

# School Safety After the Bell Rings

By Joey Melvin



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Critical incidents at after-school events are not a new phenomenon. While school shooting incident data often hit the media headlines, it is essential to note that the majority of school shootings occur at much higher rates outside of the building. According to research conducted by the *K-12 School Shooting Database*, of the 1,987 documented school shootings since 1970, 1,198 occurred outside of the building (Riedman, 2022). Of those school shootings, 1,117 occurred before or after the scheduled student day (Riedman, 2022). While I've highlighted the high-impact incidents, attention must also be given to the wide range of more commonly occurring incidents, such as fights, weather-related events and medical emergencies. The bottom line, the school's responsibility to provide safe learning environments continues well beyond the end of the school day.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (2022), approximately 7.7 million youth remain on campus for after-school or Out of School Time (OST) programs. Unfortunately, at the end of the school day, most school-based resources and supports are no longer available, yet students are commonly still present. Ranging from an Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter meeting to the Friday night football game, many students and visitors remain on campus after the bell rings, signaling the "end of the day." For many schools, the plans and procedures practiced between student arrival and dismissal are not practical enough to be facilitated afterward. From limited communication abilities during critical incidents to visitor ignorance of campus expectations, gaps in after-school emergency planning are prevalent and can lead to tragedy.

## Preparedness Begins with Discussion

A decisive first step in addressing after-school activities is the simple act of facilitating a discussion with stakeholders. Ongoing emergency planning meetings with school *safety teams* should be regularly scheduled to ensure that identifying concerns, needs and resources remains a fluid process. Individual schools' climate and respective "pulse" fluctuate based on myriad impacts, and a continual communication process is integral to enhanced prevention and response actions. Identifying practices which currently exist in your school's emergency plan provides a valuable baseline to build upon. Reviewing the existing methods will assist the stakeholder groups with creating specific processes for application to after-school activities.

For example, medical emergencies during the school day might involve pre-identified individuals assigned particular roles and responsibilities that cannot be applied after school. Most of the participants involved in the medical emergency response during the regular school day are absent. Important to after-school safety discussions is bringing together staff members who are in supervisory roles. Coaches and teachers who supervise programs after school may only have a perfunctory knowledge of their campus emergency plan. Anyone overseeing programs after school must have clear expectations of their role and responsibilities. It is also important to note that staff members available after school frequently change depending on the various activities and times of the year.



**Middle school football game (Georgetown, Delaware). Many school emergencies occur after the end of the school day.**

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## Communication

Methods of communication commonly utilized during an emergency during the day, such as the public address (PA) system, are not accessible or of any value to communicate with persons outside of the building. Identifying methods of communication available is a valuable first step. The safety team's discussion will determine the dependency on radios for communication and the available staff to respond to an incident. Additionally, schools should consider a communication policy that includes training and requirements related to communications for after-school programs.

The safety team should craft specific responses to their after-school events, including school-sponsored, contracted events and weekdays/weekends. Those responses should include the following:

- Civil unrest
- Medical emergency
- Weather
- Threat of violence
- Evacuation
- Reunification
- Shelter in place

The examples provided should be expanded upon as schools assess and determine what emergencies could occur at their respective locations.

## Follow the Discussion with Exercise

After safety teams craft emergency plan enhancements, further refinement should be made with the facilitation of tabletop exercises. Tabletop exercises provide an opportunity to identify and rectify gaps in their response before actual events and can be coordinated and facilitated to offer valuable discussions in a low-stress environment. They also provide an opportunity to bring together safety teams and external stakeholders such as law enforcement, fire depart-



The author spoke in his role as School Resource Officer to a group of elementary school students (in Delaware) about safety.

ments, emergency medical services, parents, etc. Use the tabletop exercises to identify and document gaps and actionable items to address those needs. In a case study published by the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center (REMS), the South Carolina Department of Education analyzed their facilitation of tabletop exercises, which resulted in the agency identifying the action-oriented approach as being the most successful due to its low-stress involvement of stake-

holders and improvement planning focus (REMS, 2022).

Keeping schools safe is a foundational goal of all stakeholders in education. The daily efforts and resources put forth to meet the expectations of everyone involved in school safety are substantial. Whether you're a district superintendent, School Resource Officer, parent or student, feeling safe underlies all aspects of measuring success. Parents expect their children to return home, teachers strive for student academic achievements and administrators orchestrate safe and positive climates. Avoid complacency and do your part to prevent or mitigate the impacts of after-school emergencies by reviewing and enhancing your school's emergency plans.

For additional information, please contact Mr. Melvin at [jmelvin@csc.csiu.org](mailto:jmelvin@csc.csiu.org)

## References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2022, August 16). *Out of school time*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-schools/ost.htm>
- Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center (REMS). (2022). *Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Practice and Validate Emergency Operations Plans*. [https://rems.ed.gov/docs/EmergencyExercisesFactSheet\\_508C.pdf](https://rems.ed.gov/docs/EmergencyExercisesFactSheet_508C.pdf)
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