

WS1: Tabletop Exercise Scenarios

Directions: All of the following scenarios are based on actual events that have occurred in schools. Before beginning, each of the ICS functional roles should be assigned to a group member (i.e., incident commander, planning section chief, operations section chief, logistics section chief, finance/administration section chief, safety officer, liaison officer, and public information officer). The group will then read the “initial impact” information and will be asked to begin responding to the events. Your instructor will give you a prompt to begin reading each new section approximately every 5 minutes. Your team will need to adapt to the updates and continue to quickly respond as best you can with the new information given. Please provide thorough and detailed responses to the questions and try to anticipate and consider any potential problems. This entire activity should last approximately 45 minutes.

Note: You may copy the blank template at the end of this document to record your responses.

Tabletop Exercise 1: Chemical Spill

Initial impact: It is 15 minutes before lunch and your principal makes an announcement over the intercom system for the crisis team to immediately report to the main office. Upon entering the main office you learn that a custodian was moving a cabinet of cleaning chemicals through the hallway of the school. The cabinet tipped over and the chemicals spilled, releasing dangerous gases into the hallway area.

How will your crisis team respond? Which functional protocol should the building follow (for example, lockdown, shelter-in-place, evacuation)?

First 5 minutes: After calling 911, the incident commander learns that a teacher e-mailed the front office and reported that four students in her classroom felt dizzy and nauseous. Just a couple minutes later, a second e-mail from the same teacher reveals that one of the four sick students is experiencing mental confusion and is beginning to lose consciousness. The classroom teacher was able to verify that the affected students were in close proximity to the incident when it happened.

What should you do next?

Ten minutes: Even though the incident commander directed the operations section chief to have the entrances to the school parking lot blocked off, several groups of parents have parked down the street and are walking toward the main entrances of the school. One parent has driven past the barriers, over the curb, and across the grassy parkway area to gain access to the school.

How would you handle these events?

Fifteen minutes: The school resource officer radios the principal and informs him or her of two things. First, a news team has gained entry into the school building through a side entrance where the door was not closed all the way. The officer informs you that he has detained them and is directing them to leave the premises. Second, a student with autism is yelling and flailing in a nearby classroom and staff are calling for additional staff to help physically manage this student.

What will your crisis team do to solve these problems?

Late afternoon: It is now approximately 30 minutes before school lets out. The initial crisis is over, medical treatment was administered to those affected, and the fire department has declared the school building safe. Your district is looking to you and the rest of the crisis team for direction.

What will you do to disseminate accurate information and ensure the perception of safety for students, parents, and staff? What other possible implications from this event does your team need to consider?

Before we discuss how we could have improved this response, let's take a few minutes to discuss your initial reactions and feelings during this entire response.

What planning and preparation would need to be in place, prior to the incident, for this to be a successful crisis response?

What would need to be done for the long-term recovery and how this type of incident will affect future crisis planning for the building?

This actual event was handled well by school staff and firefighters. This was considered a hazardous materials response due to the multiple chemicals spilled. Firefighters were able to assist in the cleanup and verify the condition of the school so that it was safe for children to return. No children or staff were hurt in this successful crisis response.

Tabletop Exercise 2: Escaped Inmate

Initial impact: It is 9:30 a.m. on Thursday and you and the front office staff overhear unusual chatter on the bus radio. You turn the volume up to learn that there is an escaped prisoner on the loose and he was reported as last seen heading south in the direction of your town. While being transported, the convict overpowered two police officers, took one of their guns, and then stole a vehicle from an elderly woman at gunpoint.

How will your crisis team respond? Which functional protocol should the building follow (for example, lockdown, shelter-in-place, evacuation)?

First 5 minutes: The incident commander of your school (the principal) just received a phone call from your district's administrative office that you need to check your e-mail and read the directives. The directives state to follow district emergency procedures and immediately go on soft lockdown. As you walk to the intercom system you remember that you have two parents and a new student on a walking tour of the school. In addition, two cars just pulled up out front and people are getting out and walking toward the school.

What should you do next?

First 30 minutes: Your administrative office notifies the school that they received a police advisory that the fugitive has just carjacked a second person and robbed a bank within blocks of your school. Police search helicopters, SWAT teams, FBI agents, and multiple police departments are searching the area for the fugitive. One of the classrooms is on a field trip at the outdoor education center, which is 30 minutes south of your school.

How would you respond to these events?

Noon: Now that your school has been on a (hard) lockdown for over an hour, students are complaining of hunger and behavior problems are increasing in frequency. An update is received that the fugitive was spotted by a civilian several towns away, but the person was not apprehended. The school phone is continuously ringing with kindergarten parents wondering if they can pick up their children, who are only on a half-day schedule. If this community crisis continues until the end of the school day, you will have to figure out how the children are going to be transported home.

How will you adapt to these circumstances?

Next morning: Although the police officially called off the search late last evening, they plan to meet early this morning for roll call, receive additional briefings, and begin the search process again. Some parent voicemails that were picked up this morning were demanding that school be cancelled. Many parents are keeping their children at home.

What decision will your team make to ensure the safety of students and staff? How will this be communicated?

Before we discuss how we could have improved this response, let's take a few minutes to discuss your initial reactions and feelings during this response.

What planning and preparation would need to be in place, prior to this incident, for this to be an exceptional crisis response?

What would need to be done for the long-term recovery and how will this incident affect future crisis planning for the building?

This actual event caused many schools within a large geographic area to be on high alert. Schools near the crime scenes went on hard lockdown (kids and staff hiding in classrooms) while schools farther away went on soft lockdown (perimeter of school locked and kids still learning in classrooms). The fugitive was apprehended 48 hours later without having physically harmed any individuals.

Tabletop Exercise 3: House Fire

Initial impact: The school principal receives a call from a school safety resource officer at 4:30 a.m. The police are calling to inform staff that there was a fire this morning at a nearby house that involved some of your students. Initial reports indicate that there are fatalities, but it is not known, at this point, how many members of the family died in the fire. Department officials said they will call back with more information as it becomes available.

What decisions need to be made at this time?

5:00 a.m.: The incident commander gets an update call from the police department social worker, and they have confirmed that both parents and one male child died in the blaze. One of the girls was able to escape the fire and was rescued by a responding police officer and neighbor, who were both able to get a ladder up to the roof. Another child also survived the fire, and both children were taken to their local trauma center for treatment.

What decisions and actions need to take place?

7:00 a.m.: News reporters on television are reporting that firefighters found obvious signs of arson. A suicide note was also found, apparently written by the father of the family. This incident is now being referred to as a murder–suicide, and media representatives are trying to reach the school for comments. You have responded to many incidents at schools before, but you know this one will be different because of its severity. It is likely that many groups from the community will be involved.

How will your crisis team respond?

7:30 a.m.: Your staff and students will be arriving at school in about an hour. Staff have begun arriving at school and are distraught over the loss. There is a great deal of shock and sadness among the staff. One of your crisis team members finds out that the mother of the family worked at a school in the area.

How will you adapt to these circumstances?

That evening: Staff and families within the community are wanting to designate a memorial and also set up a fund to help support the surviving family members. A local newspaper reporter is requesting an interview with someone from the school to discuss the events.

How will the crisis team handle these requests? What needs to be communicated to the students, staff, and family members of this school community?

Before we discuss how we could have improved this response, let's take a few minutes to discuss your initial reactions and feelings during this response.

What planning and preparation would need to be in place, prior to this incident, for this to be an exceptional crisis response?

What would need to be done for the long-term recovery and how will this incident affect future crisis planning for the building?

This scenario is based on actual events. The tragedy affected many in the community as they struggled to understand the horrific events that unfolded. One of the “gifts of the tragedy” is that local schools realized that they needed more crisis training and some have followed through with taking additional classes and workshops.

Tabletop Exercise 4: Medical Emergency (School Nurses)

Initial impact: A staff member runs into the nurse's office and yells out that a student is down in the gymnasium. She doesn't know what happened because she was not there when it happened. She did overhear someone say that they were playing volleyball and the student may have gotten hit in the head and passed out.

What should you do?

First 3 minutes: When you get to the gym you immediately find an unconscious student face down on the volleyball court. You take the girl's vitals and you find that her pulse is irregular and she has very shallow breathing. The other students who witnessed this event are frantically crying and wondering if she is dead. You ask the gym teacher if she knows what happened and she says she doesn't know. “She just fell to the ground. She didn't get hit by the ball. She just collapsed.”

What should you do next to ensure the students' safety?

Five minutes: You've already sent two staff members to the P.E. office for an AED (automated external defibrillator) and an oxygen tank. They come back and ask you if you know how to use it, because they have never used one before. You tell them you have been trained as you begin to apply the pads. Another staff member shows up and tells you that they have notified the student's emergency contacts and that she is allergic to peanuts and penicillin.

What should you do next?

Afternoon: Later that afternoon, you get a call from the student's foster parents at the hospital thanking you for your help. You are delighted to find out that the student is doing well and tests at the hospital confirmed a cardiac abnormality. Although you are happy with this news, you have been informed by one of the counselors that the rumor going around school is that the student overdosed on drugs.

How will you adapt to these circumstances?

Next morning: The next morning you receive a sad phone call from the student's parent. Although doctors were predicting a positive outcome, their foster daughter died as a result of a complication that occurred during heart surgery. The parents request that this information not be shared yet because the family is in shock and they cannot handle additional attention at this point.

How will your crisis team respond to these events?

Before we discuss how we could have improved this response, let's take a few minutes to discuss your initial reactions and feelings during this response.

What planning and preparation would need to be in place, prior to the incident, for this to be an exceptional crisis response?

What would need to be done for the long-term recovery and how will this incident affect future crisis planning for the building?

This scenario was based on a similar actual emergency that occurred in a high school. A student collapsed on the volleyball court and the school staff responded with an AED. The student was taken to the nearest hospital, treated, and survived the medical emergency. This actual crisis event highlights the fact that school staff being prepared and trained ahead of time can prevent some school crises from further escalating or ever happening.

Tabletop Exercise 5: Gas Leak (Administrators)

Initial impact: A teacher smells natural gas in her classroom and reports this information to the main office staff. Although she can't be sure, the teacher thinks the gas is coming in from outside, because the smell is stronger when she opens the window. She has seen workers outside all morning but is not aware of what they are doing.

What should be done to ensure the safety of students and staff? Which functional protocol should the building follow (for example, lockdown, shelter-in-place, evacuation)?

First 15 minutes: After the decision is made to evacuate the children from school, the fire department arrives and informs you that they do not know how long your students may have to wait outside. You ask a staff member to call your predesignated relocation site, the nearby park district building, to confirm that you can use their building to house the children. The person who took the call does not know about the relocation plan and says they will have to look into it and call you back. The person never calls back.

What should you do next?

First half hour: You call your second predesignated relocation site, the local high school, and decide that the high school would be able to accommodate the children. However, the high school is too far for the children to walk and they would have to cross very busy streets to get there. While the children are waiting outside for instructions on what to do next, the school nurse approaches you with the information that a kindergartner was stung by a bee and has the initial symptoms of anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction).

How will your crisis team respond?

Forty-five minutes: The incident commander from the fire department contacts you to inform you that gas meter tests confirm that there are elevated levels of natural gas in and around the school. They spoke with the electric company that was digging nearby and found out that they hit a gas line. Although the gas company was sending out repair crews, no one informed the school of the situation. Since you had a prior agreement with the bus company to provide immediate emergency bus evacuation, they arrive promptly. Local police officers offer to escort the buses to the relocation site. The fire department announced that the school is closed for at least the rest of the day.

What decisions will your crisis team have to make to deal with this scenario?

One hour: Parents begin arriving at school to pick up their children. Some of the students are on buses and some are still waiting to be loaded. Although some parents are calm and offer to help supervise the kids, another group of parents is upset that they can't find their child since they want to take them home immediately. One parent starts challenging staff authority in front of school staff and students. She then boards a bus to start looking for her son. You quickly begin to realize that once you get the students to safety, your next major challenge will be working with parents and transporting the children home from the relocation site.

What will be done to effectively handle the current situation? How will information be communicated and updates provided to parents and the community?

Before we discuss how we could have improved this response, let's take a few minutes to discuss your initial reactions and feelings during this response.

What planning and preparation would need to be in place, prior to the incident, for this to be an exceptional crisis response?

What would need to be done for the long-term recovery and how will this incident affect future crisis planning?

This response was based on actual events. Students were evacuated and transported to a local school gym for the rest of the day. All students went home safely and no staff or students had significant levels of exposure to the gas.

Tabletop Exercise 6: Suicidal Student (Technology Considerations)

Initial impact: Two students walk into the principal's office and share that they think one of their friends is suicidal. The student of concern posted "FML" on a social networking website, which is computer slang for "F___ my life." Since this expression could be an indication of suicidal ideation, the principal requested that school mental health staff locate the student and conduct an initial safety assessment. A call to the student's mother at work revealed that the student stayed home sick from school that day.

What should be done to ensure the safety of this student?

First 30 minutes: A call to the student's home went unanswered, and staff are beginning to feel uneasy. A decision is made by the school resource officer to drive out to the student's residence to do a well-being check. Upon arrival, the SRO discovers that the male student has died by a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

What should you do next?

Two hours later: A teenage neighbor saw the county medical examiner's vehicle pull up to the house, and this information quickly spread around the school and community via student texting. Rumors are running rampant as there are few known facts, and many people are drawing their own conclusions as to what actually happened.

How will your crisis team respond?

The next day: The school crisis team decided the night before to allow students the opportunity to gather in the library the next morning to support each other and receive counseling, if needed. The next morning the staff found, to their surprise, that only a couple students came down to the library. The students shared that no one wanted to come to the library because electronic devices were not allowed. Staff discovered that students were communicating with each other, but they were doing so primarily through texting on cell phones and posting online messages on social networking sites. The staff realized that students were not attending the traditional "crisis room" because they spontaneously created a "virtual crisis room" the night before.

How will your team adapt to these circumstances?

Mid-day: The crisis team reconvenes for a lunch meeting briefing to make sure everyone has the same information and to formulate plans for the afternoon and coming days. At the meeting, it is discovered that another male student was making similar depressive statements online. Your school does not have established policies regarding online student communications. Some staff want to get online and communicate with students, but the school does not have a social networking account. The administration is expressing concern that online communication is outside the realm of the educational setting.

What decisions will your crisis team have to make in order to effectively deal with this dynamic situation?

How will information be communicated and updates provided to parents and the community?

Before we discuss how we could have improved this response, let's take a few minutes to discuss your initial reactions and feelings during this response.

What planning and preparation would need to be in place, prior to the incident, for this to be an exceptional crisis response?

What would need to be done for the long-term recovery and how will this incident affect future crisis planning for the building? Are there any proactive measures that could be taken in the future?

This scenario was created by combining a couple of actual events. In one case, a student died by suicide and the school staff found that students had essentially been grieving amongst themselves online. This presented a new and challenging situation, because students had typically come to school to talk with staff and other students. A second scenario involved a student who clearly posted statements online that were assessed to be an indication of suicidal ideation. The principal of the school went online to print out the comments that were posted and promptly called the parent of the student with the school psychologist. Both school staff and parents were able to call the student (at home sick that day) and verify that the student was safe. The mother of the student made arrangements for a family member to go over to the house to be with the student.

Tabletop Exercise Scenarios: Response Template

Initial impact response: _____

Next response: _____

Next response: _____

Next response: _____

Next response: _____

Final considerations and concluding thoughts: _____

