

Practical Safety & Security

Improving Emergency Response

Lockdown & Shelter-In-Place

INTRODUCTION

Lockdown drills have become a normal part of school emergency response planning and in some states are mandatory just as fire drills have been for years. Developing an effective lockdown protocol may seem simple on the surface but there are a number of factors to consider to gain the most benefit from this important safeguard. Here are some suggestions for improving your lockdown plan:

All Conditions Response:

Most schools run their lockdown drills during normal class times. However, it's just as likely that a lockdown will be needed at other times when the students are not in a well controlled an environment. For example, lockdown protocols should be in place for:

- The lunch period when large groups are going to and from the cafeteria;
- During class change;
- During morning arrival and afternoon dismissal when students are outside the building;
- While students are on a bus arriving at school;
- While students are outside for recess or athletic classes;
- For after hours and special events such as dances, assemblies, theater productions, etc.

Each of these conditions require a different approach to lockdown. One way to address this is to have separate announcement scripts for each situation and to communicate the protocols to all staff. Also be sure that drills are conducted to include at least some of these special response situations.

Plain Talk Announcements:

Lockdown announcements should be made over the public address system using plain English and scripts designed for each situation. The Federal Emergency Management Agency recommends against using codes or complex signals which may only confuse people. The announcement should clearly state that a lockdown is being implemented and should instruct staff and students what to do. Make sure to remind everyone to ignore fire alarms unless instructed to leave the building by the police, fire department or school administration. Pulling a false fire alarm has been used in some cases to lure students into the open for attacks as was the case at the Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas in 1998.

Be sure that your lockdown announcement can be heard everywhere on the campus including outdoor activity areas. In some cases it may be appropriate to precede the announcement with a special alert tone to get everyone's attention.

Develop an "All Clear" protocol using standard wording so that everyone can recognize the official announcement when the emergency situation has been resolved.

Multi-Level Lockdown:

Each school should have at least two levels of lockdown sometimes called "Hard Lockdown" and "Soft Lockdown". A Hard Lockdown is typically defined as students locked in their classrooms seated along a wall out of sight of windows and doors. Lights are usually turned off and no teaching is done until the threat passes. This is the usual response for an intruder inside the building or other serious, immediate threats. However, there may be times when a less restrictive approach is appropriate.

A Soft Lockdown is employed when there is a threat outside the school but no immediate threat to the students inside the school. During a Soft Lockdown the building perimeter is secured and staff stationed at the doors to be sure nobody goes in or out of the building. Teachers lock classroom doors, but teaching goes on as usual. Depending on the situation, class changes may also take place. A Soft Lockdown might be appropriate if the police are looking for a felon in the area, during a toxic spill event near the school, or other threat where students are safer and better managed inside.

External Communications:

While most schools prohibit the use of cell phones during class, many permit students to carry them as long as they are not turned on. However, during a lockdown some students may ignore the rule and call friends or parents resulting in added confusion or misinformation. Teachers must keep a close eye out for students using cell phones or texting during a lockdown and all other emergencies. It may be a good practice to have teachers collect phones as a part of the lockdown protocol.

As with all emergencies, the school must carefully release information through a trained media representative or public information officer.

Internal Communications:

Each classroom should have a means to communicate with the main office. Where this is not possible, teachers should be able to use their cell phones and the office should maintain a list of teachers' cell phone numbers.

It's important to alert the emergency response teams to special problems. One way is to use colored cards to indicate the room status. These may be slipped under the door into the hallway or placed in an exterior window:

- **Green Card:** Everyone is accounted for and safe. No immediate assistance is needed
- **Yellow Card:** Everyone is accounted for. Some minor injuries or concerns that require assistance but there are no immediate needs.
- **Red Card:** EMERGENCY! Someone is unaccounted for or has serious injuries. We need help now!

Shelter in Place:

At times when there is an external threat to the school it may be necessary to seal the building against infiltration by chemical or biological agents. This process is typically referred to as "Shelter in Place". To execute a Shelter in Place response a school should implement a hard or soft lockdown (depending on the nature of the threat) and take special action to prevent outside contaminated air from entering the building. Some areas to address include:

- Turning off HVAC systems to prevent spread of chemical or biological agents;
- Cover or secure outside fresh air intakes;
- Seal exterior doors and windows with plastic and tape (be sure to stockpile this material in strategic areas around the school);
- Turn off building water feeds.

If possible the school should stockpile food and water for an extended shelter in place period. Elementary teachers should have a supply of water and snacks in their classroom along with some games to keep younger children occupied.

Outside Agency Participation:

Each Emergency Response Team (ERT) has their own preference as to rules for turning lights off, covering windows, and other special actions. Schools should discuss this with the ERT commander and include these special procedures in their lockdown protocols.

It's also critical that emergency responders practice in the school buildings. Schools should make the buildings available for practice during non-school hours with administration participation as needed. Unannounced stress drills, especially those involving students, are not recommended.

Locks for Lockdown:

It might seem obvious, but we often find schools with classroom doors that are not set up for quick lockdown. Each classroom door should have a means to quickly lock the door from the inside. In some schools, doors only lock with a key from the hallway side. In this situation, the teacher is exposed to the threat and may waste valuable time looking for a key. Substitute teachers may not even have a key to the door. We even find some older schools with no locks on classroom doors at all. Every school should inspect classroom doors to ensure that they can be safely and quickly secured.

As an added safety measure we recommend that classroom doors be closed and locked during classes as a standard practice to deter intruders and limit access.

CONCLUSION

These suggestions reflect just a few issues schools need to consider when managing their safer schools controls. Our Loss Prevention specialists can help schools identify classroom safety and security risks and provide a solid planning base for future improvements. We can also assist with in-service meetings and training topics. Our Loss Prevention services are provided to our policyholders at no charge*. If you would like assistance with school safety please contact your agent or Loss Prevention specialist.

* Service product availability may be limited by the coverage in force and available staff resources.

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