

Emergency Response: Preparing for a Crisis

Leveraging technology to be better prepared for emergency situations.

By Steve Waldmann and Tom Strasburger



When it comes to school safety and security, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December 2012 forever changed the way K–12 schools prepare for emergencies. Until then, schools handled emergency preparedness on a case-by-case basis and mostly internally. Districts didn’t share best practices, state departments remained largely uninvolved in the process, and no federal laws broached the topic of how to prevent such unthinkable events from taking place on our public school campuses.

With the Sandy Hook tragedy as a driving catalyst, districts saw a massive uptick in the number of

recommendations, programs, and expectations around school safety. All schools nationwide are expected to have clear, effective emergency operation plans in place—a daunting expectation.

Facing the Forces of Change

With six school buildings, 4,200 students, and 457 teachers, administrators, and employees, Kings Local School District in Ohio is a midsize K–12 district that doesn’t necessarily face any unique challenges in the safety and security arena. However, when state and federal governments started making recommendations related to new safety concepts, expectations, and plans,

the district found itself in the midst of a 180-degree change in the way it prepares for and handles emergencies.

Among the requirements for schools in Ohio are “theoretical school safety drills” that go beyond the basic drills that schools have conducted for decades. Theoretical school safety drills provide instruction to school faculty and staff regarding procedures to follow in response to a sudden emergency caused by an act or potential act of violence, such as a person possessing a deadly weapon or dangerous ordnance.

In Ohio, House Bill 422—commonly known as the “safety drill” bill—went into effect in March 2015 and requires school safety plans to be updated at least every three years or when a major modification to the school building necessitates changes in the plan’s procedures. In addition to the standard fire, tornado, and lockdown drills, the school principal or director of any school (both public and private) must conduct a theoretical school safety drill once a year.

Along with the new safety drill requirements came several additional compliance mandates from the Ohio Legislative Service Commission. For example, a district must include a copy of the school building’s blueprint when it files the current school safety plan with law enforcement agencies. In addition, all school safety plans and blueprints must be filed with the attorney general and, upon request, with the fire department that serves the political subdivision in which the building is located.

Meeting the Requirements

To maintain accurate records across the district’s six different facilities, Kings Local School District turned to the online regulatory compliance solution it had been working with since 2007.

To meet the new requirements, the district set up recurring reminders for the upcoming theoretical drills, as well as other compliance tasks.

When the new laws went into effect, the creators of the regulatory compliance solution immediately addressed the legislation and integrated the new compliance tasks into the platform the district already had in place. That adjustment ensured that the district did not miss any required training, drills, inspections, or other compliance deadlines, all of which are vital to ensuring the safety and security of students and staff.

To meet the new requirements, the district set up recurring reminders for the upcoming theoretical drills, as well as other compliance tasks. For example, a reminder was created for the administration to notify the sheriff’s office of the required drills on December 1



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of each year so the sheriff’s office is both aware of the schedule and can participate in drills.

Kings then assigned the tasks and their associated deadlines to the appropriate administrators. With this comprehensive calendar of tasks already scheduled to recur as required, the automation makes it easier to stay in compliance.

With each recurring task set up according to specific date ranges and with the proper documentation included, the district no longer worries about whether the tasks are completed for each upcoming year. The system reminds administrators about what has to be done to comply and includes instructions and the appropriate documentation and forms.

From Tabletop to Real Life

Before the new theoretical drill requirement went into effect, Kings Local School District had been conducting “tabletop” exercises at administrative meetings for about two years. At those meetings, administrators focused on three different top-of-mind issues related to specific events or exercises.

They then looked carefully at the options and decided what actions they would likely take in an emergency.

Through in-depth discussions as a group, the team hashed out considerations, options, actions, and other important information so they could “bank” that information for future use.

When the new law went into effect, it was relatively easy to transition from the administrative tabletop exercises to the theoretical drill’s broader effort, which included law enforcement personnel, teachers, facility staff members, and other key individuals.

Now, rather than mentally banking the information for future use, the administration and staff are able to execute their plans more clearly in real-life situations as an entire district—from the student to the teacher to the administrative staff, and everyone in between. That process helps Kings build out ideas when the district is *not* in crisis mode and allows the administration and staff to walk and talk through situations to be better prepared for them.

The district continues to talk about safety, to reiterate its importance, and to set expectations for staff members to be “players” in the overall process.

Using the compliance management solution, the district can automate the assignment of a particular theoretical drill across all buildings and ensure that all interested parties are “in the know” and up to speed should a real crisis occur. It’s critical that everyone understands his or her role in the process and what could be expected of staff should this theoretical drill become a “real-life” event.

The district also used the compliance portion of the solution to remind key administrators to have the necessary discussions at administrative meetings and also to notify local first responders after the plan is executed.

Not Over until the Last Person Leaves

Although the new safety drill requirements for schools are straightforward in theory, getting everyone to recognize their importance and making the drills as realistic as possible can present significant challenges in ensuring that they are completed. In addition, administrators

want to ensure that staff members take away some constructive value from the process rather than viewing it as “yet another requirement” being rolled out at a school.

Another key expectation is that teachers recognize that although their primary job is teaching, they must also allocate time and effort to keeping their students safe and secure. To more effectively redirect teachers’ emphasis in that direction, Kings focuses on delivering a consistent and clear message.

That message is vital because when the issue is no longer a topic of discussion, it tends to lose its importance or value. To offset that challenge, the district continues to talk about safety, to reiterate its importance, and to set expectations for staff members to be “players” in the overall process. The district’s safety is tied directly to its employees. If an employee is unaware of the proper procedure or action to take in an emergency, the district has a safety issue.

Looking back on the past few months, effectively and efficiently meeting the new theoretical safety drill and compliance requirements without using technology would have been difficult. The district now has peace of mind knowing that all safety requirements are being met.

Steve Waldmann is manager of school business affairs for Kings Local School District, Kings Mills, Ohio. Email: swaldmann@kingslocal.net

Tom Strasburger is vice president of PublicSchoolWORKS, Cincinnati, Ohio. Email: tstrasburger@publicschoolworks.com

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