

## What are realistic and effective emergency drills and procedures for international schools?

During my time as a security contractor, specifically in Angola, Iraq and Afghanistan, I witnessed and took part in seven different real-life emergency procedure events. These were mostly as a result of stand-off attacks on the compounds or bases where I happened to be at the time. After the first two incidents I realized this wasn't just bad luck and I started to pay extra attention to the emergency briefings when arriving at any new compound or base. I knew bad things could happen, they might happen again, and coming out intact depended on being well prepared.

Over the years in those countries and then others, I developed a sense for how a planned emergency drill or procedure would hold up during an actual emergency event. I came away from these experiences with a critical awareness around the practical requirements for emergency procedure planning. I can summarize all of this in two simple points for consideration:

1. **Realistic** refers to the assessed hazards and threats, the security profile and vulnerability of the organization, and to the resources available for security measures.
2. **Effective** means readily accessible and practiced procedures that are clear, logical and easy as possible to follow in times of urgency.

Some years later I found myself as the head of security for an international school in Africa. The first thing I realized was how vulnerable an international school is. Applying realistic and effective emergency procedures was a whole new ball game. Also, you cannot just hand a work-loaded administrator an emergency manual and say that's what we do in an emergency. They, and the whole school, need to see how it works in practice.

International schools are busy places. Emergency procedure planning is vital, but whole-school emergency drills are disruptive. Practice drills need to be scheduled with prior approval from each division head for the least disruptive available times in a school day. In addition, each drill should ideally be carried out at different levels of complexity and convenience. This means running announced drills during class times when students are under direct supervision and easily controlled, to unannounced scenario-based drills during break times when students are scattered. The school also needs to become familiar with each unique alarm tone and PA announcement signaling a specific drill, including the expected procedure to follow. To achieve this, you would need at least three practices per drill-type during the school year. So, when you get the opportunity to drill, make the most of it!

This then brings to mind some of the very well-intended recommended "best practice" procedures out there for international schools. They include up to six different types of emergency drills: lock-down, clear the hallways, duck and cover, shelter in place, evacuation and reverse evacuation. Anyone who has conducted a school drill would probably be thinking about the practicalities of six separate drill procedures.

Firstly, six different alarm tones are likely to cause some confusion, especially in schools without a PA system. Some systems do not reach every corner of the campus, like swimming pools, noisy gym halls and sports fields – hence the need for an easily identifiable alarm tone, siren or signal. If we then apply the logic of three-practices-per-drill, and with the available school months in the year, you would need an emergency drill every second week. Unfortunately, this runs the real risk of inducing alarm and drill fatigue in your school. Practice drills will eventually become nothing more than annoying disruptions for staff and students, and the school will push back.

One of the primary objectives when dealing with any emergency is gaining control of the school. This means getting people out of harm's way to a safe place as quickly as possible. That then allows for your emergency management team to collect themselves, communicate and decide the next course of action. It also allows for your security team to launch their sweep and search function and/or incident intervention procedures. To achieve these objectives the following three procedures were found to be useful as all-school drills:

A **lock-down** procedure is an extremely effective way of getting control of a school, and is not just reserved for an active shooter or threat of violence. It also serves the purposes of clearing the hallways, sheltering in place and ducking for cover in one well adapted drill.

A **building-evacuation** procedure is used to get everyone clear of the buildings and is useful for a fire, bomb threat, earth tremor, or anything where your community needs to be assembled out in the open. Once again, you would have control of the school and planning for next steps.

A **safe-haven** procedure may well be those next steps leading on from a lock-down or building evacuation, and a far more logical answer to the suggested reverse-evacuation. Many schools have safe havens and their importance cannot be emphasized enough. As the name suggests this is a place where students and staff can shelter with water and dry rations for longer periods of time. Control and communications are made simpler and students can be reassured and informed of what to expect next. Gym halls and auditoriums often double as safe havens, depending on the facilities available. The security team are tasked with safe haven protection and is part of their emergency procedure protocol. Typical examples for the use of a safe haven could include extreme weather, when a school's access roads are blocked by civil unrest or protest action, or while awaiting parent or bus pick-up after a fire or hazmat incident.

With only three procedures and alarm tones for the school to get used to, applying the three-practice-per-drill logic would require roughly one drill per month. This seems a little more realistic and effective.

That all sounds simple enough, however there is an emergency planning and management structure that needs to be in place in order to produce "realistic and effective." For a visual of what that framework might look like, please refer to the page three diagram as an example..

Stay safe!  
Mike Mills

