The call went out at 1:13 p.m. for emergency crews to respond to a roof collapse in the gymnasium of the Maple Street Elementary School due to heavy rain. En route, the officer in the first-due rescue truck checks his electronic tablet to call up the schools’ critical information that includes school schematics—building type, floor plans, utility connections, etc.—so he can best direct manpower and resources at and to the scene. In addition to sending EMS and police to the school, the alarm also triggered planned responses at the county emergency management office, which has lists of companies with appropriate construction equipment that may be needed on-site, and at area hospitals, which need time to prepare their emergency rooms for a possible mass-casualty incident.

Meanwhile, Maple Elementary’s school personnel—using a mobile app to access the emergency plan they were instrumental in developing—have already been evacuating students and alerted district officials to the need for student shelter and transportation. In addition, plans are put in motion on how to prevent parents—who come rushing to the scene on hearing the news—from actually hindering any rescue efforts by clogging the school parking areas or even the roads around the school. At the same time, utility crews are automatically being sent to the scene to cut any electrical and gas feeds that may endanger responders and victims.

In this moment, debate over what could have been done to prevent the accident is irrelevant. All that matters is the speed and effectiveness of the response—something that demands long-term, detailed, and comprehensive preparation. While the thorough planning, quick action by emergency and school personnel, and a bit of luck prevented any serious injuries at Maple Elementary, that is unfortunately not always the case. Indeed, the outcry over the need for such planning often peaks in the days and weeks following a tragedy of some magnitude, and in the education space one only needs to recite the locations of schools where significant injury and loss of life occurred—Sandy Hook, Joplin, Columbine, to name a few. Reaction after each ran the gamut of emotions, with “Why?” at the tip of most everybody’s tongues. The solutions for prevention produced much public debate, which has led to considerable behind-the-scenes work among professionals away from the cacophony of the 24-hour news cycles to determine answers and develop mitigating strategies.

Still, a recent study featured in USA Today and elsewhere found that 28 states and the District of Columbia do not require schools
and day care centers to meet minimum evacuation standards to protect children in an array of situations. And the survey by the nonprofit organization Save the Children also reported that six states (Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri and North Dakota) and Washington, D.C. do not require a multiple hazards approach to preparedness.

This issue of From Practice to Policy looks at Delaware’s first-in-the-nation initiative and process for implementing statewide changes to multi-hazard emergency management and planning in every school and district in the state, as well as the initiative’s online interactivity. This brief is intended to provide state board members, as well as legislators, educators, and the general public, with essential information on developing emergency preparedness policies and statutes that also require leaders to orchestrate a division of labor and responsibilities among myriad agencies at the state and local levels.

Specifically, this brief includes:

- A brief definition of comprehensive planning;
- The origins and development of Delaware’s emergency preparedness initiative;
- Technology’s role in the Delaware model; and
- A look at federal emergency planning guidelines for schools and districts released by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

**What Is Comprehensive or Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning?**

Some may ask whether educators haven’t always done emergency planning? After all, schools have conducted fire drills for decades—sometimes even in concert with the local fire department—and lockdown drills more recently. And these efforts appear to have met with success: while the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) reported 13 injuries due to fires in schools from 2003-05, no student has died in a school fire since the Our Lady of the Angels School in Chicago fire in 1958, which claimed 95 students and teachers.

It is important to understand the reasons behind this statistic. First, and likely foremost, are changes to building safety laws and codes. Since the late 1970s, most schools have been required to use safer construction materials, such as brick, and install sprinkler systems in buildings. Laws in some states also bar the hanging of flammable items, such as posters, on walls. Second, of course, are the ubiquitous fire drills. Both of these, however, are examples of planning by code or by statute to mitigate specific risk factors.

But comprehensive or multi-hazard emergency preparation covers much more than fires or active shooter/intruder alarms. Depending on where a school is located, planning for earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, hurricanes and typhoons, and even tsunamis may be among the emergencies for which officials plan. And regardless of geography, situations to consider may include pandemics, social unrest, gas leaks, oil spills, and so on. This is a process that requires deep consideration and sufficient time for development, testing, scaling-up, and finally implementation. Yet this is the path Delaware chose to take for maintaining the safety of its students and school staff.

**State Statute for School Preparedness**

The initiative to create a comprehensive emergency preparedness template started not with the education department, but with the secretary of the state Department of Safety and Homeland Security (DSHS), Lewis Schiliro, some two years ago. According to Randall Hughes, DSHS deputy secretary—and a member of the state board of education—after the governor signed the Omnibus School Safety Act in September 2012, he gave DSHS officials five years to develop and implement a comprehensive emergency preparedness plan statewide. That timetable was accelerated in December 2012 after the mass shootings at the elementary school in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, with the governor’s directive to fully implement the plan within two years. The template is in the final stages of beta testing in two districts, and the final introduction of the template to the whole state is slated to occur in late 2013. Districts were notified of the advanced timeline and rollout of the plan so it would not be suddenly thrust upon affected personnel. By the end of the 2013-2014 school year, DSHS must deliver a report on its progress to the governor and legislature.

One key aspect of the Omnibus School Safety Act is that it did not shoulder schools with the full responsibility of implementation. It acknowledged that while some districts had comprehensive emergency plans, many more did not, which was likely the result of varying capacity among schools and districts that were already working hard to implement
the Common Core and other reforms. So in addition to directing emergency management officials, such as police, fire, and EMS to work together with local schools and districts, the act also recognizes the relative strengths and specialties of those involved in the planning, calling for the work to be done “in a manner that minimizes administrative and other burdens upon schools and districts.” Furthermore, the organizational authority rests with the DSHS rather than the state Education Department.

Hughes said the state Education Department previously required schools to have comprehensive plans, but it was as a regulation. “That’s why we went with a statute—a law beats a regulation every day.”

Brad Spicer, CEO of SafePlans, which was contracted by DSHS to create a technology solution* to aid in plan development and implementation, said he considers the Omnibus School Safety Act the best such law in the nation because it mandates comprehensive planning rather than preparation for single events. “Delaware has embraced and is providing an all-hazard safety plan. This system is not in response to Sandy Hook or Joplin, it’s just awareness that schools need to have quality emergency plans in place.”

That overarching approach is something he tells potential clients to consider before moving forward with any initiative. “Sandy Hook has people interested in what can be done. While Sandy Hook did expose schools’ potential vulnerabilities, it didn’t necessarily mean it was something that required emergency funding. I think schools are continuing to evaluate how they can improve their overall safety. We encourage them not to make decisions based on a singular event—they need to have a systematic approach to security.”

**The Planning Process**

With Hughes taking the lead in his DSHS role (and as a retired state trooper), Delaware developed a plan using the National Incident Management System (NIMS) tool as a basis for risk mitigation (see textbox on page 4). The state plan also incorporated the Incident Command System (ICS) commonly used by emergency personnel that delineates a hierarchy of scene officers and responsibilities, and which in this case also included school administrators.

DSHS also found useful an emergency planning model developed for the school system in Marin County, California, north of San Francisco. That plan (http://mcoe.web).
was “developed by the Marin County Office of Education as a tool to assist in the planning and implementation of effective school emergency preparedness programs. The Model Emergency Management Plan provides a framework for protecting students, staff and school facilities and describes the roles and responsibilities of staff members in a variety of emergency situations.” As a model, it was readily adaptable to Delaware’s purposes.

Still, unlike Marin County, Delaware officials had a whole state to consider. As the state template for all local plans was developed, DSHS assembled a working group of law enforcement, emergency managers, and local school officials define what was most likely to occur in Delaware versus some of the emergencies planned for in California, such as earthquakes. Also factored into the planning was not just an event’s likelihood, but also its scale of impact, no matter the probability. For example, the risk of a tornado touching down in Delaware is fairly low, but if one does hit, the impact could be devastating. Similarly, while the tragedies at Columbine and Sandy Hook were indeed horrific and have since become a part of the nation’s collective consciousness, the risk of an active shooter scenario in a given school is quite low but when it does happen, its impact is immense.

The working group then had to balance the likelihood of event occurrence placed against the impact. The decisions on how to balance probability and impact were derived by closely examining local and national research on each hazard. In the end, the group chose 29 responses to a range of threats. The threats include tornadoes, bomb threats, active shooters/violent intruders, fires, medical emergencies, missing or kidnapped students, and storms or severe weather.

Another critical piece of the development process was to get buy-in from the teachers unions for the effort. Hughes explained this was critical because during an emergency on school grounds, the “true” first responders are not police or paramedics, but teachers, administrators, and other school staff. To help gain this buy-in, Hughes said he explained to staff representatives that because school faculty and personnel are on-site, DSHS wanted to provide them with the right tools and training—training traditional first responders already had.

**Planning Challenges**

There were many challenges around statewide emergency planning that the working group had to consider and overcome. For instance, many school building floor plans on file were not correct. That is, they were in all likelihood correct when the school first opened, but over time large rooms were partitioned, offices created, offices removed, trailers added, and other alterations had been made. Elsewhere, schools did not have floor plans filed with the education department at all. Floor plans that were available to first responders were also sometimes stored electronically at the Delaware Department of Education in Dover, but those were only available during regular business hours—if there was an emergency after 5 p.m., for example, those plans were inaccessible.

Another paperwork difficulty lay in the filing and storage of schools’ material safety data sheets (MSDS)—the documents that catalog what chemicals are stored on campus—which must be maintained on-site, but were often not kept in a central location. Sometimes they were

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**National Incident Management System**

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) identifies concepts and principles that answer how to manage emergencies from preparedness to recovery regardless of their cause, size, location or complexity. NIMS provides a consistent, nationwide approach and vocabulary for multiple agencies or jurisdictions to work together to build, sustain and deliver the core capabilities needed to achieve a secure and resilient nation.

Broadly written, this system is comprised of five major components that are standardized, yet flexible enough to be used in almost any emergency situation:

- Preparedness,
- Communications and Information Management,
- Resource Management,
- Command and Management, and
- Ongoing Management and Maintenance.

Within each of these are descriptions of how each is defined, as well as what is needed to achieve these goals.


marin.k12.ca.us/emergprep/plan.html was “developed by the Marin County Office of Education as a tool to assist in the planning and implementation of effective school emergency preparedness programs. The Model Emergency Management Plan provides a framework for protecting students, staff and school facilities and describes the roles and responsibilities of staff members in a variety of emergency situations.” As a model, it was readily adaptable to Delaware’s purposes.
in a custodian’s closet; sometimes the school chemistry teacher maintained an MSDS set. But if the custodian or teacher was not working on a given day, no one would know where the sheets were filed when fire or EMS responders needed them. A goal of the planners was to ensure that under the new system, once it was fully implemented in all of Delaware’s public schools, MSDS and floor plan issues will be a thing of the past.

There were—and still are—practical challenges that arise when implementing the new emergency preparedness system require altering local practices already in place. For instance, schools often have different visitor management systems. Delaware’s plan is to make sure the protocols for allowing visitors into schools is the same at every public school across the state. The same consistency needs to be demonstrated by other agencies: e.g., all law enforcement personnel responding to an active shooter scene have now been trained to the same standard operating procedure. This means that every local police officer and state trooper responding to such an emergency will be jointly executing the same tactics at the scene.

Finding mutually agreeable a time of day to bring first responders and educators together is another issue, Hughes explained. The first responder community was told it had to work on educators’ schedules in their respective schools and response districts—even if that meant working on a catch-as-catch-can basis. As Hughes explained, school personnel are strapped for time with their standard responsibilities, so the onus to be responsive to that falls on emergency management personnel.

**Building the State’s Web-based Emergency Information Portal**

“*Delaware is at the forefront of enterprise-level emergency planning.*”

— Brad Spicer, CEO, SafePlans

A key component of Delaware’s plan from conception through development and finally implementation is a user-friendly, adaptable technology platform. In fact, it is technology that makes the system practicable. In addition to convenience and adaptability, many of the educators and staff Hughes approached about the initiative essentially grew up using computer technology, so using it is second nature.

Early in the planning process, the team decided the best way to compile school and other data and handle educator and school staff training was through an online solution instead of the ubiquitous tabbed three-ring binders that were familiar to educators and emergency responders alike; this was envisioned as a web-based portal that would be easy enough for everyone to use yet still robust enough to manage all of the critical plan data for every school in the state.

The search for a portal developer led DSHS to SafePlans of Jefferson City, Missouri, which specializes in developing plans, training, risk assessments, and data solutions for education, faith-based, health care, government, hospitality, retail, and financial sites and institutions. In the last 13 years, SafePlans’ business has changed from providing CD-ROM based tactical floor plans to a state-of-the-art all-hazards preparedness solution, as is the case with Delaware. And while SafePlans has worked with state agencies before, according to Spicer, Delaware is the first to work on a comprehensive, statewide interagency solution for schools.

Central to the Delaware model is SafePlans’ ERIP™ — the Emergency Response Information Portal. This is a cloud-based solution that will enable all designated and trained personnel to access, update, and review emergency plans for the state and for their respective school(s) and district(s). The system is designed to support many functions before, during, and after an emergency. Additionally, as plans are altered, the state will be able to electronically notify districts, schools, and first responders when changes are made at a given site.

Spicer, who previously worked in Army intelligence and as a state highway patrolman, praised Delaware officials for the forethought it is putting into the work. “I serve on our local school board and I understand that education is local, but I don’t think that school systems want to develop emergency plans by themselves. They would love to have state resources available and that’s where a statewide system can help.”

Development of Delaware’s ERIP began with the state’s model plan and the groundwork the working group laid to build upon it. SafePlans combined this comprehensive school safety plan with other national best practices, then entered all of the data into a secure server, password-protected, web-based system. This way, the plans for any given site will be available to all authorized personnel at all times. Delaware’s ERIP home page features a series of quick links and tabs through which users may:

- view, create, and update site assessments;
- view, create, and update emergency plans;

— Brad Spicer, CEO, SafePlans
gain access to site-specific data such as school floor plans, maps, and MSDS sheets;

• take online training courses;

• manage who uses the portal;

• view an individualized green, yellow, and red color-coded track to monitor the progress of a school’s emergency plan; and

• access other resources such as those for dealing with parents and families or media outlets during a crisis.

Inside the Emergency Plans tab, users are presented with an online table of contents set up much like a paper manual that offers a six-section introduction under the heading of “Introduction to Emergency Management.” This is followed by a chapter on mitigation and prevention that includes “how-to” sections on reducing hazards and how to conduct a safe schools assessment, as well as an area to list local hazards and the school visitor screening policy. The third chapter is “Preparedness,” with sections on NIMS and the district and school ICS, school rosters, evacuation and shelter-in-place plans, and other critical information.

Also featured under Emergency Plans is a section headed “QRGs,” which stands for Quick Reference Guides that will be easiest to follow during a crisis. In this section, users will find an Immediate Actions Checklist, Emergency Actions, a listing of specific emergency types with links to what to do in those situations, and a final page with emergency contacts and other data.

Not everything has to be high-tech—all of the plans, checklists, and other information are also available as downloadable PDFs that can be printed out and reviewed as needed—but the technology component can make the planning phases move more efficiently and it’s almost certainly easier to use during an event than flipping through the three-ring binders used previously.

And while the basic ERIP system already existed, the software is continually being updated with improved functionality, so the overall system is never going to be static. Just as changes occur at the local level, be they in personnel or in physical plant, preparedness profiles are altered with them. “An emergency plan needs to be a living document,” Spicer said.

Part of the evolution of ERIP has been the addition of mobile applications that connect users to the online plan pages as needed. This is very important to first responders en route to a scene, but it is just as critical to school and district personnel, because they manage the initial stages of an event. Further, they are likely the most important people in the continual evolution of plans since they are on-site nearly every day of the week and have the best understanding of their school’s climate and facilities.

As Hughes explained, a school principal with a tablet or smartphone doing a simple site inspection can immediately note changes in room configurations, take photos of security and safety equipment that require immediate repair or replacement, transmit the location of utility and fire department connections, and manage other functions.

The online component also enables real-time, no-fault training scenarios that are not possible in real life, and school personnel training is absolutely vital to ensuring plans of action are followed during an actual emergency. For instance, one course is Intruderology™, or what do if a violent intruder enters the school and how to manage the run/hide/fight defense scenarios in that case. Other courses cover how to conduct a threat assessment or handle an evacuation, and there are training modules for all parties on the site mapping system and other areas of concern.

By January 2014, the initial data for all schools will be loaded to ERIP. Software training has already begun in districts. Then from January through March, school and emergency personnel will be put through a variety of scenarios during tabletop exercises using the portal. This will allow all involved to review and revisit the initial site-specific plans as needed, both individually and as groups. By June all the exercises should be complete in all locations, allowing DSHS to review all the data before making its report to lawmakers and the governor.

Federal Guidelines

However, to help states advance comprehensive emergency preparedness plans, FEMA developed host of tools and guides. Among them are a basic primer on NIMS itself, NIMS Implementation Activities for Schools and Higher Education, (www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/emschool/EL361Toolkit/assets/NIMSImplementationActivitiesforSchools.pdf), as well as broadly written online classes such as “Introduction to Incident Command at Schools” and “Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Schools,” available through the Department of Homeland Security website at www.dhs.gov/school-safety.

Another strong place to start may be found in the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/REMS%20K-12%20Guide%200508_0.pdf) published by FEMA in 2013. This guide is organized into four sections: 1) The principles of school emergency planning; 2) A process for developing, imple-
menting, and continually refining a school emergency operations plan (EOP) with community partners at the school building level; 3) A discussion of the form, function, and content of school EOPs; and 4) “A Closer Look,” which considers key topics that support school emergency planning, including addressing an active shooter, school climate, psychological first aid, and information sharing.

With all of these tools, no matter how robust, it is critical to understand that they are designed mainly for local school and district administrators and are not a substitute for deeper and customized investigation and policy development at the state level. And while it is incumbent on local administrators to work within their respective communities on emergency preparedness, coordination at the state level, keeping all agencies on the same page, may be vital to operational success in larger-scale emergencies.

The Bottom Line for State Policymakers

As with academic standards, there are potentially many moving parts within each plan and emergency scenario that require revisiting as conditions change, be they geopolitical, environmental, or simply changes in student enrollment in a given school. Finances may also prove to be an issue during the initial planning process and again throughout implementation and updates. Bearing in mind that Delaware’s total area is dwarfed by many counties in the western United States and that student enrollment (131,514 in 2013) is lower than some of the nation’s largest school districts, the state’s full initiative was funded by the legislature at $418,000.

Delaware stressed that its local plans be NIMS-compliant not only for the sake of safety and organization, but also because such compliance will make districts eligible for federal grant monies when they become available. Policymakers need to confer with lawmakers and their counterparts in multiple agencies, including at the local level, to determine which agency will bear the cost of emergency preparedness at a given stage. Once a system is in place, costs cannot reasonably be cut from a security perspective. For instance, as Hughes noted, when school officials work on plans they will inevitably find things that require repair or replacement. If locks on windows or doors are broken, they must be fixed; otherwise there is no effective security plan or system in place.

Finally, while not every state has top homeland security officials who are also well versed in education policy and administration, every state board and other policymaker does have the opportunity to develop stronger partnerships with their respective homeland security departments, county emergency management officers, and local first responders. And every educator, administrator, and policymaker shares responsibility for safeguarding the well being of the students they are entrusted with.

Questions for State Boards of Education to Consider

• What are your state’s emergency preparedness policies for schools? Are your policies directed solely to districts and/or schools, or is there a statewide plan?
• How does emergency preparedness fit into the state board’s mission and/or strategic plan (e.g., assurance that every student has a safe place in which to learn)?
• Should statewide emergency planning for schools be handled through state board of education policies, rules, and regulations or through statute?
• Is there a state law regulating emergency preparedness for public buildings? How well does it address schools?
• Is there a relationship between officials in your state education and homeland security departments?
• What potential emergency circumstances are unique to areas in your state?
• Is your agency able to pool funds with partner agencies to develop and implement a comprehensive emergency preparedness initiative?
Model Policy: Emergency Management Plan

**GOAL.** Each school/district shall develop a written Emergency Management Plan that provides for measured, appropriate responses when crisis incidents occur. The plan will include policies and procedures designed to address all anticipated hazards, including natural disasters, emergency medical needs, mass illness, fires, crashes, and threats and acts of violence.

**PLAN DEVELOPMENT.** Stakeholders from throughout the community, including local government, law enforcement, public safety, public health, and mental health, shall be included as appropriate in the development and implementation of all aspects of the plan. The plan shall respond to risk and vulnerability assessments that have determined potential hazards the school/district may encounter.

The plan shall include and thoroughly address four major components recommended by federal authorities: 1) prevention and mitigation; 2) preparedness; 3) response; and 4) recovery.

**COMMUNICATION.** The plan shall include communications strategies for: dissemination of the plan to first responders and other key stakeholders; communicating emergency response policies and reunification procedures to parents or guardians; alerting the public in the event of a crisis; and conducting post-incident briefings with school staff and community partners to document the quality of the response and identify areas in need of improvement.

**STAFF TRAINING.** Schools/districts shall provide training to all staff and students on emergency response procedures. Additional training should be provided as needed to staff with identified roles in emergency response. Staff and students should participate in at least two/other exercises and drills throughout the course of the school year.

**REPORTING.** Each school/district must submit the Emergency Management Plan for approval by the chief state school officer/district superintendent/other. Updates to the plan shall be submitted every year/two years/other. In the event of an incident that triggers implementation of the plan, a thorough report of the incident will be submitted within six months/other, including a discussion of major lessons learned.

Note: Words underlined and in italics indicate choices to be made by a state or local school board.

Endnotes


