• Managing Medical Emergencies

The report titled *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* includes the expectation from families and communities that students will be kept safe from threats such as crime, violence, and other hazards including natural disasters, disease outbreaks and accidents (USDE, 2013). Injuries and illness are common occurrences in the school-age population. The school is responsible for the safety and well-being of students during the hours of school attendance, while on school property, and during school-sponsored activities. The American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement, *Medical Emergencies Occurring at School,* first written in 2008 and later reaffirmed in 2017, attributes the increased risks of medical emergencies in schools to an increase in the number of children with special health care needs and chronic medical conditions attending schools along with the limited access students have to licensed health care professionals (i.e., school nurses) (AAP, 2008).

Preparation for health-related emergencies should involve planning for those students with a known health condition or disability and training of school staff to respond appropriately during unanticipated emergencies. Plans should include students and staff with disabilities, as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act, and address appropriate evacuation plans. "Preparedness in schools is a process designed to protect students and staff from harm, minimize disruption, ensure the continuity of education for students, and develop and maintain a culture of safety" (NASN, 2019). Individualized Healthcare Plans (IHPs) and Emergency Care Plans/Emergency Action Plans (ECP/EAPs) should include provisions for care during evacuation, lockdown and/or shelter in place situations. Planning, preparation and training help to maximize positive outcomes when a medical emergency occurs.

Roles of School Staff Members

School Nurse

- Assists and advocates with school and/or district for the development and implementation of emergency response policies and procedures using an *all-hazards* approach that includes a variety of potential emergencies.
- Provides or coordinates training for designated first responders and other school staff as necessary in first aid, CPR and AED use as referenced in G.S. 115C-375.1. Instruction and certification in cardiopulmonary resuscitation for one or more school personnel as part of the "school supply of epinephrine delivery systems" is required per G.S. 115C-375.2A and referenced in Session Law 2025-60.
- Periodically assesses the school environment for safety hazards and audits injury reports to identify high occurrence areas of concern. The school nurse should share data on excessive hazards and injuries with the principal and encourage a broader assessment for possible corrective action.
- Participates in development, implementation and debriefing of practice drills for a variety of emergency scenarios. Ensures that school staff responsible for medication administration have a known "assigned" location during building evacuations to facilitate

students' access to emergency medications as needed.

- Works with administration to ensure that each school has the following in place:
    - planning for delivery of health services (location for triage, provide immediate first aid, and emergency shelter if necessary),
    - emergency supplies,
    - general response training for all school staff, including bus drivers and cafeteria
    - workers, and specialized training for designated first responder teams.
    - Emergency response plan that addresses the safety of the school population including staff.
    - As part of the emergency response plan, mitigation strategies are included to reduce the possible injury to students, staff and visitors.
    - a plan in place for addressing cardiac emergencies to include response of first responders trained in CPR, access of AED and calling 911

- As part of planning, identify essential information and equipment needed during an emergency including:
    - Consider including a 3-day supply of student medications or, at a minimum, all emergency medications such as inhalers, epinephrine delivery systems, and those ordered for diabetic and seizure emergencies as well as documentation forms. Student confidentiality and security of supplies should be maintained as much as possible during drills and emergencies
    - Although there is no national list of supplies to have on hand, having first-aid supplies that align with the needs of the school population are recommended. A "Go bag or box" is often referred to as containing these emergency supplies and may include things such as basic first-aid items, compression bandages, CPR mask, biohazard bags, flashlight and stethoscope. For a full list of recommended supplies review the supplies list provided by NASN found under Disaster Preparedness resources. The bag or box should be portable, easily accessible, and assigned to a specific staff person to grab in the event of an emergency (include this task in drills as appropriate).
- Ensures availability of emergency flip charts or first-aid algorithms to be located in convenient areas as a readily accessible reference for school personnel.
    - The Emergency Guidelines for Schools, 2009 Edition, a publication of the NCDHHS Office of Emergency Medical Services for Children program, should be available at each school main office and can be loaded onto teacher computers for easy reference. The Emergency Guidelines for Schools can be downloaded at https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/n.c.-emergency-guidelines-for-schools/2601242.
    - North Carolina Poison Control Center (1-800-222-1222)
- Ensures that a process is in place whereby emergency information for each student is completed and maintained in the health room and/or office for staff members' use. Emergency information should contain demographic information; home, cell, and work phone numbers for both parents/guardians; names and contact info for other adults authorized to retrieve a student from school; allergies; chronic health conditions; and contact information for the student's primary provider, dentist, or other health professionals

as indicated. Emergency information should be easily accessible while also protecting the confidentiality and security of information. Information should be made accessible to others on a need-to-know basis. (Brzoza, V., Cosby, M., & Silva, C., 2025)

- Ensures access to Emergency Action Plans for students with known life-threatening conditions.
- Incorporates school safety, injury prevention, and first-aid education into the health curriculum to be reinforced via health promotion activities.
- Ensures notification of parents regarding student injury/illness is consistent with local policy and procedure as well as use of sound nursing judgment.

School Administration

- Establishes a core emergency response planning team that includes a variety of key school personnel; student/parent/family representatives; agency representatives that support groups with special needs; and community partners who have a role in emergency response.
- Designates staff to be trained to respond to emergency situations in the role of first responder as defined by Article 25A, *Special Medical Needs of Students*.
- Provides opportunities to practice components of the emergency response plan (i.e., drills).
- Includes a mechanism for ensuring that all new staff receive training at the time of hire.
- Ensures regular review of the emergency response plan and update as needed.
- Ensures the development and implementation of local policy and procedures that address the handling of health care emergencies. Be sure that planning includes the classroom, playground, school-based health center (if applicable), before- and after-school programs, field trips, school transportation, and athletic events.
- Identifies specific school staff who will address the emotional needs and support needed for students and staff.
- Communicates policy and procedures to all school staff, students and parents.

Other School Staff

- Participate in general staff training related to common school health emergencies.
- Follow health care plans as written. Communicate with the school nurse/parent/provider as needed or appropriate.
- Respond promptly to emergent and urgent health concerns, communicating concerns to the school nurse, designated first responder team members, school administrators and parents.
- Recognize the limits of licensure, job description and training.
- Adhere to school policy related to blood-borne pathogens, universal precautions, and the exposure control plan.
- Adhere to school policy on emergency response to health care needs.
- Participate in completion of incident reports in accordance with school policy and procedure.

Parent/Guardian

- Provides school staff with current information specific to student health care needs.
- Ensures the school has up-to-date contact information and current care plans that address the needs of the student during the school day, while on field trips and in the event of an extended shelter in place situation.
- Follows school plans regarding emergency supply of medication and/or supplies.
- If invited, participate in the emergency response planning team.

National Framework for Preparedness Efforts

According to the United States Department of Education (USDE) The Role of Districts In Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans 2019 resource, "Indeed, a safe and healthy environment is vital to student learning, and necessary for maintaining public trust in our education system." The guide sets forth emergency management principles applicable to local schools, school districts, regionally, statewide and nationally. The steps and processes outlined in the guide can be a valuable tool to mitigate emergencies when they occur to respond effectively and reduce the negative impact. The five mission areas related to preparedness include: Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery, as described below.

- Prevention: the capabilities necessary to avoid, deter, or stop an imminent crime, or threatened or actual mass casualty incident. Prevention is the action schools take to prevent a threatened or actual incident from occurring.
- Protection: the capabilities to secure schools against acts of violence and manmade or natural disasters. Protection focuses on ongoing actions that protect students, teachers, staff, visitors, networks, and property from a threat or hazard.
- Mitigation: the capabilities necessary to eliminate or reduce the loss of life and property damage by lessening the impact of an event or emergency. Mitigation also means reducing the likelihood that threats and hazards will happen.
- Response: the capabilities necessary to stabilize an emergency once it has already happened or is certain to happen in an unpreventable way; establish a safe and secure environment; save lives and property; and facilitate the transition to recovery.
- Recovery: the capabilities necessary to assist schools affected by an event or emergency in restoring the learning environment.

Additional emergency preparedness resources:

- Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) expands upon the five mission areas further and includes resources, trainings and guidance.
- National Incident Management System (NIMS) is supported by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and provides government and nongovernment

organizations with guidance to address emergency management.

- Incident Command System (ICS) is a component of NIMS which provides a standardized approach for incident management regardless of the cause, size, location or complexity.

Nursing Assessment and Triage

The primary role of a school during an emergency or disaster is providing triage and immediate first aid to students, staff, family and members of the community. The school nurse should be prepared and ready to respond to an incident as soon as it is safe and following communication directives. As part of the school nurse role, the nursing process should guide emergency response. The four components of a systematic approach in an emergency include:

- Scene safety assessment – The school nurse assesses the emergency scene to ensure it is safe. This may include inside the school building, the surrounding outside perimeter, a specific location on a school campus. Safety of those responding comes before identified or potential victims as they cannot help others if they become a victim. The assessment includes identifying potential dangers to the victims, first responders, possible bystanders including parents, other students and staff. It is important to note "if hazards are evident, the scene is not safe and should not be approached. Activate EMS and wait until the risks are reduced before proceeding with care" (Brzoza, Cosby & Silva, 2025, p.395).

- Across-the room assessment – As soon as the school nurse observes those that are ill or injured, an assessment is initiated. The general appearance can be performed in a hands-off manner depending on the given circumstances. This immediate assessment can determine possible physical concerns such as obvious injury and the urgency of response needed. The ABS pediatric assessment tool can be implemented to 1) General **A**ppearance 2) Work of **B**reathing 3) **C**irculation of the skin as described in Chapter 17 of the School Nursing A Comprehensive Text. Determining if the student is stable or needs urgent medical attention will determine if EMS is immediately activated and the school nurse proceeds with a primary assessment to render life-saving interventions.

- Primary assessment – The school nurse provides a rapid physical examination to determine if there is an emergency at risk for loss of life or limb. Problems that may impact loss of life, limb or vision are advised to follow the following format: Control hemorrhage/perform CPR, Airway, Breathing, Circulation, Disability and Exposure. For additional information on this assessment tool as well as how to assess the level of consciousness or disability, please refer to Chapter 17, *Students With Acute Illness and Injury,* (Brzoza, Cosby, & Silva, 2025). In order to be best prepared for emergency response related it essential to be informed of these critical assessments which may greatly determine the outcome of victims.

- Secondary assessment – This component requires the school nurse to gather additional information on those that are victims. The necessary information to support decision making for those that are injured or ill is based on: 1) Full set of vital signs including assessing level of pain 2) providing comfort measures 3) obtaining a health history and completing a head-to-toe assessment 4) Inspection and interventions that are appropriate

based on previous findings.

Triage is the process of sorting individuals according to the type of urgency of their condition and then allocating the necessary care. School nurses are encouraged to utilize the systematic emergency response assessment as described in order to implement triage. As the health care professional in the school setting, the school nurse needs to have skills in order to quickly prioritize and initiate interventions in an emergency. This applies to individuals and mass causalities. The level of triage acuity levels to implement when triaging include:

- Emergent – Activate EMS immediately.
- Urgent – Medical treatment is required within 2 hours.
- Nonurgent – Condition is not severe but may need follow-up medical care.

For a more comprehensive review of the four components, Chapter 17 of "School Nursing A Comprehensive Text" (4th edition, 2025) provides detailed guidance and a summary of systematic emergency response. This chapter also provides greater details of triage categories, response with students with special health care needs and body system related emergencies (Brzoza, Cosby, & Silva, 2025)

Resources

There are a variety of resources that are available to assist the school nurse in being better prepared to handle school emergencies. Some suggestions are listed below as a place to begin but the list is not comprehensive. Each school nurse is responsible for a self-assessment of competence and learning needs related to emergency response activities.

- American Heart Association, Pediatric Emergency Assessment, Recognition and Stabilization (PEARS)
- American Red Cross, Resources for Schools, Preparation Tips for Schools, Staff, and Students
- National Association of School Nurses (NASN) has a variety of educational and training resources related to the management of common health emergencies including asthma, diabetes, disaster preparedness, drugs of abuse, food allergies and anaphylaxis, mental health, seasonal influenza, and violence in schools. Go to www.nasn.org
- National Association of School Nurses Disaster Preparedness Resource Page
- NC DPI Center for Safer Schools
- NC Public Health Preparedness and Response Branch
- School Emergency Triage Training: The purpose of SETT is to provide school nurses with the knowledge, skills and training resources to lead school-based Disaster Response Teams and perform triage in response to mass casualty incident (MCI) events.

References

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