

Public Schools Underprepared for Disasters

Project Title: Emergency and Disaster Preparedness in California's Public Schools

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Overview:

This brief reports on a study assessing prior experiences with and current preparedness for emergencies and disasters in a cross-sectional sample of public schools in the State of California. A mail survey collected information from a sample of 98 school district administrators and 157 school site administrators. **The results showed that school populations are commonly exposed to potentially disastrous hazards and that there are major weaknesses in their preparedness for future events.**

Interim Findings:

1) *The harmful or disruptive effects of school emergencies are widespread*

Ninety-six percent of school districts and 78% of school sites reported experiencing some kind of disruption, damage, loss or negative health outcome to their students and staff within the last three years because of a school emergency or disaster.

2) *Hazard exposure is common*

Over 75% of school districts and over 60% of school sites reported experiencing a power failure, animals/insects on campus, angry parents, neighborhood crime, violence involving students/staff, weapons on campus, gang activity, and intruders on campus within the last three years. Exposures to other types of hazards (e.g., fires, wind/storm, bomb threats) were also reported.

3) *Schools have been slow to adopt a standardized emergency management protocol*

Despite the fact that California school districts and schools have been mandated to use the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) for their planning, training and response since 1993, only 65% of school districts and 56% of schools reported that their disaster plan followed the guidelines of the SEMS protocol. Only 41% of school districts and 21% of schools said that they practice the SEMS protocol during their emergency drills, which underscores the fact that written plans/protocols are often not implemented.

4) *Schools have limited interagency relations*

Interagency collaboration with local government agencies and other organizations and groups (e.g., Red Cross) is essential in preparing for a multi-agency emergency response operation. While almost all school districts and schools reported interacting with their local fire and law enforcement officials, less than half of the districts and schools reported working with other

agencies, such as the county office of emergency management, city offices or managers, health care agencies, the public health department or private businesses on issues related to emergency preparedness and response. Furthermore, less than 25% of all school districts reported participating in city- or county-wide emergency drills during the prior school year

Recommendations:

In addressing the above shortcomings, leadership and management are key:

- a) Local emergency management offices should appoint an individual or committee to be in charge of managing school preparedness. This includes maintaining communication with the schools in their jurisdiction, facilitating preparedness in those schools, and integrating them into local emergency planning and preparedness; alternatively,
- b) School principals and district superintendents should designate someone in their school or district who can provide leadership, serve as a liaison to local agencies, and keep school safety and preparedness a priority at their school/district.

Future Directions:

Findings from this study need to be disseminated widely among policymakers, emergency management professionals, educators, and school administrators to heighten awareness about this issue and to direct more resources to improving and strengthening school preparedness for emergencies and catastrophic events. There is also a need to conduct more research to examine these issues in private schools and in other parts of the nation.

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