

# Transcript of Preparing Parents for School Emergencies

Speaker 1: Welcome to our program Preparing Parents for School Emergencies. We're happy to have you with us today. We anticipate that this will be a very informative session for the parents that are participating help you prepare yourself, your families, and your children for any school-based emergencies that may occur.

This program was development by the Center for Safe Schools in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania under the direction of the Susquehanna Township School District in Dauphin County Pennsylvania. Funding for this program was made possible by the US Department of Education Readiness and Emergency Management in Schools Grant granted to the Susquehanna Township School District.

The Readiness and Management Schools Grant obtained by the Susquehanna Township School District was designated project clear for connecting local educators and responders. This parent training program will reemphasize the concept that schools, the community, and the parents need to work together in preparing for, preventing, and responding to school-based emergencies.

This program has four objectives. Upon completion, we would hope that all of you will understand why schools development all-hazards plans; be able to list ways to assist the schools, and your families, in preparation of emergencies; understand some of the language used by schools to designate school-based emergencies; and also be aware of actions not to take in an emergency at school because it might hamper the operations of the school and responders.

While our schools remain statistically one of the safest places in the country, both natural and human-caused events require us to prepare for what school-based emergencies. Parents and other caregivers should be prepared to assist schools during the emergency and potential emergency situations, and follow through with directions of the school. All of our students need to be ready to perform age-appropriate protective actions for emergencies at school. In fact, students as young as the third grade have been known to assist teachers in preparing for lockdowns in one school-based emergency here in Pennsylvania in Cumberland County back in 2005 where those students gave direction to the substitute teacher of what to do when a real lockdown situation occurred.

Let's discuss a little bit about how your child's school prepares for emergencies. Most all schools in Pennsylvania, and indeed other states, have developed what are called all-hazards plans. These all-hazards plans respond to a multitude of situations, both natural, manmade, and technological events that might occur and create an emergency to school. The purpose of these plans are to reduce uncertainty and facilitate good decision making when emergencies or potential emergencies present themselves at the school or to the school officials. You need to understand that these plans have been developed, usually, in cooperation with a multi-disciplined committee of both internal and external members representing community members, emergency responders, and other

folks who have an input into a school emergency situation. Please note that specific procedure of the school district are considered secure and sensitive documents. These documents would not be released to the general public and would not be released to the parents because they do contain information that could be used against the school in case of emergency.

Throughout the school year, students will be trained in emergency procedures at school and will be taught to how to react, where to assemble, and what to expect in emergency situations. While it's very unsettling to think that emergencies might happen to our children, frequent review and practice of the emergency procedures, both at school and at home, will help everyone be prepared for emergencies. We strongly encourage that you also review emergency procedures in your home with your school-age children, which would include evacuation drills and the ability to get out and call 911 in case of an emergency.

We would encourage all parents to take part in three-step process regarding planning for school emergencies and planning for home emergencies. The first is be informed. Know what's going on in your community and in your schools at all times. Number two: be prepared. Be able to respond appropriately to an emergency. Make sure your emergency contact cards are updated. Make sure children have a family communications plan. The third step is become involved. Don't sit back and relax. Become involved and understand what's required of you in a school-based emergency and what you need to do at home to be prepared for family-based emergencies also.

How can you help become prepared? Well, let's talk about some things at home. First off is make sure you formulate your own emergency plans and teach your child or children what to do in case of emergencies at home. Provide instructions to them, what to do, and who to go to if for some reasons you are not available in an emergency and emergency occurs at home. For more information on family preparedness, we would strongly urge you to consult the website [www.readypa.org](http://www.readypa.org), as shown on your screen. This website will provide valuable information on family and home preparedness in case of emergencies.

Let's talk about some ways that you can help the school become prepared for emergencies and make you and your family more prepared also. First off is ensure that your child's emergency contact information is accurate and current. One of the biggest complaints we hear from administrators and school secretaries is that parents do not maintain up-to-date emergency contact information that can be used in case of a medical emergency, a school-wide emergency, or other situation involving your child. Secondly, provide that contact information as soon as possible to the school at the beginning of the school year. Often times, we hear of schools well into October or even November that still have not received emergency contact information back from parents. Thirdly, become familiar with the parent reunification portion of your child's emergency plan. In case of an emergency, parents want their children, and they generally want that child as soon as possible. Understand that there may be several hundred other parents that also want that child, so you need to become familiar with the parent reunification plan for you particular school or school district.

Other ways that you can help your school become prepared for school-based emergencies is to sign up for parental/guardian alerts through their web-based programs, telephone alert systems, or other mechanisms that your school district have. Most school districts have some sort of parental notification process. Again, as with the emergency contact information, please make sure if you change a work number, a home number, or a cellphone number that update your contact information on the automated notification systems provided by your school district. Finally, if your child has any specific medical conditions, allergies, or requires regular medications, please speak with your school nurse and make sure that information is on file with the school nurse. This information may be critical in an emergency situation for not only the school-based nurse program, but also first responders and EMS personnel that may need to treat your son or daughter in case of emergency at school.

Let's talk a little bit about the language schools use to discuss emergency situations or potential emergency situations that may occur at the school. The first term we want to talk about is the term evacuation. Certain emergencies may require students to exit the school building. That would be most common in case of a fire or a smoke situation in the school building. Off-site evacuations may be conducted when it's not safe for students to remain on the campus. This may occur as a result of a hazardous materials release or even situations involving shooters. If an evacuation occurs or one is in progress, please do not respond to the school. Please wait for instructions on where and how to be reunited with your child. In most of these situations, they are relatively minor. After the evacuation with a short period of time, students are generally permitted to reenter the building and resume educational activities. The disruption caused by multiple parents arriving at school could be more disruptive than the actual event that caused the evacuation.

Secondly, let's talk about lockdown situations. A lockdown may take place if an actual potential internal threat is identified at or near the school. All school doors will be locked and access to the building classrooms will be controlled by the school administration. Understand that during a lockdown no one is permitted to enter or leave the school until the situation is resolved. Again, these situations may involve the need for responders to come to the school to assist school officials. If parents flock to the school during these situations, many times what occurs is a traffic jam that prevents legitimate emergency responders from providing the assistance need to the school.

Less restrictive than lockdown is what's called a restricted movement. occasionally, student, staff, and visitor movement may be limited in schools. This usually involves a pre-planned event, such as a drug dog search, [inaudible 00:08:59] will restrict movement because of a medical emergency in the school. Students are not permitted to move freely during these events. Generally, classes will be held in class without class changes at the secondary level, but no immediate danger exists to school. If your son or daughter would happen to contact you and advise that they're in a restrict movement situation, there's absolutely no need to respond to the school. These situations are pre-planned in most cases or relatively short lived, and will be terminated relatively quickly by the school officials. In fact you have questions, please utilize the website or the alert systems to contact your school district for more information.

Other situations that may occur to the school that require protective action are severe weather events and shelter-in-place events. Let's discuss each of those individually at this time. Severe weather, for example, in the case of a severe thunderstorm or tornado warning where danger to students is imminent, students will be moved to safer locations within the school to maximize their safety from high winds and potential building damage. Likewise, at the end of the day, where severe thunderstorms are being called for, or even tornado warnings, students may be held at the school as a protective action rather than put them on buses, which are less severe during the severe weather time. Other types of severe weather that may require students to be held at the school could include severe flooding, flash flooding, or other types of situations where they're might be mudslides or the inability to get the students safely home.

As a parent myself, I understand that many times your first reaction to a school-based emergency may be to call the school or rush to pick up your child at the school. Please do not do either of these. Do not call or rush to the school upon first notification of emergency. Reasons for this are that telephone lines and the staff members are needed to handle emergency actions. Many times, school lines actually will go unanswered because school officials are busy handling the actual emergency.

Driving to the school, which also is a first reaction for many parents when they hear of an emergency, can also be very detrimental to the emergency response to the school. Driving to the school will block roads and limit access for vitally-needed emergency responders in many school situations. Just imagine what the school looks like on spring concert night each spring when the elementary school is providing services. At that point in time, many, many cars are jamming the school. That situation would be replicated in an emergency if parents suddenly rushed to the school during an emergency. Understand that our responders may take, 5, 8, 10 minutes to respond to the school. If parents rush in ahead of them, you're blocking access to vital services that might be required in a school emergency situation.

While we've already asked you not to call the school or respond to the school in emergency, some of you may be very tempted, in case you hear of an emergency at a school, to call or text message your child using cellphones. Again, for safety reasons, students and staffs are urged not to use telephones during emergency. Many a times, the cell towers can come overloaded when several hundred students and staff try to use cell towers in close proximity to a single location. These cell towers are needed for emergency and school staff communications. Please do not use the cellphones and tie up those cell tower connections in a school-based emergency.

We've talked about a few things that we would urge you not to do in case of a school emergency. Let's talk now about some good things that can happen and actions that parents should take in an emergency at their son or daughter's school. First off is turn to local TV and radio stations for official school announcements and instructions. Listen to those announcements carefully because they may provide information regarding the situation, and also information regarding parent/child reunification process. These procedures are where they will direct the parents to go to a specific location and the procedures to follow in order to be able to pick up their son or daughter from the school. Understand that many of these school emergencies are relatively short events and the

school may elect to try to maintain all the students at school and continue the educational process.

If a parent/child program is established, students will only be released to parents and guardians who are documented emergency contacts and upon presentation of photo ID, such as a driver's license, government issued ID card, or passport, in order to verify that the person picking that student up is indeed the emergency contact person listed on the emergency contact information sheets. Again, this is a vital reason why, as we discussed earlier, parents should make sure that their emergency contact information for their children are updated regularly in any time a change occurs.

Some other good information for parents is to only rely upon official communications from the school district or public safety officials. Many times, the rumor will circulate quite rapidly and very quickly during a school-based emergency. Again, we urge you to sign up for email alerts in advance through your school and visit the school district website, or stay tune to public television or radio in your area for updates from the school or public safety officials. Again, please wait for communications, either phone calls, emails, or text messages from the school, or information be broadcast on television or radio before you would respond to a school so you know the proper situation's occurring and what procedures to follow in order to pick up your son or daughter from the school.

If in fact the school decides that they want to release children early, parent actions and emergency would require you to report to a designated area so that you're able to pick up your child more efficiently and follow the procedures of the school. Understand that if a legal guardian listed on the emergency contact information is not available to pick up a child, the child will generally remain at the reunification site under the supervision of school personnel until a person on the emergency contact form is capable of arriving at the school to pick up that child.

In serious situations, particularly early on in emergencies, the situation may change requiring a change in directions to parents or guardians, particularly as it pertains to picking up their children. Parents and other caregivers need to follow directions of school staff or emergency responders the first time given. Keep in mind the school staff and the responders are already dealing with the emergency and they do not need to be dealing with parents who are not capable of or unwilling to follow their directions. Please follow directions the first time given of school staff and emergency responders if you do respond to the school.

We would ask the parents to also talk with your children about student responsibilities in the school setting in preparation for the potential of school-based emergency. Ask your child to be active participants in all school-prepared activities. Many times, students, particularly our older students, tend to think of these things as silly or jokes and do not fully participate in the emergency preparedness activities. Secondly, ask your students to take all drills and exercised seriously. These are not simply times to get out of class, but they're preparing for the potential of a real emergency that may need to enacted in real time in order to make the difference between life and death for children and staff members in schools. Thirdly, reemphasize with your student the need to follow direction of school staff and any responders the first time given. In an emergency situation, the

time is not to be challenging responders or school officials, but they need to follow directions the first time given.

Some other things parents should do with their student is talk with them about the protective actions students need to be capable of taking during a school-based emergency. All students should be capable of following directions for or on an age-appropriate level by conducting the following actions around school: evacuation, reverse evacuation, severe weather produces, intruder and lockdown procedures, and ground shaking procedures. Again, if these terms are not familiar to you and your students, you may wish to contact your school building administrator to discuss when these activities were last exercised in the school.

Evacuation is very simply the typical fire drill where we're getting all the students and staff out of the building as quickly as possible and then counting for those students. Reverse evacuation is a little bit different. This is where students and staff might be outside, elementary schools, that might be a playground situation. During the secondary programs, it might Phys Ed classes. It might afterschool activities. If an emergency occurs outside the building, we want to be able to reverse evacuate and get students and staff back inside of the building. Again, severe weather procedures, intruder/lockdown procedures, and ground shaking were discussed earlier. Your student and all staff members should be capable of carrying out these protective actions with minimal guidance from the school administration should an incident occur.

Let's summarize some of the things that we've talked about during this program. First off is it's very important for students and parents to learn emergency procedures in advance. These are not only the emergency procedures at school, but also having a good family emergency plan in case of fire, natural disaster, or technological or human-caused events at the home situation. Second, parents should make sure they take advantage of and sign up for electronic and digital messaging provided by the school. And again, keep those information contacts current. Make sure if you change a cellphone number, you change a work number, you change a home number that you update that contact information to be provided with the timely information from the school. Third, please keep your emergency contact information for your child current with the school. Again, if a number changes, please update that information with the school. If a person is no longer viable as an emergency contact, remove that person from the list and provide an additional contact for the schools to use. Fourth, follow directions given by emergency responders and school staff. This will provide for a better outcome of all situations.

As we discussed early on in this program, parents need to work collegiately with the schools. Schools, communities, and parents working together will provide for a much better situation in a school-based setting. Parents, if you see that you've talked with your children or you've talked with school staff and your schools are not doing any of the protective actions listed, I encourage you to talk with the school staff and urge them to follow through with making sure that all students and staff understand those protective actions.

Our last closing thought that we'll talk about is understand parents need to allow the school administration and emergency responders time and space to handle emergency situations. As we discussed earlier, while the first impulse may be to rush to the school, call the school, or try to call your student, many times that has an adverse affect on the ability of school administration and emergency responders to handle the situation. Please be patient. Follow the directions given by public safety officials and school officials as printed in the websites, email alerts, text message alerts, and on public television and radio. It will make for a much better outcome should the unfortunate situation or emergency occur at your son or daughter's school.

We'd like to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to view this program. We strongly encourage you to follow through with some of the protective actions we talked about, including establishing family emergency plans, speaking with your son or daughter about how prepared they feel in case of school-based emergencies, and working collegiately with your school administrators in order to make the school a safer and healthier place for all students. Again, we thank you for visiting this program. If you desire additional information on school safety, we'd encourage you to visit the website for the Center for Safe Schools at [www.safeschools.info](http://www.safeschools.info). Again, thank you for attending the program.