i>Awareness Levels</i>	<i>Developmental Levels</i>	<i>Developmentally Typical Knowledge/Understanding</i>	<i>Developmentally Typical Capabilities</i>	<i>Developmentally Appropriate Safety Explanations/Activities</i>
<i>Early Awareness</i>	<i>Preschool–Kindergarten Students</i>	• Demonstrate basic understanding of “danger.” • Require adult guidance to determine what is, and is not, dangerous. • Have difficulty distinguishing probable dangers from all possible dangers, and between reality and fantasy. • Understand: ▪ “Get Out” or evacuate; ▪ “Hide Out” or stay out of sight with lights off; ▪ “Keep Out” (i.e., that adults will lock and barricade classroom doors to keep danger out and students safe).	• Dependent on adult management and direction during emergencies. • Able to follow basic safety directions (e.g., “Get-Out” or evacuate; and “Hide Out” or stay out of sight with lights off).	• Explain that adults at school work hard to keep school safe. • Offer concrete examples of common dangers that adults address (e.g., a stray dog on campus and not knowing if it is a good or sick dog). • Use the word <i>safety</i> when describing/conducting drills (e.g., use “Get Out Safety Drill” to describe an evacuation). • Practice following atypical adult directions associated with elements of safety drills (e.g., during art, ask students to quickly line up at the door). • Conduct “Get Out” and “Hide Out” safety drills.
<i>Developing Awareness</i>	<i>Early Elementary Students</i>	• Demonstrate evolving understanding of “danger.” • Require some adult guidance to determine what is, and is not, dangerous. • Have difficulty distinguishing probable dangers from all possible dangers, and may have difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy. • Understand: “Get Out,” “Hide Out,” and “Keep Out.”	• Need adult management and direction during emergencies. • Able to follow basic safety directions. • Can provide assistance with simple safety tasks in an emergency (e.g., following adult direction to turn off lights, close blinds).	• Explain that teachers and school staff members always work to keep school safe. • Offer concrete examples of common dangers that adults address. • Use the word <i>safety</i> when describing/conducting drills. • Practice following atypical adult directions associated with elements of safety drills. • Conduct “Get Out” (evacuations) and “Hide Out” (lockdown) safety drills.

Awareness Levels	Developmental Levels	Developmentally Typical Knowledge/Understanding	Developmentally Typical Capabilities	Developmentally Appropriate Safety Explanations/Activities
<i>Practiced Awareness</i>	<i>Upper Elementary Students</i>	- Require limited adult guidance to determine what is, and is not, dangerous. - May have some difficulty distinguishing probable dangers from all possible dangers. - Capable of understanding why school safety drills are conducted. - Understand all safety directions and instructions.	- Need adult direction during emergencies. - Able to follow all safety directions and instructions. - Can assist with many safety tasks during an emergency (e.g., following adult direction to turn off lights, closing blinds and doors, moving furniture, barricading doors, calling 911).	- Explain that teachers and school staff members always work to keep school safe. - Offer examples of common dangers that adults address. - Teach the difference between possible dangers and common dangers. - Use the word <i>safety</i> when describing/conducting drills. - Conduct “Get Out” (evacuation) “Hide Out” (lockdown), and “Keep Out” (barricade) safety drills.
<i>Proficient Awareness</i>	<i>Intermediate, Junior High, and Middle School Students</i>	- Have all <i>Practiced Awareness</i> knowledge and understanding. - Able to distinguishing probable dangers from all possible dangers. - Capable of understanding why school safety drills are conducted.	- Benefit from adult direction, but able to perform practiced actions independently during emergencies. - Can assist with most safety tasks during an emergency. - May or may not demonstrate the ability to disrupt the actions of an intruder.	- Engage in discussions regarding the need for school safety procedures. - Allow students to generate examples of common dangers that school safety procedures are designed to address (verify understanding of the difference between probable and possible dangers). - Use the word <i>safety</i> when describing/conducting drills. - Conduct evacuation and lockdown safety drills. - If indicated, conduct options-based safety drills (e.g., drills wherein the option to lockdown, barricade, evacuate, or fight back/encounter are considered).
<i>Independent Awareness</i>	<i>High School Students, Adult Students, and Volunteers</i>	- Have all <i>Proficient Awareness</i> knowledge and understanding. - Have knowledge of a range of emergency safety actions and can match them to the appropriate situation (e.g., know the situations that require evacuation versus lockdown).	- Benefit from adult direction, but able to perform practiced actions independently during emergencies. - Able to help identify probable dangers confronting a school. - Able to assist in the development of school safety protocols. - Able to appropriately adapt safety actions to a range of dangers. - Can assist with all safety tasks during an emergency. - May or may not demonstrate ability to disrupt the actions of an intruder.	- Engage in discussions regarding the need for school safety procedures. - Engage in discussions regarding the specific types of school safety procedures required at a given school. - Use the word <i>safety</i> when describing/conducting drills. - Conduct evacuation and lockdown safety drills. - If indicated, conduct options-based safety drills.

<i>Awareness Levels</i>	<i>Developmental Levels</i>	<i>Developmentally Typical Knowledge/Understanding</i>	<i>Developmentally Typical Capabilities</i>	<i>Developmentally Appropriate Safety Explanations/Activities</i>
<i>Advanced Awareness</i>	<i>Professionally Trained School Staff Members</i>	• Have all <i>Independent Awareness</i> knowledge and understanding. • Have knowledge of the probable dangers confronting a given school. • Have detailed knowledge of all school emergency safety protocols.	• Able to identify probable dangers confronting a school. • Able to develop school safety protocols. • Able to direct student safety actions and leading others in an emergency. • Capable of independent decision making during an emergency. • Have first aid training and skills. • May or may not demonstrate the ability to disrupt the actions of an intruder.	• Conduct threat assessments to identify the specific dangers specific schools confront. • Engage in conversations about the specific school safety protocols needed. • From threat assessment data, develop specific school safety protocols. • Engage in advanced training in the selected school safety protocols. • Engage in first aid training. • Practice managing and directing the selected school safety protocols (e.g., conduct evacuation, lockdown, and options-based safety drills).
<i>Professional Awareness</i>	<i>First Responders and School Safety Professionals</i>	• Have all <i>Advanced Awareness</i> knowledge and understanding. • Have knowledge of tactical responses and counterattack measures.	• Capable of high-level decision-making during an emergency. • Trained and equipped to provide tactical response and counterattack measures to protect self and others in an emergency. • Trained and equipped to provide advanced emergency medical assistance to others. • Have the ability to disrupt the actions of an intruder.	• Establish a process to screen potential school-based law enforcement officer's decision-making ability in high stress events. • Provide training in specific tactics for confronting and ending an active shooter event. • First responders should be trained in tactical first-aid strategies.

Note. Adapted from Development Levels of Safety Awareness, 2016a. Safe and Sound Schools: A Sandy Hook Initiative.

APPENDIX 4: QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CONSIDERING ARMED ASSAILANT TRAINING

Emergency Operations Plan Development/Revision

1. How does this fit into a comprehensive school emergency operations plan (EOP)?
2. Have all relevant stakeholders been consulted and involved in reviewing possible programs/approaches?
 - a. Superintendent and district leadership staff
 - b. Law enforcement (district and community law enforcement agencies; school resource officers)
 - c. District safety and security officers
 - d. Mental health professionals (school psychologists, counselors, and social workers)
 - e. Health services
 - f. Principals and teachers
 - g. Parents and students (as age appropriate)
 - h. School board members
 - i. District legal representation
 - j. District insurance company
3. Is this supported by a needs assessment that determined the most likely crises to occur in the district?
4. Has a cost–benefit analysis of the potential training been done, considering financial costs in relation to the likelihood of a particular crisis?
5. What evidence is there that the procedures being considered have been evaluated for effectiveness?
6. What evidence is there that the procedures are aligned with the guidelines of the U.S. Department of Education (2013) and allied professional organizations (National Association of School Psychologists, National Association of School Resource Officers, Safe and Sound Schools)? Note: The U.S. Department of Education does not mandate school districts to conduct armed assailant/active shooter exercises.
7. Are the procedures in compliance with state laws and school board policies? Does the state law mandate highly sensorial drills or exercises, or is discretion allowed to conduct nonsensorial drills/exercises?

Designing and Selecting the Types of Threat- and Hazard-Specific Exercises and Drills

1. Does the training teach multiple types of exercises to respond to an armed assailant scenario (i.e., lockdown, evacuation, etc.)?
2. Does the training consider all available types of drills to teach participants the appropriate exercises?
3. Does it follow a hierarchy from simple low-cost discussion-based activities to operations-based activities?
 - a. Orientations
 - b. Workshops
 - c. Tabletops
 - d. Drills
 - e. Advanced simulation drills and exercises
4. Have the readiness and trauma histories of the staff members and students been assessed before determining what drills are most appropriate?
5. How will the types of drills to use with students be selected?
6. What accommodations will be made in the drills for students with physical, sensory, or other disabilities?
7. If simulations are to be used with carefully selected and willing staff and student actors, has the district consulted with their legal team and insurance provider to identify possible risks and liabilities (i.e., there have been lawsuits filed by school staff for physical injuries and emotional trauma as a result of forced participation in armed assailant/active shooter exercises)?
8. Has the district set monies aside to repair possible damages to building and district goods as a result of a simulation exercise?

Designing Student Instruction

1. Is there a lesson plan for providing developmentally appropriate training for students?
2. Are instructional experts and school-employed mental health professionals involved in designing and implementing developmentally appropriate curriculums for elementary, middle, and high school students?
3. Does the plan identify potential training goals, objectives, measurable outcomes, and obstacles?
4. What accommodations will be made in the lessons for students with special needs?
5. How will teachers receive critical background information, including:
 - a. Considerations for students with physical, sensory, or other disabilities
 - b. Developmental guidelines for instruction and drills (i.e., typical knowledge/understanding; typical response capabilities; age-appropriate explanations, procedures, activities and drills).
 - c. Recognizing common trauma reactions to help identify when a student, fellow staff member, or oneself needs to be removed from a drill.
 - d. Identifying someone that needs mental health support after the drill.

Physical and Mental Health Considerations

1. Does the training balance the need to empower school staff while minimizing potential harm (e.g., minimizing the triggering stressful or traumatic reactions)?
2. What are the considerations to mitigate potential physical harm during drills?
3. What financial and medical support is available to address potential physical damage during the drills?
4. What are the mental health supports to mitigate potential psychological harm, such as identifying prior traumatic experiences in participants?
5. What emotional supports will be in place during and after drills for students and staff?

Opt Out Options

1. How can students or staff members opt out of drills or simulations?
2. If staff or students opt out, how will they receive comparable instruction?

Communication

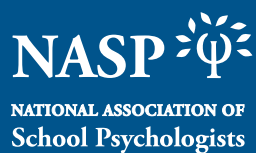
1. What is the parent and community education and communication plan prior to implementing the training?
2. Will parent consent be obtained prior to student participation in the training? Will it be active or passive?
3. What is the parent and community education and communication plan whenever drills are conducted?
4. How will parents and the community receive communication during an actual armed assailant crisis?

Evaluation

1. What is the feedback and evaluation process from participants and parents?
2. How will the knowledge and training be maintained and built upon?
3. How will new staff members and students be trained?
4. What is the evaluation process for determining the efficacy of the training and assessing ongoing and/or changing preparedness training needs?

Resources

- Brock, S. E., Nickerson, A. B., Reeves, M. A. L., Conolly, C. N., Jimerson, S. R., Pesce, R. C., & Lazzaro, B. R. (2016). *School crisis prevention and intervention: The PREPaRE model (2nd ed.)*. National Association of School Psychologists.
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