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place questions. Thus, these results mirror those of staff and suggest that students may need additional training in all areas of emergency preparedness and response. Whereas—on average—student answers to about one-third of all comprehension questions were consistent with their school's EOP, they showed stronger comprehension of multiple-choice questions measuring basic knowledge of EOP protocols and concepts. On average, student answers to almost half of those questions were consistent with the material from their school's EOP (see standardized subgrade in Exhibit 5-7).

Exhibit 5-8. Descriptive Statistics for Average Staff and Student Comprehension Grades (N = 585 staff, 1,326 students)

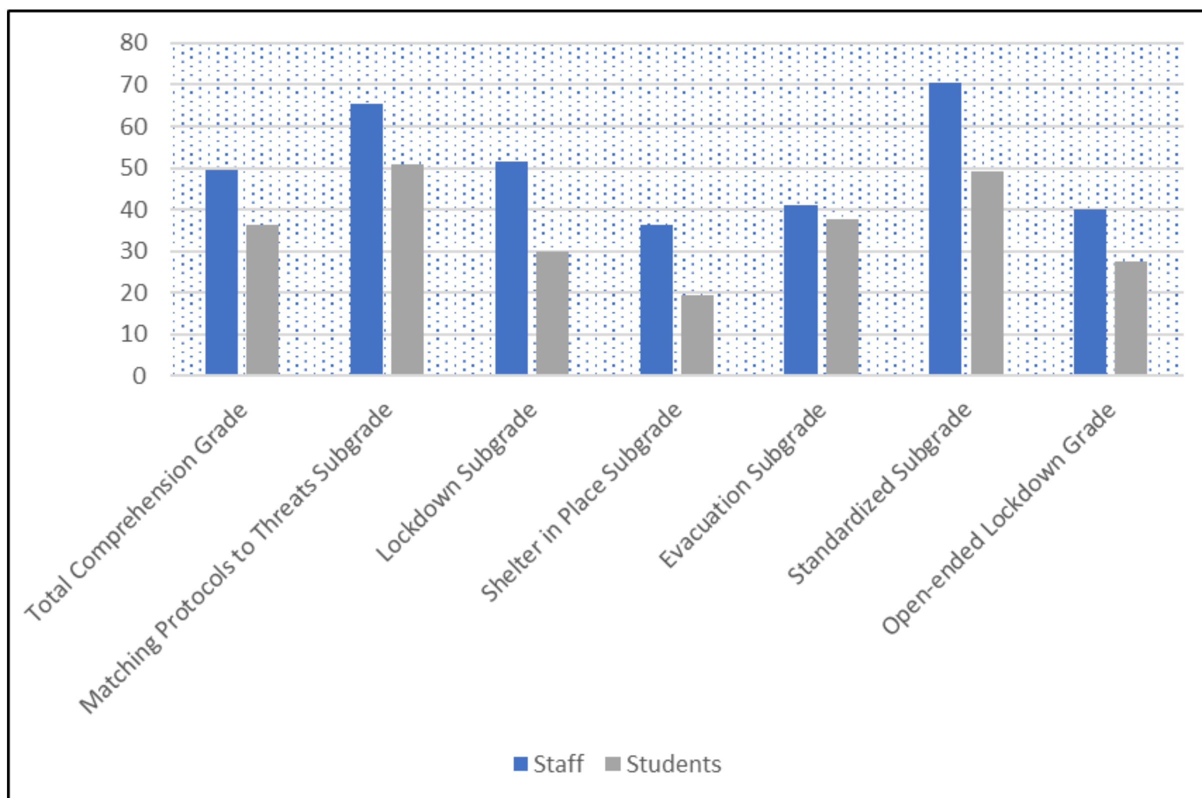

Exhibit 5-9 presents the results of a random-intercept linear regression model predicting student total and standardized comprehension grades by several student- and school-level characteristics. Student-level predictors included:

- an indicator for students that primarily speak English at home (versus students who do not, a proxy for English as a second language or ESL students);
- a variable with five categories for self-reported academic grades that school year (1=*mostly Fs*, 2=*Mostly Ds*, 3=*Mostly Cs*, 4=*Mostly Bs*, 5=*Mostly As*);
- an indicator for students who identify as White (versus students who identify as a race other than White); an indicator for male students (versus female students); and

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- a variable with three categories for sense of safety and membership at school (0=low sense of safety and membership at school; 1=medium sense of safety and membership at school; and 2=strong sense of safety and school membership at school).

Exhibit 5-9. Random-Intercept Linear Regression Model Predicting Student Comprehension Grades (N = 1,326)

	Model 1: Predicting Total Comprehension Grades		Model 2: Predicting Standardized Subgrades	
	Coefficient (SE)	95% Confidence Interval	Coefficient (SE)	95% Confidence Interval
Respondent (Level 1) Characteristics				
Staff position				
Primarily speak English at home (versus do not)	3.38** (1.22)	[0.99, 5.78]	5.61** (2.04)	[1.62, 9.60]
Academic grades (5 categories)	2.72*** (0.38)	[1.98, 3.47]	2.50*** (0.64)	[1.25, 3.75]
White students (versus non-White students)	3.46*** (0.84)	[1.80, 5.12]	3.18* (1.42)	[0.39, 5.97]
Male students (versus Female Students)	-1.26* (0.62)	[-2.48, -0.05]	1.52 (1.03)	[-0.51, 3.55]
Sense of safety and school membership (3 categories)	1.51*** (0.40)	[0.73, 2.29]	1.75** (0.66)	[0.45, 3.06]
School (Level 2) Characteristics				
Student enrollment number (3 categories)	-1.41 (2.14)	[-5.61, 2.79]	-7.77*** (1.66)	[-11.03, -4.51]
Rural schools (versus town & suburban schools)	-7.10* (2.98)	[-12.93, 1.27]	-5.84 (10.21)	[-25.85, 14.17]
High school (versus middle schools)	0.35 (2.77)	[-5.08, 5.79]	11.82*** (1.66)	[8.56, 15.09]
Average staff EOP comprehension grade	0.84*** (0.19)	[0.46, 1.22]	1.36* (0.62)	[0.15, 2.58]

School-level predictors included: student enrollment number (0=*120 to 551 students*; 1=*558 to 1,000 students*; 2=*1,071 to 1,679 students*); urbanicity (i.e., an indicator for rural schools compared to suburban and town schools); school type (i.e., an indicator for high schools versus middle schools); and a continuous variable for each school's average staff EOP comprehension grade.

Model 1 indicates interesting variation in comprehension grades based on student background characteristics. Primarily English-speaking students scored an average of 3.4 percentage points higher than students who speak another language at home. Higher academic grades were also statistically associated with higher levels of comprehension (beta=2.72***, SE=0.38). For instance, students who reported earning mostly As and Bs that school year scored an average of 5 percentage points higher than students who earn mostly Cs, Ds, or Fs. White students scored an average of 4 percentage points higher than non-White students. Male

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students scored an average of 1.3 percentage points lower than female students. Additionally, for each one-level increase in sense of safety and school membership, comprehension grades increased by 1.5 percentage points (i.e., students with a strong sense of safety and school membership would be predicted to earn an average of 3 percentage points higher than students with a low sense of safety and school membership).

Model 1 also indicates that students from rural schools scored an average of 7.1 percentage points lower than students from town and suburban schools, and also indicated a positive relationship between average staff comprehension grades and student comprehension grades. Specifically, a 1 percentage point increase in staff comprehension grades was associated with a 0.84 percentage point increase in student comprehension grades. We also explored supplementary models that included additional school-level predictors, such as number of days since each school had conducted various types of emergency drills at the time of the student survey and a three-category variable for EOP word count (conceiving of it as a proxy for the comprehensiveness of the school's emergency management system, or in other words, the amount of emergency management information there is for students and staff to know: 1=5,000 to 29,000 words; 2=30,000 to 32,000 words; 3=57,000 to 99,000 words). These models did not have a noteworthy impact on the aforementioned effects, but did show a statistically significant effect of EOP word count (beta=-5.82***, SE=1.30). Specifically, while controlling for enrollment size, urbanicity, and school type, this model indicated that for each level increase in EOP size, student comprehension grades can be predicted to decrease by nearly 6 percentage points.

Results from Model 2, which predicts student comprehension based on seven multiple-choice questions measuring basic knowledge of emergency protocols and concepts, show highly similar respondent-level effects to Model 1. The most notable respondent-level difference between the models is that there was no statistical difference in grades between male and female students. Thus, although female students exhibited higher levels of total comprehension than males, female and male students exhibited similar levels of basic EOP knowledge. Model 2 also shows different school-level effects. Specifically, students from larger schools (based on the number of enrolled students) scored lower on basic knowledge questions than students from smaller schools, and students from high schools scored higher than students from middle schools (the finding that older students scored higher than younger students was also identified when student grade was entered as a continuous respondent-level variable rather than controlling for school type at level 2: beta=2.20***, SE=0.44). Additionally, unlike with total comprehension, scores were not statistically different between students from rural or town and suburban schools. Supplementary models showed no statistically significant effects of the number of days elapsed since the last evacuation, shelter in place, or lockdown drill, but did show that students from schools with relatively lengthy EOPs scored lower on average than students from schools with relatively small EOPs (beta=10.62**, SE=3.88). Results were also highly similar when subgrades for evacuation and lockdown questions were regressed on the same set of student- and school-level characteristics. They were also highly similar for regression models predicting lockdown protocols comprehension from the open-ended question posed to all students.

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Summary of Findings: Student EOP Comprehension

- Students exhibited much lower levels of EOP comprehension than staff, answering about half of basic knowledge questions consistently with their school's EOP, and about one-third of questions consistently when questions addressed both basic and advanced knowledge.
- Like staff, students exhibited the strongest comprehension for questions that asked them to identify which emergency protocols correspond to specific threats or circumstances and lower levels of comprehension of policies and procedures for lockdown, evacuation, and shelter in place.
- Average student comprehension levels varied significantly across the schools.
- Numerous student demographic and other background characteristics were associated with higher comprehension levels. For example, students who feel a great sense of safety and membership at school exhibited relatively higher levels of EOP comprehension. This finding may reflect that students who feel safer and more connected to school are more trusting of school authority figures and in turn are more engaged with and responsive to efforts to educate them on emergency procedures. Alternatively, it may also suggest that being more knowledgeable of the school's procedures actually leads students to feel safer and more connected to the school. Earning high academic grades, being older, and primarily speaking English were each associated with higher EOP comprehension levels.

Reporting Back Sessions and Additional Themes Uncovered from Staff and Student Comprehension Surveys

After the project team reviewed all EOPs and analyzed comprehension surveys for each school, a virtual "reporting back" session was conducted with top administrators and other staff responsible for emergency planning and management from each school. The purpose of these meetings was to discuss and solicit feedback on aggregate and school-specific results of the EOP assessments and comprehension surveys. In preparation for these sessions, the project team developed reports for each school that overviewed the findings from the study's first two phases. The process used to develop these reports and synthesize feedback provided to the schools helped to uncover important additional themes related to EOP comprehension:

- Most staff members in most schools exhibited strong comprehension when it came to understanding the general logic or purpose of evacuation and lockdown; identifying their school's primary evacuation location; the signals for when a lockdown or evacuation is initiated and when it has concluded (e.g., physical release by law enforcement following lockdown); which emergency protocols require teachers or other staff to take student attendance; the importance of locking doors or ensuring doors are locked and hiding out of plain sight during a lockdown (although they exhibited weaker comprehension of secondary actions, including turning off lights and covering windows); ignoring alarms during lockdowns; and general policies around cellphone use during emergencies.

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- In almost all schools, in answers to open-ended questions, a subset of staff and students described actions that should be taken for lockdown, evacuation, or shelter in place that were not listed in their school's EOP (e.g., turning off all lights and light-emitting technology, using placards to signify safety statuses, getting into prone position, barricading the door, collecting all cellphones). Sometimes these extra actions were logical and might have been learned through in-person trainings but they had not been appropriately documented in the school's EOP. Other times, these actions contradicted the EOP (e.g., staff described the importance of turning off lights during a lockdown when the EOP explicitly prescribed not turning off lights; using cellphones to text critical information to the front office despite the EOP directing staff to immediately turn off their cellphones during a lockdown). On a few occasions, staff described actions that were both not listed in their school's EOP and could potentially put students in harm's way (e.g., gather students in the hallway during a lockdown, use green placards in classroom windows to signal that everyone in the room is accounted for and safe during a lockdown—which can inadvertently notify armed intruders that the room is occupied).
- In all but two schools, a subset of staff provided generic answers when asked to describe actions that should be taken during a lockdown or evacuation (e.g., "keep everyone safe," "follow the appropriate school policy," "care for the students") or reported "I don't know." In a few cases, staff said they would reference a classroom flipchart to identify the best course of action to take for a specific type of threat (during the emergency).
- Responses to close-ended questions in many schools indicated a lack of understanding about actions to take if a lockdown is called when students or staff are not in a classroom (e.g., when students are gathered in a common area or during lunch).
- A subset of staff and students were confused about the differences between evacuation and lockdown, or between lockdown and shelter in place and the basic actions that should be taken for each of these events. For example, in one school, 11 staff members (primarily newer staff not employed as teachers or head administrators) described common lockdown protocols when asked to describe evacuation protocols. In at least three schools, staff responses indicated that they believed shelter in place and lockdown were the same procedure and that the terms could be used synonymously. For example, when asked to describe the actions appropriate for lockdown, a handful of staff wrote the same responses that they had provided for the same question for the shelter-in-place procedure or they simply wrote "same as shelter in place." Several staff believed that hiding was an important action that should be taken for a shelter-in-place procedure.
- In a few schools, there was confusion about terminology, or a wide range of terminology was used to describe the same procedure or concept. For example, staff in one school collectively used four different terms to refer to the school's onsite evacuation location (staging area, evacuation site, rally point, rally location). In another school, in response to a question about shelter in place, a few staff indicated

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they were not familiar with the term "shelter in place" but were familiar with protocols for severe weather. The principal informed us that the use of "shelter in place" in the EOP was a formality and was written that way in the plan because it is consistent with guidance from various agencies in their state (e.g., the Department of Education) even though it was not used during drills or other in-person trainings. In another school that partitioned lockdown protocols into three levels in their EOP (level 1, level 2, level 3 lockdowns), some staff indicated that their school does not use level 1, 2, or 3 terminologies but instead use "lockdown intruder alert." Likewise, despite the EOP's use of "code red" and other coded language to signify various threats and the need for specific emergency responses, a considerable proportion of staff and students exhibited weak comprehension when asked about these codes in close-ended questions. During the reporting back session with this school, the safety officer informed us that despite what it says in the EOP, codes are never used in emergency communications or trainings at the school.

- Staff and students in most schools exhibited confusion about the shelter-in-place procedure, including the types of threats and hazards it should be used for. Most prominently, our reviews uncovered confusion about the use of the shelter-in-place procedure for chemical spills or incidents involving biological or chemical weapons outside of the school, including the protocols that should be followed for these types of events (e.g., shelter in place rather than evacuation).
- In schools that promoted an "options-based" approach for responding to an armed intruder, a subset of staff only mentioned the necessity of evacuating rather than discussing any actions related to lockdown while others simply reported "run, hide, fight" or "utilize ALICE training." In a handful of cases, students indicated that they would arm themselves in order to fight the intruder or retrieve a firearm from their home or car and return to the school.

Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned findings from staff and student EOP comprehension assessments, our recommendations for school and district officials are as follows:

- Our analysis showed substantial variation in student and staff EOP comprehension levels across schools. In many cases, when staff comprehension levels were high relative to other schools, student comprehension levels were also relatively high (e.g., Schools 6, 7, and 1) whereas the opposite was also true (i.e., when staff comprehension levels were relatively low, so were student comprehension levels, such as for Schools 5, 6, and 3). The correspondence between student and staff comprehension levels might suggest that systems and mechanisms that schools use to promote EOP comprehension (e.g., trainings, exercises, EOP reviews) can have a tangible impact on students and staff and create a culture in which the school community feels invested in and accountable for fostering a robust emergency management system. The variability across schools identified in this study makes it critical that head administrators and safety teams not assume that their students and staff are familiar with and understand the school's emergency procedures and

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concepts. Given that our data do not show a statistical relationship between perceptions of preparedness and EOP comprehension, it is also important that they not assume that confidence is a proxy for knowledge. Rather, they should **make it a priority to regularly assess what the school community knows about the school's emergency procedures and identify gaps in knowledge to inform future training efforts or EOP modifications**. This might include developing and administering EOP comprehension surveys once or twice per school year, analyzing results, and drawing conclusions about where educational and training resources should be devoted to enhance comprehension. Conducting regular comprehension assessments with staff and students will help to identify areas in which there are conflicting notions about roles, responsibilities, and appropriate responses to different emergency situations. Regularly "checking the pulse" on EOP comprehension will also help to create a culture of accountability and send the message that emergency preparedness is everyone's responsibility. Additionally, schools should carefully document strengths and weaknesses demonstrated by the school community during drills and identify gaps in knowledge or understanding of protocols during tabletop exercises regularly conducted with representative groups of staff members.

- Reading the EOP and serving on at least one emergency planning or crisis response team were consistently associated with higher EOP comprehension among staff. These findings further support efforts by top administrators and emergency planning teams to **ensure all staff have access to the EOP and that they understand the importance of regularly reviewing it, and that mechanisms are put in place to ensure staff review the EOP regularly throughout the school year**. This might include creating designated times during which all staff review the plan, holding staff meetings in which EOP training is provided, and administering regular comprehension assessment surveys to assess staff knowledge of critical protocols and concepts. Likewise, **involving more staff members (e.g., on a rotating schedule) on emergency planning and crisis response teams may help to give more staff exposure to the EOP itself, as well as the details within the plan**. At the same time, the small effect sizes of reading the EOP and serving on a team suggest that these efforts alone are not enough to promote strong comprehension. Rather, schools must also invest in effective in-person trainings that complement EOP materials and allow staff to practice what they have reviewed.
- Schools should make special efforts to **provide more focused training to teaching assistants, paraeducators, and food service staff**. These staff members showed consistent deficiencies in comprehension levels across multiple domains. This may include holding special training sessions for these staff members in which basic EOP protocols are discussed along with responsibilities that are more specific to their position (e.g., leading a lockdown during lunch). Dedicating special times and resources for training these staff members may help signify that their involvement and knowledge of core emergency procedures and concepts are critical to the success of the overall emergency management system.

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- Schools may consider enhancing the system used to train and educate students on the school's emergency procedures and concepts. **Because students typically do not have access to the EOP, top administrators should consider creative ways to disseminate critical information to students outside regular lockdown, evacuation, and shelter-in-place drills**. For example, this may include creating mini EOPs tailored to include "need-to-know" information for students, utilizing basic learning principles to promote comprehension of core materials (e.g., quick-reference charts, diagrams). These efforts might also include making emergency preparedness a more perennial part of their curriculum by reserving special times to involve students in discussions about safety and emergency response (e.g., during homeroom) and discuss various emergency scenarios, or simply debriefing with students after drills to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the class's response.
- Head administrators, emergency planning staff, teachers, and other staff responsible for educating and training students on emergency procedures should recognize that not all students are equally likely to understand various emergency procedures and concepts, but that efforts should be made to ensure all students are prepared to respond to emergency situations. Our analysis found differences in comprehension across gender, perceptions of safety and school membership, grade levels, academic grades, race, and primary language spoken. Thus, trainers must **recognize that students learn at different paces and that emergency operations materials may need to be adapted to be accessible to all types of students**.
- **Ensure that the information students and staff are taught during in-person trainings is consistent with what is written in the EOP**. This includes actions that must be followed for specific protocols, as well as the terminology that is used across these platforms. Ensuring this consistency will safeguard against confusion when emergency situations arise and will help to promote a coordinated school-level response.

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6. Goal 4

Use the perspectives of staff, students, district representatives, local law enforcement officials, and other key stakeholders to understand how EOPs—and school emergency more broadly—could be improved and what the most pervasive challenges and vulnerabilities in school emergency preparedness efforts are.

Immediately following site visits and virtual interviews, audio recordings from each interview session were transcribed and then coded by a team of analysts with extensive experience in school safety and qualitative research using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. Qualitative data was analyzed using a framework analysis approach for the purpose of gathering specific types of information with potential to create actionable outcomes (Srivastava & Thompson, 2009). Specifically, a structured process was used to analyze the data, beginning with a stage of familiarization in which analysts read all transcriptions and notes compiled by the designated notetaker and discussed initial thoughts about the data and its interplay with data collected from earlier phases of the study (i.e., the EOP assessments and comprehension surveys). The team then identified a thematic framework by developing a preliminary code list derived from the project's core research goals, interview protocols, and initial readings of the data. Next, the team coded the data to capture critical patterns, expanded and refined codes as necessary to ensure that important nuances were captured, and then organized data segments into thematic clusters. Finally, the Principal Investigator synthesized and analyzed data from thematic clusters to inform data collected at earlier stages in the project or to yield substantive findings about school safety and emergency preparedness more broadly.

The interviews were invaluable for contextualizing and better understanding the reality of emergency planning and preparedness efforts in schools. Speaking directly with different types of staff members uncovered several themes that supported key findings from the comprehension assessments. However, in many cases it also revealed that the study of EOPs, what they represent to staff, and how they are used is different and more complex than what we initially understood. In some instances, these insights had direct implications for interpreting the results of the comprehension assessments. Below, we describe the most pertinent themes uncovered from the qualitative analysis of interview data.

The Value of the EOP and EOP Comprehension

Head administrators, district safety officers, SROs, and leading members of school emergency planning teams recognized the importance of the EOP for emergency preparedness

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and school safety more broadly. As one principal described it, the EOP is the "touchstone" they can always refer back to, even in highly complex, stressful situations in which it is easy to get overwhelmed and feel like things are out of control. It represents all of the work the school has put into thinking through the ins and outs of their emergency management system over the years, and it acts as the standard against which the outcomes of emergency drills and other training exercises can be evaluated. Working cooperatively with internal and external stakeholders, EOPs were designed to provide clear guidance during unpredictable situations, but with the understanding that predetermined protocols will not always apply neatly in real life as they do on paper. But the beauty of the EOP is that it can be continuously revised and enhanced to account for new information and to better reflect the strengths and needs of a school. Moreover, documenting details of the emergency management system ensures that there is a plan in place that can be passed on and activated in times of need and that the wellbeing of the school does not depend on the presence of one or two people who champion emergency preparedness.

> *"In a real emergency we are going to be in heightened stress and most importantly I want everybody to know the parts of it they need to execute. I want them to know who's in charge and where to find that person. I want them to know the basics so that it is easy to ground ourselves in a moment of stress. They've seen it beforehand, we've drilled, and now stress happens, but we know where to go to find our touchstone materials."*
>
> *— Principal, on the value of EOPs*

There was also consensus among most of these top safety officials that basic knowledge of the protocols described in the EOP is paramount for protecting the school against dangerous threats. After all, even the most comprehensive, high-quality EOP is of limited value if the school community is not empowered with that knowledge and prepared to activate their training should the need arise. They believed it was critical to educate staff *and* students on their responsibilities during different situations—like staff, students should know where to hide, how to improve their position, barricade the door, and what to do if an intruder gains access to the classroom. At the same time, they realized that emergencies are highly stressful, which impacts how people process information and their ability to enact what they have been trained upon. But for many staff and students, the most stressful situations are those in which they do not have the information they need to make an informed decision—either because they are not relayed critical information about the threat in real time or because they have not received the training they need to handle specific situations. In general, most of the staff we talked to desired higher-quality training and education on emergency preparedness. One teacher's statement underscored this anxiety and the pressure to prepare: "What if I get myself and the entire class killed? Or what if the entire front office is taken out and teachers have no directions?"

Dissemination of Emergency Operations Protocols

Safety officials viewed access to the EOP as an important priority and described a number of strategies they use to disseminate it to staff. Staff received hard or electronic copies of the plan

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at the beginning of each school year. Classrooms and other locations on campus were equipped with flipcharts or quick-reference posters that succinctly described the main actions for lockdown and other emergencies. One school also delivered key information through an online training module, and another outfitted staff with wearable lanyards displaying a "Cliff's Notes" version of the school's active shooter protocols so that information was always available. At least one school used a secure school safety app to make their electronic EOP accessible to staff via their smartphones.

Additionally, our interviews uncovered a vast range of additional activities the schools engage in to ensure people are well positioned to respond should an emergency situation arise. Those included communicating protocols during safety summits for parents, staff, and students, presentations from local law enforcement or a school resource officer on active shooter responses, school assemblies, posting active shooter response videos on school or district websites, reviewing basic emergency protocols via intercom announcements or weekly news videos, conducting tabletop exercises with staff or groups of students to discuss scenarios, and having teachers or law enforcement officers debrief with students after drills to discuss what went well and which areas need improvement. A few schools had also recently shifted their overall orientation toward active shooter response from "traditional" lockdown (i.e., hiding in secured room out of sight and waiting for law enforcement release) to a more options-based approach, such as run, hide, fight (with one school promoting evacuation rather than lockdown as the first line of response). They also eliminated the use of code words from their EOP and any emergency protocol announcements, replacing that system with the use of plain language in all communications with students and staff during drills and emergencies.

And of course, efforts also included a variety of emergency drills—scheduled lockdown, evacuation, and shelter-in-place drills; surprise drills (i.e., students and staff do not know about them ahead of time); and drills during irregular times or under varying circumstances, such as during a class change when most students are in the hallways or when students are gathered in the gym or another common area. One school had even conducted live simulation active shooter drills, complete with participation from local law enforcement and the use of air-soft guns, actors posing as gunshot victims or students banging on classroom doors, barricades, tourniquets, and opportunities for students and staff to practice defensive "fight back" strategies. Another had recently conducted a full-scale, off-campus evacuation drill to see how long it would take to bus students and staff to the site.

Creating an Inclusive Culture Around Emergency Preparedness

A prominent theme emerging from the interviews ultimately tied back to the importance of engaging as many staff as possible in the emergency management system. Involving staff in efforts to plan for emergencies built an investment and sense of buy-in into the system and helped staff feel confident that their school was ready for anything. Serving on one or more of the school's safety teams gave staff the opportunity to observe drills with other members of the team or to discuss various emergency scenarios at tabletop exercises, apply their knowledge,

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and evaluate whether the EOP was set up to inform different types of threats. Importantly, it gave them a voice in the larger conversation while providing supplementary exposure to the school's protocols.

Efforts to build an inclusive culture around emergency preparedness also included designating different types of staff to serve on teams or lead the school's emergency drills on a rotating basis. One month it might be the office secretary, whereas the next it might be the custodian, a kitchen staff member, or a teacher. Challenging staff members to take on a leadership role during drills fostered a culture of accountability and a collective conscience around emergency preparedness because everyone was expected to understand the procedures well enough to lead others. Likewise, this kind of inclusiveness created a safety net in the event a head administrator or top safety official was not available to direct the school during a threat, by creating a wider cast of staff with the knowledge to lead. For one school, this strategy paid off when a power outage occurred when head administrators were off campus. According to the custodian, the sense of responsibility for emergency preparedness was well distributed among staff, as were opportunities to take on leadership roles during drills and other activities—thus, several staff had the confidence to step up and lead the school's response.

The Power of People

The importance of engaging and including staff and students in the larger emergency management system was also apparent in light of the substantial insights that our respondents shared regarding areas of vulnerability at their school, weaknesses in their plans, the effectiveness of training and dissemination strategies, and the school's greatest needs for becoming more prepared. If utilized appropriately, the wealth of knowledge possessed by staff and students could be leveraged to inform revisions to the EOP, enhancements in emergency protocols and security systems, and improvements to existing operations and trainings. They described numerous insights about gaps or vulnerabilities in their school's security and emergency protocols.

> *"By including the student perspective on safety protocols, the school would be a safer place."*
>
> *—Principal, on the importance of getting student perspectives on safety*

- There were areas around campus in which a dangerous individual could easily gain access to the building or individual rooms, and common practices that undermine quality access control (e.g., staff in one school identified multiple exterior and side entrance doors that are left unlocked throughout the schoolday).
- Various lockdown procedures prescribed by a school can have unintended consequences by alerting an intruder that classrooms are occupied. Teachers worried about opening their classroom door and "sweeping" hallways prior to locking down and about the noise caused by barricading doors.

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- Various procedures prescribed by the school were not possible or realistic. For example, teachers mentioned that their school directed them to barricade the door during a lockdown, but the school had not provided them with any materials to do so. Instead, they had attempted to move the teacher's desk in front of the door or tie it shut with a belt, which was noisy and caused permanent damage to the doors. In one school, teachers were instructed to turn off the lights in the classroom during a lockdown, but emergency safety lights remained on even when the overhead lights went off and could only be terminated by manually unscrewing the light bulbs. Respondents also called out specific locations on campus in which hiding out of plain site was not possible because the room was surrounded by windows or because there was no blind spot in the room, and described not knowing what to do if they were in one of those rooms when a lockdown was announced. Cafeteria staff in one school explained that although they were told to lockdown in the staff bathroom within the cafeteria, there was not enough space to fit all staff members. Others questioned how substitute teachers or students (in the absence of a teacher) would lock doors during a lockdown, since they are not provided with keys or keycards.
- There is a lack of planning for atypical situations or special circumstances. For example, custodial staff worried about having to lockdown or evacuate the school if an incident were to occur during an afterschool event, when staff who are most knowledgeable of emergency procedures have left for the day. Students wondered what to do if an armed intruder entered the school while they were in the restroom, or what offensive and defensive strategies they could use to thwart an attack were they to directly encounter a dangerous individual within the school.
- There is a lack of training on options-based responses. Although many appreciated having freedom to choose the best response depending on the situation (rather than rigidly following the school's EOP protocols), they also recognized that they had not been given enough guidance or opportunities to practice so that they know when to choose different courses of action (e.g., evacuation versus lockdown).
- Students were confused about where to evacuate to (i.e., the onsite evacuation location), how to find their teacher, and knowing which teacher to find (e.g., their homeroom teacher or their teacher for the current class period). Many students described evacuations as chaotic and disorganized, but thought that they could be improved if they better understood what they were supposed to do.
- There is conflicting guidance from state and federal agencies, local law enforcement, and school safety experts on the best practices for active shooter response in schools; respondents questioned whether their endorsement of the run, hide, fight approach for armed intruders would help save lives or expose students and staff to more danger if they tried to flee in the middle of a violent incident. Likewise, there was some concern that run, hide, fight, and other options-based approaches may be difficult for students to enact in real emergencies—they questioned whether adhering to a traditional lockdown approach would be more doable, effective, and age-appropriate.

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- There were concerns about not being able to hear emergency announcements via the PA system in certain places on campus (e.g., meeting rooms, the band room).
- There are unintended consequence of conducting drills with students—they never believe it is a real threat and therefore do not take drills seriously, instead using the time to play on their phones and socialize.
- Students are unable to lead a lockdown without a teacher to direct them, because schools don't practice student-led lockdowns; there were also questions about whether teachers and other staff could lead without the guidance of top administrators.
- Certain staff are especially undertrained and lack knowledge on what to do during emergencies (especially substitute teachers).
- There are various different terminologies used in the EOP or in in-person trainings (i.e., partial or soft lockdown, lockout, shelter in place).

In addition to critiquing their schools' emergency management system, they also endorsed multiple, actionable ideas about how operations could be improved (examples below).

- Continuing, increasing the frequency of, or enhancing training exercises and drills to consider different types of circumstances—this includes student-led drills, drills without the help of top administrators or SROs, and drills at varying times of the day (especially passing periods) or executed in different locations (e.g., on the football field). They often wanted more involvement from local law enforcement in these efforts and more opportunities to practice options-based responses and other protocols that are described in their plan but rarely featured during drills. Likewise, they wanted access to more scenario-based training and opportunities to discuss how the school would respond to different types of emergency situations (e.g., what students would do if a lockdown was announced and the teacher was not in the room or was injured or killed by the intruder; what to do if a gun is spotted in a student's backpack; how to respond to an ex-spouse demanding to see a teacher). They believed these discussions would help to fill in the gaps and enable them to feel more confident. Staff from one school promoted their school's approach of presenting staff members with several different scenarios prior to their next drill, not knowing which one would come into play during the drill. This approach gave staff members a chance to proactively think through how they would respond under these scenarios, and if needed, seek answers from head administrators or the emergency planning team prior to the drill date. They could then apply this information when the drill was announced, which they believed enhanced the overall level of coordination and effectiveness of these exercises.
- Rating drills—using a more structured system to rate the effectiveness of drills, convening tabletops or debriefings with staff members to discuss how the response could have been improved, and creating a more formal system to relay that information to the rest of the school.

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- Debriefs with students after drills—teacher-student debriefs were not required in any of the schools, rather, it was up to the discretion of teachers. However, multiple teachers and students reported that talking with students after drills was time well spent. During debriefs, the class could talk about what went well, what didn't, and how they would have responded under different circumstances (e.g., if an intruder tried to gain access to the classroom). A member of the emergency planning team at one school wanted teachers to recognize students as a source of information that can be used to improve emergency operations, encouraging them to "Ask students for feedback after a drill – What did you see? What have you seen before that we didn't look?" One teacher noted that students are often very engaged during debriefs because "they want to know what they should do" in different situations, and they "feel better talking about it." Students believed that the simple practice of debriefing would help them feel more involved in the planning process and would encourage them to take drills more seriously. Many students and staff also viewed debriefing as essential for calming students down and reducing anxieties that arise during drills—especially surprise drills. One principal summarized the importance of regular dialogue with students in addition to a normal drilling regimen, noting "To do that in conjunction with a drill sets the scene and tone for a more serious conversation, turns it into a lesson."
- Discussions—holding discussions among the emergency planning team immediately after school shootings that have occurred elsewhere and assess whether any lessons learned should affect their emergency protocols.
- Guides for substitute teachers—creating quick-reference guides specifically for substitute teachers and requiring them to pass a basic comprehension assessment of those protocols prior to being eligible to teach classes.
- Accessible protocols—making written protocols accessible for different types of readers by communicating as succinctly as possible with explicit, bulleted actions that must be followed and making EOPs easier to navigate and find the information that is needed.

Although schools did not always have formal channels through which student and staff insights on safety and emergency operations could be communicated and leveraged, principals and other safety leaders within schools often recognized that soliciting feedback from the school community is critical for understanding vulnerabilities and devising actionable solutions.

Unequal Access to the Emergency Management System

Not all staff members have equal access to the emergency management system, nor is the same premium placed on EOP access or EOP comprehension for different types of staff members. The opportunity to speak with custodial and food service staff was one of the most insightful and valuable activities of the project. The insights they provided were highly consistent with, and also informative of, key results from the staff comprehension surveys. With few exceptions, food service staff across the schools believed that they were not recognized as a crucial part of their school's emergency management system, that they did not get the same

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training as others, and as a result did not know how to lead core emergency procedures (although they trusted teachers and others with more training to lead the school). Rather, they often felt like they had to “figure it out” on their own. One food service staff member expressed frustration with constantly feeling out of the loop when it comes to emergency planning. From his perspective, when a lockdown is announced, staff in the cafeteria don’t always know if it was an unannounced “surprise” drill (in which nobody knew it was coming) or whether those in the kitchen were simply the last to know. His suspicion was that everybody else in the school usually knew when a drill was coming, but nobody thought to tell the cafeteria staff until the administrators were doing walkthroughs and realized, as he put it, “Oh right! you guys exist!” Food service and custodial staff described other examples of feeling left out—for example, having to rely on a faulty PA system that could not be heard in the cafeteria or finding out about a school safety application the rest of the school was already using for emergency planning but that they did not know about.

> *“Knowing about all the drills is nice, because sometimes we don’t hear about it. The PA will go off, ‘lockdown, lockdown!’ but we don’t know if it’s a drill or not. Being in the loop would be nice because sometimes it’s like, ‘oh right!, you guys exist!’”*
>
> *— Cafeteria staff member, on feeling left out of emergency planning*

At the same time, food service and custodial staff expressed a desire to be more integrated into the system. They wanted to be informed of upcoming lockdown drills like other staff, to have specific responsibilities under different procedures, and to get regular feedback about what they did well and where they needed to improve. They also advocated for conducting lockdown drills before school and during lunch so that they would have the chance to lead and learn ways to improve their responses. They also wanted the chance to take specialized active shooter trainings that were available to other types of staff. At the end of the day, they wanted the confidence to know that they could protect students, themselves, and one another just as well as anybody else on campus by having access to the same resources. Although they believed that their school’s administrators would be receptive to this feedback, they had doubts about whether any policies would ever change or if any real efforts would be made to get them better prepared.

A range of respondent types from principals, leaders of crisis response teams, teachers, and school resource officers agreed that food service and custodial staff and substitute teachers do not get the same training as other staff, largely because they are part-time or contract staff who cannot be compelled to attend safety meetings or trainings or serve on emergency planning or crisis response teams. In other words, these staff members were not intentionally marginalized, but they were different categories of employees and quite often were not even on campus when most emergency operations activities took place. In many instances, administrators and SROs also recognized the cafeteria itself as a significant blind spot in their EOPs because they had never conducted drills during a lunch period or fully thought through how students and staff should conduct a lockdown in the cafeteria. Although most of these respondents recognized the

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need for more focused training efforts with food service and custodial staff and in the cafeteria more generally (despite the challenges of doing so), top officials from one school believed it was a moot point because there would always be a top administrator on campus to lead the school through a crisis and staff in the cafeteria would never be charged with that responsibility.

The Truth about EOPs and the Reality of School Emergency Preparedness

Ultimately, qualitative research conducted under this project was crucial because it unveiled that the reality of school EOPs and emergency planning efforts is not entirely aligned with our perceptions going into the project (in a way that the survey component could not). At the beginning of the project, we viewed the EOP as a clearly defined, revered document made accessible to (and only to) staff within the school, in addition to a few entrusted local partners (e.g., local law enforcement). We did not consider the possibility that there might be confusion or variability around what exactly constitutes the plan. The wide variety of materials we received during the collection of EOPs hinted at the possibility that what constitutes the EOP varies across schools and also according to who is sending it. However, conducting interviews with various staff members explicitly uncovered that a subset of staff within some schools were not familiar with the materials we were told represented their EOP; believed that their room flipchart or quick-reference poster was the entire EOP; had never seen the school's EOP (but in some cases expressed that they would like to); knew about the EOP but did not know where to find it (or in some cases, even feel a need to access it); or did not know how to use it because they had never received any specific training. Thus, our survey questions that asked staff whether they had read their school's "EOP" and how recently they had received training on the EOP were obviously problematic because it is not clear exactly which materials staff referred to when they read those questions (e.g., a classroom flipchart versus the entire written plan).

In a few cases, interviews uncovered that the EOP was not exactly accurate, because it had not been updated recently enough to account for new or modified emergency protocols (as we also discovered in the analysis of open-ended survey questions and during reporting back sessions). In some schools, new procedures (e.g., run, hide, fight; stop, look, listen protocols) had been practiced during drills and discussed during trainings but not yet documented in the EOP (because nobody at the school had time to update it). Accordingly, in some instances our survey questions, which were derived explicitly from the EOPs that schools provided us, were sometimes assessing comprehension of procedures or concepts that were outdated or that in other ways conflicted with what they hear during in-person trainings. Staff and students also have access to a wide variety of perspectives on emergency preparedness, especially active shooter response, outside of what their school teaches them to do. Some staff members directly

> *"In person trainings are much more important than the written plan because nobody has time to read it; they have five other things to think about and people learn by practicing and being taught. You are taught and then can go back and reference it."*
>
> *—Principal, on the importance of in-person trainings and the role of the EOP*

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acknowledged that their beliefs on the best ways (and how they intended) to respond to an active shooter differed from the school's formal protocols.

Likewise, staff are given considerable discretion when it comes to how often and how much of an EOP plan they review—or whether they review it at all. In all but a few schools, there were very few mechanisms in place to ensure staff had reviewed at least relevant parts of the plan on a regular basis or as part of their safety training. Counselors and psychologists in one school were not sure they had ever reviewed the plan or even how to access it if they needed it, with one noting that they thought they had received a copy of it at one point but that realistically they would never have time to sit down and read a document like that. One teacher at a school with an especially long EOP (i.e., hundreds of pages) realized the importance of being familiar with the plan and knowing how to navigate it, but indicated it had taken her 10 years to read it in its entirety and understand its contents. Although one principal believed in the necessity of having a written plan, he viewed them as a less important tool for training people to respond. To him, in-person trainings were more critical because that is how people learn: "by practicing and being taught."

Some staff saw relatively little, if any, value in reading the plan at all because they believed it to be highly unlikely for anyone to follow protocols should an emergency actually occur. They also believed that it was unrealistic to think there was anything a school could do if someone has an intention to harm people ("If someone wants to do something, you can't stop them"). Although they generally believed their schools do well enough jobs of preparing for emergencies, they also described emergencies as virtually "unpreparable" because the tendency for people to panic would undermine any efforts the school made to prepare. One counselor noted that trying to prepare for an active shooter situation was like "chasing a moving target" because no matter how much you practice, no matter how much people know about their protocols, the reality of the situation will be something completely different from what the school has prepared for. One SRO in another school also questioned the importance of the school's written protocols and instead believed that it was more essential to teach a survivor's mentality in which students and staff become adept at making effective, in-the-moment decisions based on the information at hand—regardless of what the school's EOP says they should do. In his perspective, the burden should be on the individual to assess the situation and make the decision most optimal for their survival.

The Impact of Threatening Events on Emergency Operations

Our purposive sampling approach explicitly prioritized the recruitment of some schools that had enacted an emergency evacuation or lockdown in response to a real or perceived human-caused threat in the years leading up the study. We recruited these schools because we viewed it as opportunity to learn about how these experiences impact the school's engagement with emergency planning efforts and uncover lessons learned that emerge when students and staff

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must execute emergency procedures in real time and outside of the training environment. Interestingly, in general, interviews did not yield much information about lessons learned from enacting emergency protocols or about whether those experiences had a genuine impact on emergency planning or the extent to which students and staff engage with the topics of school safety and emergency preparedness. Quite often, staff did not recall those events at all—sometimes because they were not employed at the school when the incident occurred or because it had been too many years and they had simply forgotten about it or at least could not recall the details about how the school responded or whether their response was effective. In many cases, even if they did remember, they could not pinpoint specific impacts that the event had on the school. These findings indicate that, in order to learn about the impacts of emergency incidents, it is critical to speak with staff and students immediately after an incident has taken place.

> *"I don't think it's good policy to lock people into a mindset, I don't want it to be muscle memory, because no crisis is going to be muscle memory…who am i to tell you, and dictate what you should do in a specific crisis situation?"*
>
> *— SRO, on the usefulness of written protocols*

One exception to this pattern was that some head administrators believed that comprehension of emergency protocols was high in their school in part because the school had recently experienced a dangerous event that made people realize that "violence can happen here" and that emergency preparedness must be taken seriously and is everyone's responsibility. Some of the regression models predicting staff comprehension levels provided preliminary support for this idea, as staff from schools who had recently enacted an emergency protocol scored higher on average than staff employed in schools that had not even after controlling for school enrollment size, urbanicity, and school type.

Another school's experience reacting to a firearm incident at the high school across the street was learning that staff and students cannot and do not always follow the protocols described in their EOP when a real event occurs. For instance, as the school went into lockdown, teachers unlocked the main doors to let students from the nearby high school into the building even though their protocols directed them not to and even though those students could have been among those perpetrating violence. They learned that even though the EOP is an important resource, sometimes breaking protocol is what is needed in the moment and people must have the freedom to use their judgment about how to keep each other safe. A custodian at another school described as eye-opening an experience when a dangerous individual was known to be in close proximity to the school, which initiated a schoolwide lockdown, but students—rather than following lockdown procedures they had practiced all year—used the time to joke around, socialize, and play on their phones. For him, the key lesson learned was that the school's efforts to become prepared might ultimately be futile if the key players do not recognize the seriousness of the situation and do not enact the procedures in they have been trained.

Rather than pointing to specific lessons learned about incidents at their own schools, some staff pointed to the importance of learning from high-profile school shootings that occur

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throughout the country and incorporating lessons learned from those events into their own planning efforts. For instance, one school implemented a "stop-look-listen" protocol to supplement their regular evacuation procedures in addition to a system for staff to receive emergency notifications via text, phone, email, and the PA system in response to lessons learned from the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Others described that shooting, in addition to others, such as at Sandy Hook Elementary, as inspiration for adding covers to classroom windows, incorporating ALICE active shooter trainings, and installing bullet-resistant glass on windows and doors and a two-stage buzz-in system for visitors.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, we make the following recommendations for schools and leaders of safety planning:

- **Clearly define what materials constitute the EOP and then train staff to understand what it is, why it is valuable, and how they are expected to use it** (e.g., regular reviews of the entire document; partial reviews of areas relevant for each position, only as needed). Likewise, trainings should cover expectations for how room flipcharts and other quick-reference guides should be used. If there is an understanding and acceptance that those materials will be used in lieu of the entire plan, flipcharts and quick-reference guides should be compiled very carefully and thoughtfully to ensure they effectively communicate the most important information in a way that is consistent with the larger EOP but also relevant to the staff who need the information (e.g., customizing quick-reference guides to staff roles and location on campus). During trainings, communicate the importance of all staff having basic knowledge of their options for responding to different emergency situations—because it can never be guaranteed that there will be someone more knowledgeable around to call the shots. Moreover, explain that emergency preparedness is everyone's responsibility—a system only as good as its weakest link. Ensure that staff understand the importance of drills, documented protocols, and other efforts to get buy-in to these activities, reiterating that these procedures (while far from infallible) are currently the most actionable lines of defense that schools have for responding to unpredictable emergency situations. Even if the school advocates an options-based approach to active shooters or promotes students and staff adopting a "survivor's mindset," educate staff that learning the basics of the procedures is a necessary building block before other options can be considered viable.
- **Consider EOP development to be an ongoing process rather than treating it as a static document that gets shelved.** Schools must adopt a model of continuous improvement and remain committed to uncovering and incorporating new information that can make the EOP more accurate and effective. This information might come from talking with students and staff, learning from emergency situations at schools elsewhere in the country, or incorporating insights learned from recent drills.
- **Update EOPs immediately after protocols change or new ones are added.** Not updating the plan minimizes its usefulness because it cannot be used by staff to

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review current procedures and does not work toward establishing a sustainable emergency management system that can be passed down along with changes in leadership or staff turnover. Additionally, efforts must be made on an ongoing basis to ensure that the prescribed protocols are realistic and possible and when they are not, indicate how and when modifications should be made.

- **Create an inclusive culture around emergency preparedness**. Involving more staff in leadership roles and providing opportunities to serve on safety teams, develop plans and policies, and learn additional skills will help build investment in school safety, increase exposure to core procedures, foster confidence, and better prepare individual actors within the system. Take a critical look at the entire system, determine whether certain types of staff are less connected to that system, and identify ways to get them more involved. Discuss whether part-time, contract, and other support staff could benefit from focused training efforts.
- **Talk about safety issues with students and staff. Solicit their feedback about what helps them feel informed and prepared.** Whether it is drills, tabletop or other exercises, or quick-reference guides—they have a lot to say about what works. They have information about unsafe spaces on campus, gaps in security, or problems with specific procedures. Create formal channels of communication that students and staff can use to express their thoughts and ideas about safety and emergency planning. Those insights can be used to improve security and enhance the usefulness of EOP materials, drills, and other training efforts. Consider making short debriefing sessions with students mandatory immediately after drills to ensure there is a safe space where students can ask questions (especially those who may need extra support).
- **Consider incorporating more scenario-based training opportunities for all staff and students**, because many believe this is what they need to feel fully prepared. If possible, manipulate the circumstances of drills (e.g., the timing of a drill or the location of students at that moment) to assess where gaps are and where more support is needed. Schools might also consider developing scenarios during tabletop exercises and documenting them in the EOP or in a "emergency scenario handbook" that staff can reference and utilize as a training resource.

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7. Concluding Remarks

The National Institute of Justice's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative afforded RTI International an extraordinary opportunity to take an intimate look at how 10 American schools prepare for violent events and other emergency situations. Through four project phases, the study has helped to demystify the reality of emergency operations plans—including what they look like, what information they contain, and how they are perceived and actually used in schools. Obtaining access to school EOPs demonstrated several different approaches to developing written plans and a significant amount of variation across them—so much so that comprehension assessments had to be customized for each school.

Some of the schools kept short, concise EOPs that covered a fraction of the material recommended at the federal level. After reviewing the plans and getting the chance to talk with staff, it became obvious that the benefit of plans like this is that they present an amount of information with which is reasonable for staff to actually engage. They may not come close to covering all of the areas that might be important for preventing, responding to, and recovering from emergencies, but they represent something that staff might actually use. Conversely, other schools kept extremely comprehensive, lengthy EOPs that document their emergency management system in extensive detail. Here, the advantage is that the emergency planning team has devoted a substantial amount of time to thinking through the nuances of their system; by documenting this level of detail, they have created a sustainable emergency system that can easily be passed down through changes in leadership or significant staff turnover. The downside is that plans of this size lose value as a training resource because staff who are already strapped for time will likely never engage with all of it.

Moreover, we learned that in many schools, despite its potential as a reference guide and training resource, the EOP is not always disseminated to staff with the expectation that they will regularly refer to it as a means of mastering emergency concepts and protocols. Rather, a more common viewpoint was that people learn by participating in in-person drills, tabletop exercises, and other activities better than they do by reading protocols from a document, and that the EOP itself is more of a way for top administrators to document the many details of the emergency management system or even use as a resource to reference during emergencies. Visiting schools and talking with staff also uncovered that it is not always entirely clear what constitutes an EOP; in fact, a nontrivial number of staff we spoke to believed that handouts, protocols printed on classroom posters, or other supplementary materials represented their school's entire EOP. Some were not sure if they had ever seen the entire EOP, but doubted that they would engage with it even if they were to see it.

In retrospect, it makes sense that staff comprehension levels were strong when questions measured knowledge of basic concepts and procedures (e.g., those listed in handouts and classroom charts or that are more likely to be covered during drills and other in-person training activities) but lower regarding questions about more advanced or specialized procedures that

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are documented in the larger EOP but not in quick-reference materials. Likewise, learning that EOPs do not always reflect the terminology and procedures that schools actually use in day-to-day emergency planning and operations also highlighted a disconnect when the EOP is used to develop questions measuring knowledge of a school's emergency operations. We encourage all schools to take a critical look at their EOP and engage in a collaborative process to transform it into something that staff can use in their training. Drills and other in-person activities are important for learning and managing protocols, but they are also time-consuming, require a great deal of planning and coordination, and can be highly disruptive to the schoolday and psychologically impactful on students and staff. Treating the EOP as a training resource is a low-cost, low-burden strategy that schools can use in addition to drills, tabletop exercises, regular debriefing, and other activities to create a well-rounded system for helping people learn and stay up-to-date on emergency operations.

Although the school community holds a wealth of information and has great potential as a resource, it is a challenge for schools to confer with its members and devise effective dissemination strategies so that materials are user-friendly, relevant, and help people feel more prepared. For example, given the concerns students and staff have about needing more guidance for different scenarios and circumstances (in other words, how the school's procedures are impacted under different scenarios), schools should consider developing scenarios for a wide range of events, customizing them to their campus and school community, and incorporating them into the EOP or into an "emergency scenario" handbook that staff can review on a predetermined schedule and refer back to in times of need. This type of strategy, if enacted effectively, could help staff and students internalize the purpose of and nature of core emergency procedures—this opportunity to review different scenarios and think about how various responses could impact the outcomes of the event could also help build up what some respondents referred to as a "survivor's mindset" that is capable of quickly assessing the available information, weighing different options, and making a well-informed decision.

Despite the reality of how EOPs are actually used in schools (e.g., as a mechanism for documenting procedures rather than as a training and education resource), the results of the project's EOP comprehension assessments—and the value of these assessments more broadly—remain highly informative. Ideally, EOPs document core emergency procedures and concepts that are also used in trainings and quick-reference materials. Therefore, comprehension assessments based on EOPs reveal important information about what the school community knows about its emergency procedures (although to varying extents). However, top administrators and leaders of emergency planning teams are in the best position possible to conduct their own assessments of their staff and students—because only they have the necessary knowledge of what and how protocols are communicated, which staff should be knowledgeable of which concepts and procedures, and what students are expected to know.

Undoubtedly, creating a regular, more formal mechanism for assessing a school community on comprehension of emergency procedures and access to important resources is worthwhile

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because it can reveal critical insights about the school's strengths and needs. The current study showed that staff and students are proficient at knowing which threats and circumstances correspond to different emergency procedures, but that they may need additional and higher-quality training for enacting core emergency procedures or access to different types of resources (e.g., scenario-based training) to feel confident in their abilities to respond. It revealed that certain types of staff are considerably less engaged with the larger emergency management system, highlighting the need for a more inclusive system and more focused training efforts for those staff. It also uncovered that reading the EOP and receiving EOP training helps people feel more prepared.

At the same time, results suggest that although reading the EOP, receiving EOP training, and serving on emergency planning or crisis response teams are important, these activities alone are not sufficient for ensuring people feel confident and fully understand roles, responsibilities, and actions to follow during all emergency situations. Rather, these efforts must be combined with regular in-person opportunities to practice and discuss the complexities of various emergency responses. Alternatively, findings also indicate that in-person trainings alone are not enough to prepare the entire school community and that all staff should be given opportunities to read the plan and become directly involved in planning efforts. Specifically, attending in-person trainings is not always feasible for all staff—which makes it critical to have a written resource they can reference at any time, regardless of the school's training schedule. Additionally, the EOP covers many details that cannot always be a focus of drills or other in-person trainings (e.g., the location of the family reunification site and family reunification procedures). In fact, if drills and other in-person training activities accurately and effectively covered all of the details written in the EOP, we might not expect to see significant differences in EOP comprehension based on whether people had read the plan or served on a planning committee. However, we did find those differences, because the reality is that the EOP provides the school community with additional critical information about their school's emergency procedures beyond what is typically possible in drills or training exercises.

The process of creating comprehension assessments will require time and effort, because top safety officials will have to first determine which parts of the plan are relevant for all staff, versus only select types of staff members. However, if conducted on a regular basis, these assessments have important potential for gaining insights into the effectiveness of trainings, gaps in knowledge around procedures, and which members of the school community might need additional supports. Additionally, that process can be leveraged to create staff-specific mini EOPs that will often be more useful than the full EOP and more informative than generic protocols often included in classroom flipcharts or quick-reference guides.

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8. Future Directions

The findings from this study are by no means representative of all schools and the nature of their emergency management systems. The results presented in this report are based on a small study of just 10 middle and high schools within eight rural, town, or suburban school districts. The staff in the schools were overwhelmingly White and non-Hispanic. Moreover, seven of the schools were identified by district officials as schools with model emergency plans in place. Thus, not only do these results not speak to emergency operations in urban, inner-city schools (in which violence is often more likely) or elementary settings, the study's focus on model schools and those that have recently enacted emergency procedures means the results do not necessarily reflect the strengths and needs of other schools in the United States. Future research should explore issues of emergency operations and comprehension in a larger and more representative sample—although, as we experienced, researchers will likely face considerable challenges accessing EOPs in urban schools that may be less willing to share materials with outside parties. It would also be worthwhile to develop comprehension assessments based on a variety of data sources in addition to EOPs, including interviews with top safety officials and observations of drill, tabletop exercises, and other activities to gain a more holistic understanding of emergency operations within specific schools and to ensure that the questions that are asked and how they are asked reflect the procedures and concepts that students and staff practice and are expected to know. Additionally, along with future research that takes a similar interest in exploring how various behaviors impact mastery of emergency procedures (e.g., serving on a planning team, receiving EOP training, reading the EOP), there is a need for evaluation research to study the effect that creating a more inclusive emergency management system and incorporating staff and student insights on gaps in security and training needs has on school emergency preparedness and whether regular comprehension assessments can help improve trainings and inform the effective targeting of school resources.

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Appendix A: List of Resources Used to Inform the EOP Assessment Rubric

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Appendix B: Condensed EOP Rubric (80 items within 9 Discrete Sections)

	Section (1)	Basic documentation
1		Cover Page with title, date, and schools covered by the plan
2		Promulgation Document/Signatures (i.e., a signed statement formally recognizing and adopting the school EOP; gives both the authority and responsibility to school officials to perform their tasks before, during, and after an incident, and should be signed by the school administrator or other authorizing official)
3		Record of Changes (e.g., includes change number, date of the change, name of the person who made the change, summary of the change)
4		Record of Distribution (e.g., includes title and name of the person receiving the plan, agency to which the recipient belongs, date of the delivery, and number of copies delivered)
5		Introduction/Approval and Implementation (e.g., introduces the plan, indicates that it supersedes all previous plans, includes a delegation of authority for specific modifications that can be made to the plan and by whom they can be made without the school administrator's signature, includes a date and is signed by the authorized school administrators, includes a description of the purpose of the EOP, includes a situation overview that describes why the EOP is necessary, threats and hazards that pose a risk to the school and would result in the use of the plan, dependencies on parties outside of the school for critical resources)
6		A page number provided on each page
7		One table of contents that provides a layout of the major sections and subsections of the plan that makes finding information easier (i.e., links specific sections to page numbers)
	Section (2)	**CONOPS**
8		A section called "Concept of Operations" (also known as the "CONOPS" section) (or something similar), a written or graphic statement that explains in broad terms the school administrator's intent with regard to an operation
9		Gives an overall picture of how the school will protect students, staff, and visitors
10		Identifies those with authority to activate the plan
11		Describes how plans consider the architectural, programmatic, and communication rights of individuals with disabilities and others with access and functional needs
12		Identifies other response and support agency plans that directly support the implementation of the school's EOP (e.g., city or county EOP, school EOPs from schools co-located on the campus)
13		Explains the primary purpose of actions taken before an emergency is to prevent, protect from, and mitigate the impact on life or property
14		Explains that the primary purpose of actions taken during an emergency is to respond to the emergency and minimize its impact on life or property
15		Explains that the primary purpose of actions taken after an emergency is to recover from its impact on life or property

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	Section (3)	Roles and responsibilities
16		A section called "Organization and Assignment of Responsibilities" (or something similar). This section provides an overview of the broad roles and responsibilities of school staff, families, guardians, and community partners, and of organizational functions during all emergencies. It should describe the broad roles and responsibilities of individuals that apply during emergencies (e.g., principals and other school administrators, teachers, support personnel, parents and guardians, community-based organizations) and informal and formal agreements in place for the quick activation and sharing of resources (e.g., fire department, police department, neighboring schools)
17		A section called "Direction, Control, and Coordination" (or something similar) This section describes the framework for all direction, control, and coordination activities. It should explain the and/or a description of the ICS structure as used by the school
18		Relationship between the EOP and the district or community emergency management system
19		Who has control of the equipment, resources, and supplies needed to support the school EOP
20		A description of the planning team (i.e., a diverse group of members that collectively represent multiple perspectives, as opposed to a single individual or a small handful of individuals in similar roles) developed the EOP (the planning team may go by different names, such as the incident response team, crisis response team, crisis intervention team, crisis management team, safety team, etc.)
21		The collaborative planning team includes representation from community emergency management (e.g., local law enforcement, fire officials, or public health practitioners)
	Section (4)	**Basic security**
22		A section called "Security" (or something similar) that describes functional protocols for the courses of action that schools will implement on a routine, ongoing basis to secure the school from criminal threats originating from both inside and outside the school. This includes efforts done in conjunction with law enforcement personnel. The planning team should consider the following when developing its goals, objectives, and courses of action:
23		How to make sure the building is physically secure (including implementation of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design [CPTED])
24		How to keep prohibited items out of school
25		The school has a formal and standardized access control policy that requires exterior doors to be locked during the schoolday with some form of controlled access for a single point of entry.
26		The school has a formal and standardized visitor management procedure that requires all visitors to sign in and receive badges based on their government-issued photo identification cards before visiting the school buildings.
27		The school does not post building plans for the school in an unsecure web-accessible manner.
28		The school does not post emergency plans and procedures in an unsecure web-accessible manner.
	Section (5)	**Threat assessment**
29		The EOP discusses threat assessment.
30		The school's written threat assessment process includes a standardized assessment form that specifies the types of actions the school will take to respond to specific types/levels of threats posed by students or staff.

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	Section (6)	Emergency procedures
		Evacuation
31		A section called "Evacuation" (or something similar) that describes functional protocols for courses of action that schools will execute to evacuate school buildings and grounds. The planning team should consider the following for this section:
32		How to safely move students and visitors to designated assembly areas from classrooms outside areas, cafeterias, and other school locations
33		How to evacuate when the primary evacuation route is unusable
34		How to evacuate students who are not with a teacher or staff member
35		How to evacuate individuals with disabilities and others with access and functional needs including language, transportation, and medical needs
36		A section that describes functional protocols for reverse evacuation. This section should focus on courses of action that schools will execute to reenter school buildings and grounds following an evacuation
		Lockdown
37		A section called "Lockdown" (or something similar) that describes functional protocols for preventive (i.e., all exterior and classroom doors locked; hallways clear of students but learning continues) and emergency lockdown. This section focuses on the courses of action schools will execute to secure school buildings and grounds during incidents that pose an immediate threat of violence in or around the school. The primary objective of a lockdown is to quickly ensure all school staff, students, and visitors are secured in the rooms away from immediate danger. The planning team should consider the following:
38		How to lock all exterior doors and when it may or may not be safe to do so
39		How to lock all interior doors and when it may or may not be safe to do so
40		How particular classroom and building characteristics (e.g., windows, doors) impact possible lockdown courses of action
41		What to do when a threat materializes inside the school
42		When to use the different variations of a lockdown
		Shelter in Place
43		A section called "Shelter in Place" (or something similar) that describes functional protocols for courses of action when students and staff are required to remain indoors, perhaps for an extended period of time, because it is safer inside the building or a room than outside. Depending on the threat or hazard, students and staff may be required to move to rooms that can be sealed (such as in the event of a chemical or biological hazard) or without windows, or to a weather shelter (such as in the event of a tornado)
44		What supplies will be needed to seal the room and to provide for the needs of students and staff (e.g., water)
	Section (7)	**Threat and hazard specific annexes that describe the courses of action that the school will implement during the following adversarial and human caused threats/hazards:**
		School assessment
45		The EOP discusses a school threat and hazard identification assessment to identify a list of current and historical threats and hazards in the school and surrounding community, typically informed by threats and hazards the school or surrounding community has faced in the past including those outside of the schoolday and at off campus events
46		The threat and hazard identification assessment process utilizes a standardized assessment instrument that is identified in the policy
		Specific threats and hazards
47		Fire
48		Explosion
49		Bomb threats
50		Schoolbus/motor vehicle crashes/accidents

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51		Suspicious packages
52		Cyberattacks/security breach
53		Possession of a weapon
54		Assault/fights
55		Active/armed intruder/assailant
56		Hostage situation
57		Missing person/kidnapping
58		Civil unrest/demonstration/riot
59		Gang violence
60		Domestic violence and abuse
61		Child abuse
62		Sexual assault/rape
63		Restraint/physical intervention procedures
64		Angry parent
65		Medical emergencies/severe injury
66		Stabbing or gunshot wound
67		Self-injury or suicide threat or attempt
	Section (8)	**Post incident procedures and communication**
68		A section called "Accounting for all persons" (or something similar) that describes functional protocols for developing courses of action for accounting for the whereabouts and wellbeing of students, staff, and visitors, and identifying those who may be missing (e.g., how staff will determine who is in attendance at the assembly area, what to do when someone cannot be located, how staff will report to the assembly supervisor)
69		A section called "Information, Collection, Analysis, and Dissemination" (or something similar) that addresses the role of information in the successful implementation of the activities that occur before, during, and after an emergency. It should identify the type of information that will be helpful in the successful implementation of the activities that occur before, during, and after an emergency, such as weather reports, law enforcement alerts, radio alerts, and crime reports in addition to mental health agency website and hotlines, emergency management and relief agency websites and hotlines. Ideally, each identified type of information should describe the source of the information, how the information is collected and shared, format for providing the information to those who will use it, and when the information should be collected and shared.
70		A section that describes functional protocols for family reunification/the EOP contains a section called "Family Reunification." This section details how students will be reunited with their families or guardians. Information might include how to inform families about the reunification process in advance, a description of roles and responsibilities of staff members during reunification, how to verify that an adult is authorized to take custody of a student, how to facilitate communication between the parent check-in and the student assembly and reunion areas, how to ensure students do not leave on their own, how to protect the privacy of students and parents from the media, how to reduce confusion during the reunification process, how frequently families will be updated, and how to account for technology barriers faced by students, parents, or staff.
71		K–12 schools are not used as reunification centers (unless no other viable facility is available).
72		A section called "Recovery" (or something similar) that describes functional protocols for how schools will recover from an emergency. The four most fundamental kinds of recovery are academic recovery (e.g., describes when the school should be closed and reopened, and who has the authority to do so; what temporary spaces the school may use if school buildings cannot immediately reopen, and how to provide alternate educational programming if students cannot physically reconvene), physical and fiscal recovery (e.g., describes how to document school assets, which personnel have knowledge of the schools assets, how they

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		will access records to verify current assets after a disaster, where they will access records to verify current assets, how the school will work with utility and insurance companies before an emergency to support a quicker recovery, how district leadership will be included, how staff will receive timely and factual information regarding returning to work, and what sources the school may access for emergency relief funding) and psychological and emotional recover (e.g., describes who will serve as the team leader, where counseling and psychological first aid will be provided, and how teachers will create a calm and supportive environment for students, share basic information about the incident, provide psychological first aid if trained to do so, and identify students who may need counseling, who will provide trained counselors, how to address the counseling needs of students, etc.).
73		The school has a written NIMS protocol and documented ICS.
	Section (9)	**Supporting information**
74		A section called "Training, Exercises, and Education" (or something similar) that describes critical training and exercise activities the school will use in support of the plan, including core training objectives for each one
75		Establishes the expected frequency of exercises to be conducted by the school; content may be influenced based on similar requirements at the district and/or local jurisdiction level(s)
76		The EOP has plans and guidelines for conducting emergency drills, tabletop exercises, functional exercises, or full-scale exercises.
77		Emergency plans and procedures are customized at the building level (planners considered each building's unique conditions and circumstances and developed emergency procedures and course of actions that make sense for those conditions and circumstances).
78		Maps and floor and site plans
79		Descriptions of key operational locations of on- and off-campus evacuation sites and shelter-in-place zones
80		EOP describes "go kits" (also called "emergency evacuation kits" or "go-bags") that will help prepare students/staff for an evacuation or shelter in place emergency. The contents of these kits should be determined by the planning team or administrators responsible for making decisions about emergency preparedness plans. Examples of the types of items that may be considered include a current class roster for each classroom with home and emergency phone numbers, emergency medical information for students, copy of emergency procedures, a map of the school, crisis response equipment (two-way radios, cellular telephones, fully charged batter operated bullhorn), maps of the surrounding community, maps with evacuation routes, first aid supplies, flashlights and batteries, activities for students, papers and pens, a clipboard, names and contact information for crisis intervention team members, lists of assigned roles for school personnel and division personnel, staff roster that identifies those with CPR and EMT training, snacks, a whistle, blankets, toilet paper, safety vests and helmets, sample statements or letters for communicating with parents, and information on fire alarm turn-off procedures and utility shutoff valves.

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Appendix C: School Scores for Each Component of the EOP Assessment

Section of the EOP Assessment Rubric	School ID									# of EOPs that Satisfied Each Component
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8, 9	10	
(1) Basic documentation Raw score for section:	6	0	5	6	6	0	4	7	5	
Cover Page with title, date, and schools covered by the plan	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	7
Promulgation Document/Signatures	✓		✓					✓	✓	4
Record of Changes	✓			✓	✓			✓		4
Record of Distribution	✓			✓	✓			✓		4
Introduction/Approval and Implementation	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	7
A page number on each page	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	7
One table of contents that links specific sections to page numbers			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	6
(2) CONOPS Raw score for section:	6	2	2	5	5	2	3	6	1	
A section called "Concept of Operations" (or something similar)	✓			✓	✓		✓			4
Give an overall picture of how the school will protect students, staff, and visitors	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	6
Identify those with authority to activate the plan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		8
Describes how plans account for the architectural, programmatic, and communication rights of individuals with disabilities and others with access and functional needs	✓	✓						✓		3
Identifies other response and support agency plans that directly support the implementation of the school's plan			✓			✓				2
Explain the primary purpose of actions taken before an emergency	✓			✓	✓			✓		4
Explain the primary purpose of actions taken during an emergency	✓			✓	✓			✓		4
Explain the primary purpose of actions taken after an emergency								✓		1
(3) Roles and responsibilities Raw score for section:	4	3	3	5	5	1	2	4	3	
A section called "Organization and Assignment of Responsibilities" (or something similar)			✓	✓	✓			✓		4
A section called "Direction, Control, and Coordination"	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9
Describes relationship between the EOP and the district or community emergency management system				✓	✓				✓	3
Describes who has control of the equipment, resources, and supplies needed to support the school plan	✓			✓	✓				✓	4
Describes how the planning team developed the plan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		7

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Section of the EOP Assessment Rubric	School ID									# of EOPs that Satisfied Each Component
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8, 9	10	
The collaborative planning team includes representation from community emergency management	✓	✓						✓		3
(4) Basic security Raw score for section:	1	5	3	2	2	1	5	7	5	
A section called “Security” (or something similar)			✓				✓	✓	✓	4
Describes how to make sure the building is physically secure										0
Describes how to keep prohibited items out of school										0
Has a formal and standardized access control policy							✓	✓	✓	3
Requires all visitors to sign in and receive badges based on their government-issued photo Identification cards		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	6
Does not post building plans for the school in an unsecure web-accessible manner		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	6
Does not post emergency plans and procedures in an unsecure web-accessible manner		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	6
(5) Threat assessment Raw score for section:	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	
The EOP discusses threat assessment	✓					✓		✓		3
The school’s written threat assessment process includes a standardized assessment form that specifies the types of actions the school will take to respond to specific types/levels of threats posed by students or staff								✓		1
(6) Emergency procedures Raw score for section:	12	8	9	9	9	7	5	7	7	
Evacuation										
A section called “Evacuation” (or something similar)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9
Describes how to safely move students and visitors to designated assembly areas from classrooms outside areas, cafeterias, and other school locations	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	6
Describes how to evacuate when the primary evacuation route is unusable	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓				5
Describes how to evacuate students who are not with a teacher or staff member				✓	✓				✓	3
Describes how to evacuate individuals with disabilities and others with access and functional needs including language, transportation, and medical needs	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		6
Describes functional protocols for reverse evacuation	✓							✓		2
Lockdown										
A section called “Lockdown” (or something similar)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9

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Section of the EOP Assessment Rubric	School ID									# of EOPs that Satisfied Each Component
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8, 9	10	
Describes how to lock all exterior doors and when it may or may not be safe to do so			✓							1
Describes how to lock all interior doors and when it may or may not be safe to do so	✓	✓	✓							3
Describes how particular classroom and building characteristics impact possible lockdown courses of action	✓		✓				✓			3
Describes what to do when a threat materializes inside the school	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	8
Describes when to use the different variations of a lockdown	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	7
Shelter in Place										
A section called "Shelter in Place" (or something similar)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9
Describes what supplies will be needed to seal the room and to provide for the needs of students and staff (e.g., water)	✓		✓							2
(7) Threat/hazard-specific sections	14	14	9	3	6	3	16	16	13	
School assessment										
The EOP discusses a school threat and hazard identification assessment	✓	✓					✓	✓		4
The threat and hazard identification assessment process utilizes a standardized assessment instrument that is identified in the policy		✓						✓		2
Specific threats and hazards										
Fire	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	7
Explosion	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	6
Bomb threat	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9
Schoolbus/motor vehicle crashes/Accident	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	6
Suspicious package	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓	5
Cyberattacks/security breach										0
Possession of a weapon	✓						✓	✓	✓	4
Assault/Fights	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	5
Active/armed intruder/assailant		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8
Hostage situation		✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	5
Missing person/kidnapping	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	6
Civil unrest/demonstration/riot			✓		✓			✓	✓	4
Gang violence		✓					✓			2
Domestic violence and abuse		✓								1
Child abuse	✓		✓				✓			3

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Section of the EOP Assessment Rubric	School ID									# of EOPs that Satisfied Each Component
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8, 9	10	
Sexual assault/rape	✓	✓					✓	✓		4
Restraint/physical intervention procedure										0
Angry parent									✓	1
Medical emergencies/severe Injury	✓		✓				✓	✓		4
Stabbing or gunshot wound	✓									1
Self-injury or suicide threat or attempt	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	7
(8) Post-incident procedures and communication	3	2	1	4	5	0	1	4	1	
A section called "Accounting for All Persons" (or something similar)	✓			✓	✓					3
A section called "Information, Collection, Analysis, and Dissemination" (or something similar)				✓	✓					2
A section that describes functional protocols for family reunification		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		5
States that K–12 schools are not to be used as reunification centers					✓			✓		2
A section called "Recovery" (or something similar)	✓							✓		2
Has a written NIMS protocol and documented ICS	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	7
(9) Supporting information	7	3	3	6	6	4	4	4	1	
A section called "Training, Exercises, and Education" (or something similar)	✓			✓	✓			✓		4
Establishes the expected frequency of exercises to be conducted by the school	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		6
Plans and guidelines for conducting emergency drills, tabletop exercises, functional exercises, or full-scale exercises	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓			5
Emergency plans and procedures are customized at the building level	✓					✓	✓			3
Includes maps and floor and site plans	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		7
Describes key operational locations of evacuation sites and/or shelter-in-place zones	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓				5
Describes "go kits"	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8

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