

Paige, Ridge, Unveil New Web Resource to Help Schools Plan for Emergencies

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In an effort to provide school leaders with more information about emergency preparedness, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige and U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge today unveiled a new section on the U.S. Department of Education's Web site - www.ed.gov/emergencyplan - designed to be a one-stop-shop to help school officials plan for any emergency, including natural disasters, violent incidents and terrorist acts.

Secretaries Paige and Ridge unveiled the tools at Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, Md.

"As a former superintendent of the nation's seventh largest school district, I know the importance of emergency planning," Secretary Paige said. "The midst of a crisis is not the time to start figuring out who ought to do what. At that moment, everyone involved - from top to bottom - should know the drill and know each other.

"The tide of events since September 11, 2001, demands that schools be better prepared. We're here to help - to provide more information and resources and to highlight programs we know work. This new Web resource will help our schools strengthen and improve their emergency plans."

In addition to the Web site, Paige also announced that \$30 million is available in FY 2003 to help school districts improve and strengthen emergency response and crisis management plans. Funds could be used to train school personnel, parents and students in crisis response; coordinate with local emergency responders including fire and police; purchase equipment; and coordinate with groups and organizations responsible for recovery issues, such as health and mental-health agencies. An additional \$30 million is included in the proposed FY 2004 budget.

Applications for this program will be available in early spring 2003. Funding decisions will be made in the summer.

Paige added that under the No Child Left Behind Act, local school districts must provide assurances that they have plans that outline how they are working to keep their schools safe and drug free.

Paige unveiled the new resource on the heels of Homeland Security Secretary Ridge's introduction of the multi-year, multi-media Ready Campaign, which includes a new Web site, www.ready.gov, to "build a more prepared nation, one individual, one family, one neighborhood, one community at a time."

"Recently the Department launched a readiness campaign where I asked Americans to do a few simple things to help protect their families in the event of a terrorist attack against their community. These steps are critically important whether at home, work or school," said Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge. "I commend Secretary Paige and the Department Education for taking the initiative to prepare our schools for any emergency, from natural disasters to terrorism. Through initiatives like this, we are achieving our goal of building a more prepared nation, one individual, one family, one neighborhood, one community at a time."

The U.S. Department of Education has been working with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies on school preparedness. In addition, the Department has been working with experts from around the country to develop a model emergency response and crisis management plan. That plan will be released later this month. Proposed plan content is excerpted below.

Emergency Plans

If you don't have a school crisis plan in partnership with public safety agencies, including law enforcement and fire, health, mental health and local emergency preparedness agencies, develop one. Ensure that it addresses traditional crises and emergencies such as fires, school shootings and accidents, as well as biological, radiological, chemical and other terrorist activities.

If you do have a crisis plan, review it. Ensure that it addresses issues related to terrorism, such as biological, radiological and chemical attacks.

Train, practice and drill. Documents on a shelf don't work in a crisis.

Ensure that your school district crisis plan addresses the unique circumstances and needs of individual schools. Districts are encouraged to develop a separate plan for each school building. Each school crisis plan should address four major areas - prevention/mitigation; preparedness; response and recovery.

Actions that schools should take under each of these areas include:

Prevention/Mitigation:

- Conduct an assessment of each school building. Identify those factors that put the building, students and staff at greater risk, such as proximity to rail tracks that regularly transport hazardous materials or facilities that produce highly toxic material or propane gas tanks, and develop a plan for reducing the risk. This can include plans to evacuate students away from these areas in times of crisis and to reposition propane tanks or other hazardous materials away from school buildings.
- Work with businesses and factories in close proximity to the school to ensure that the school's crisis plan is coordinated with their crisis plans.

- Ensure a process is in place for controlling access and egress to the school. Require all persons who do not have authority to be in the school to sign in.
- Review traffic patterns, and where possible, keep cars, buses, and trucks away from school buildings.
- Review landscaping, and ensure buildings are not obscured by overgrowth of bushes or shrubs where contraband can be placed or persons can hide.

Preparedness:

- Have site plans for each school facility readily available and ensure they are shared with first responders and agencies responsible for emergency preparedness.
- Ensure there are multiple evacuation routes and rallying points. Your first or second evacuation site options may be blocked or unavailable at the time of the crisis.
- Practice responding to crisis on a regular basis.
- Ensure a process is established for communicating during a crisis.
- Inspect equipment to ensure it operates during crisis situations.
- Have a plan for discharging students. Remember that during a crisis many parents and guardians may not be able to get to the school to pick up their child. Make sure every student has a secondary contact person and contact information readily available.
- Have a plan for communicating information to parents and for quelling rumors. Cultivate relationships with the media ahead of time, and identify a public information officer to communicate with the media and the community during a crisis.
- Work with law enforcement officials and emergency preparedness agencies on a strategy for sharing key parts of the school crisis plans.

Response:

- Develop a command structure for responding to a crisis. The roles and responsibilities for educators, law enforcement and fire officials, and other first responders in responding to different types of crisis need to be developed, reviewed and approved.

Recovery:

- Return to the business of teaching and learning as soon as possible.
- Identify and approve a team of credentialed mental health workers to provide mental health services to faculty and students after a crisis. Understand that recovery takes place over time and that the services of this team may be needed over an extended time period.

- Ensure the team is adequately trained.
- The plan needs to include notification of parents on actions that the school intends to take to help students recover from the crisis.

There are many other organizations that have prepared information to help all Americans plan for emergencies, including:

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
www.dhs.gov

Ready Campaign
www.ready.gov

Federal Emergency Management Agency
www.fema.gov

The American Red Cross
www.redcross.org

Montgomery County (MD) public schools
<http://mcps.k12.md.us/info/emergency/preparedness/index.cfm>

Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools
www.fcps.edu

North Carolina Public Schools
www.ncpublicschools.org