PREPARE YOUR ORGANIZATION FOR TORNADO SAFETY

K–12 SCHOOLS
INTRODUCTION

Everyone has a role to play in preparing for a disaster. This day of action guide, Prepare Your Organization for Tornado Safety, is designed to help you improve your school’s readiness for a tornado. It provides guidance on how to hold a tabletop exercise to help your school assess and improve its ability to maintain or re-establish operations when affected by a tornado. The exercise leads you through a simulated disaster and prompts you to examine your plans, policies, and procedures in a stress-free environment.

Many individuals within your school can lead this effort; you may be a senior leader, a staff member, a volunteer, or a teacher. Please see A Playbook for Your Day of Action: K–12 Schools for information and resources to make implementation easy.

America’s PrepareAthon! also offers the day of action guide: Prepare Your People for Tornado Safety: K–12 Schools to encourage teacher and staff readiness for a tornado by moving them to take action. It provides guidance on how to hold a tornado preparedness discussion and conduct a short drill as a day of action for your school.

TORNADO PREPAREDNESS FOR YOUR K–12 SCHOOL

The America’s PrepareAthon! day of action guide: Prepare Your Organization for Tornado Safety is a tabletop exercise designed to help assess your school’s ability to maintain or re-establish operations when impacted by a disruptive event. A tabletop exercise is a facilitated discussion of roles, procedures, and responsibilities in the context of a simulated emergency scenario. The goal of this tabletop exercise is to determine your school’s ability to respond to a tornado scenario using your current plans, capabilities, and resources in order to identify needed improvements. By investing a few hours now, you can identify improvements that could make the difference in keeping your doors open after a disaster.

Tabletop exercises are used by emergency managers, business continuity planners, and others as part of a comprehensive exercise program to build capacity and increase resilience. For schools that do not currently do this type of planning, conducting this exercise as part of your America’s PrepareAthon! day of action can be a first step in developing a training and exercise plan.

EXERCISE OVERVIEW

The Prepare Your Organization for Tornado Safety tabletop exercise unfolds with an initial scenario description and proceeds with three scenario updates. Each stage of a scenario includes discussion questions to allow Participants to focus on problem solving and improvements in a low-stress, consequence-free environment.

EXERCISE OBJECTIVES

This tabletop exercise is designed to help your school identify strengths and weaknesses in the following areas:

**Facilities:** Building Safe Rooms to protect against high winds; supplies for staying on-site, evacuating, and performing medical response; signage; accessibility considerations; and emergency repair.

**Human Resources Policies:** Notification and alerts for teachers, staff, and parents; early release/telework policies; flexible work schedules; payroll and insurance policies; employee insurance policies; employee/family reunification procedures; employees trained in first aid with access to medical supplies; and capacity to ensure accessibility for individuals with disabilities or access and functional needs.

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1 More information can found at www.fema.gov/emergency-planning-exercises.
Continuity of Operations Plans: Plans to operate at an alternate location; access to important data; roles and responsibilities; insurance policies; supplier and customer relationship management; and plans and processes to resume operations.

Emergency Response Plans: Ability to provide critical information and updates during the emergency through multiple notification systems; guidance on how to protect critical assets; plans to provide first aid; and protocols for communicating with local first responders and critical infrastructure providers.

EXERCISE STRUCTURE

1. Introduction and Overview (suggested time: 10 minutes)
   The Facilitator starts the session with introductions of Participants, a reminder of everyone’s role, and outlines of the process for implementing the exercise or “exercise play.” The Facilitator reminds everyone that the purpose of the exercise is to improve school safety and that the exercise is not an opportunity to be critical of any person or department.

2. Exercise and Discussion (suggested time: 1.5–2 hours)
   Once the Facilitator has provided the overview of the exercise play and answered any questions, play simply begins by introducing the scenario and starting the questions. To simulate a real event, the scenario unfolds through a series of updates. Each update includes a set of questions for the Facilitator to help Participants imagine how your school would handle the situation.

   It is important to take the hypothetical scenario seriously and for each Participant to imagine as realistically as possible what he or she would be thinking, feeling, and doing from both a professional and a personal perspective. The discussion should address the specifics of your school—your teachers and staff, your facilities, and your policies. To provide context, the Facilitator may also reference actual events that have occurred in your area or in your state.

3. Debriefing and Next Steps (suggested time: 20 minutes)
   Once you have concluded the exercise, it is critical to debrief and establish followup plans. A debriefing is simply a review of the exercise and an opportunity to identify next steps. At the conclusion of the exercise, the Facilitator will ask for feedback and ensure that everyone has the chance to provide input. It is important to capture feedback from all attendees. The Facilitator ends the session with a commitment to summarize the issues identified through the exercise play and to develop an improvement plan for circulation and further discussion.

GETTING STARTED

Once your school’s leadership has agreed to hold a tabletop exercise, the following steps will lead you through the planning process and help your school get the most value from the exercise. In order for the exercise discussion to be spontaneous and realistic, it is important not to share the specific scenario or discussion questions in advance.

1. Select the Facilitator
   The Facilitator leads the exercise discussion, provides scenario updates, and prompts Participants to interact. A Facilitator who understands the scope of your school’s operations may have greater success in stimulating a productive discussion.
2. **Review Materials and Set Objectives**

The Facilitator should review all the materials in advance of the exercise and be very comfortable with the questions to prompt discussion. The Facilitator Guide provided in the next section includes the tornado scenario, scenario updates, questions for Participants to discuss, and prompts and notes to help the Facilitator lead or stimulate additional discussion. Your school’s leadership should also review these materials and add questions that are appropriate for your community, your organizational structure, and your facilities.

The objective of the exercise is to examine how you can improve your school’s plans and infrastructure to ensure minimal impact from a disruptive event, so make sure that the questions test the key functions you want to evaluate. Customize questions and/or the scenario so they’re specific to your school and the services you provide. If the days or times provided affect how your school would respond to the event, consider different times and days as you discuss the scenario.

3. **Identify Who Should Participate**

To fully examine your school’s operations in the tabletop exercise, you will need to include representatives from across your school. Involve key decision makers and subject matter experts from all departments. These may include senior leadership, facilities management, information technology (IT) teams, and human resources. You also may wish to include third-party vendors such as phone, IT, data back-up, food, and other critical services.

4. **Determine Roles**

There are different roles for “players” in an exercise, either as a Participant or an Observer. It is also a good idea to have a Note-Taker to capture important points in the conversation. Decide who should attend and which role he or she will be assigned. Remember not to share specific information about the exercise with Participants or Observers in advance.

**Participant:** Someone who has decision-making authority or is a designated proxy, who in the course of normal business operations has authority over a component of operations (e.g., Vice Principal). Participants should sit at the table, answer questions, and make decisions during the exercise.

**Observer:** Someone who benefits from attending the exercise because his or her role in the school may include implementing identified recommendations. In order to keep the number of speakers manageable, observers do not participate in the moderated discussion but are encouraged to take notes and provide feedback at the end.

**Note-Taker(s):** Someone who can record the discussion during the exercise and summarize the main points as a followup report. You may even want to have the main points recorded on a flip chart. Encourage Participants and Observers also to take notes during the exercise for the debriefing afterwards.

5. **Plan the Logistics**

Plan the logistics ahead of time to make sure the exercise goes smoothly.

**Location:** The room should be large enough for all Participants and Observers and set up so that everyone can see and hear each other. Arranging the table(s) and seating in a U-shape ensures that all the attendees can see each other and the Facilitator. If Participants do not know one another, consider having table tents or name badges with names and departments identified.

**Time:** The tabletop exercise should last approximately 2–3 hours, depending on the amount of discussion and needed breaks. This includes time for introductions, an overview of the process, the exercise, and a debriefing. While this may seem like a lot of time, especially for busy teachers, the investment will pay dividends both in a real emergency or disaster and also in improving day-to-day operations.
Invitations: Send invitations to Participants with an explanation of what a tabletop exercise is and what role they will play. Remind them that the tabletop exercise is not meant to assess individual performance but is an opportunity to identify and resolve problems as a leadership team. Set the expectations early that this is a constructive process to improve school safety and continuity of operations.

Equipment and Materials: Print enough copies of the tabletop exercise Scenario Handouts in advance for all attendees; these will be used as handouts during the exercise. Collect any other materials that you would like to have in the room for easy reference during the exercise, such as existing policies or other manuals. If you are using flip charts, make sure you have the easels and markers on hand.

MAINTAIN THE MOMENTUM

After completing the tabletop exercise, be sure to follow through with addressing the gaps and needed improvements identified by Participants. Your school’s leadership should create a plan that lists what items need to be addressed, who is responsible for executing those tasks, and when resolution is expected. Develop or update your school’s emergency operating plan and test it at least annually. The investment to prepare and to routinely review policies, plans, and communications will strengthen your school and build resilience to the challenges and events that may lie ahead.

TABLETOP EXERCISE—FACILITATOR GUIDE

TIPS FOR FACILITATING A PRODUCTIVE TABLETOP EXERCISE

Review these materials, including the links, for additional resources in advance of the exercise. Adequate preparation by the Facilitator is the best way to ensure a successful and productive exercise.

BEFORE THE EXERCISE

- Read the America’s PrepareAthon! How to Prepare for a Tornado guide, available at www.ready.gov/prepare, for information about the hazard, warning signs, and alerts, and what you should do now to protect individuals and property.
- Review the scenario and followup questions and add any additional questions or issues that are specific to your school’s teacher and staff, organizational structure, or facilities.
- Review the information at www.ready.gov/individuals-access-functional-needs and consider the needs of individuals in your school with disabilities or access and functional needs.
- Review the list of Participants and make sure you know their role in the school.
- Ensure that all logistics are taken care of, including seating for all Participants and Observers, name tags or table tents, and handouts.
- Discuss the exercise with the Note-Taker(s) so that they are prepared for the topics to be addressed in the discussion.

DURING THE EXERCISE

- Make introductions, review your role as Facilitator, explain the objectives of the exercise, and set the ground rules for the discussion.
PREPARE YOUR ORGANIZATION

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- Make sure the Participants understand that you all share responsibility for making the exercise productive and useful to the school.
- Ask open-ended questions, using the words what, when, where, how, and why. If necessary, direct questions to specific Participants.
- Encourage conversation and give extra encouragement to those who may be a little reticent.
- Elicit suggestions for how to improve issues that arise during the exercise discussion.
- Involve all Participants. Do not let one or two Participants monopolize the discussions.
- Assist the group by summarizing a point, restating a key discussion point, and asking specific individuals to comment.
- Avoid the temptation to jump in with the solutions when Participants are struggling and, instead, try to draw out the answers from them. Participants are more likely to contribute if they feel that people are listening intently and sympathetically.
- Watch for signs of frustration or conflict. Remember that the exercise is not a test, but an opportunity to identify areas for improvement. If you see mounting frustration or conflict, pause the exercise and suggest a break. Keep in mind the low-stress nature of the tabletop exercise.
- Strive to get through all the scenario updates, but know that it’s ok if you don’t. Moving too quickly may not allow solutions to come forward. Conversely, moving along so slowly that nothing of substance is decided defeats the purpose of the exercise.
- Be mindful of the suggested timelines and ensure that discussions remain within the scope of the given discussion area. Sometimes the conversation may begin to drift to topics more appropriate for discussion in later periods of the exercise, or the conversation may get stuck on a problem area that will need to be resolved later. To keep the discussion moving, use a “parking lot” to record difficult issues that can be discussed more fully at a later time.

AFTER THE EXERCISE

- Summarize a few of the highlights of the discussion and then use the same facilitation techniques to capture feedback from Participants and Observers.
- Keep this summary simple by asking for input to create a list of the areas identified as major strengths of the school and areas for improvement.
- End the session with a plan to summarize the exercise and a suggested process to begin to address the identified areas for improvement. You will want to build on the discussions that took place during the exercise in ongoing leadership discussions and in meetings with teachers and staff.

CONDUCTING THE EXERCISE

INTRODUCTIONS AND OVERVIEW (suggested time: 10 minutes)

Begin the exercise by introducing yourself and asking all exercise Participants to do the same. Ask Participants to state their role within the school. After introductions, provide a short overview of the exercise objectives and process. Emphasize that the purpose of the exercise is to identify strengths and weaknesses of current plans, policies, and
procedures to strengthen the school’s resilience to disruptive events. Explain the roles of the Facilitator, Participants, and Observers. Remind everyone to share responsibility for making the exercise useful and productive.

**TORNADO INITIAL SCENARIO**

Begin the exercise by distributing the Initial Scenario Handout to all Participants. Read the Scenario out loud.

Monday, 12:23 p.m.: The National Weather Service has issued a Tornado Watch for your area. A large line of powerful thunderstorms is approaching your area and conditions are favorable for tornadoes to develop. [You can add specific names for your area or town to make the scenario more realistic.]

**TORNADO INITIAL SCENARIO QUESTIONS (suggested time: 15–20 minutes)**

1. Who in the school is responsible for monitoring or would likely hear or receive a bulletin or alert from the National Weather Service or other alerting authority? How would they receive this information? Do they know the meaning of a watch (as compared to a warning) and what guidance should be issued? Would power be needed to receive this information?

2. What information are you sharing with your teachers, staff, and students at this time? What are the current process and communications platform(s) used to notify teachers, staff, and students of potential threats or hazards, including those who work off-site or are out of the building?

   **Prompt:** Who decides when and how to share information about severe weather? What communication platforms do you use regularly (e.g., email, messenger, smart phone, push-to-talk, radio, loud speaker, written)? Are these systems dependent on community sources of power? Have you made adequate accommodations for notifying anyone with a functional need?

3. When you hear that a Tornado Watch has been issued, what are your immediate concerns?

   **Prompt:** Are there components of your school where weather affects operations (e.g., outdoor operations, sporting events, athletics)?

4. What, if any, decisions should be made at this time? Who can make those decisions (name, position/role)?

   **Prompt:** Is there anything you can do at this time to protect the facility from damage? Is there equipment or records that should be moved?

**TORNADO SCENARIO UPDATE #1**

Distribute Scenario Update #1 Handout. Read the Scenario Update out loud.

1:05 p.m.: A large tornado, initially thought to be an Enhanced Fujita (EF) scale EF3, has hit [Insert town southwest of your community], approximately 10 miles southwest of here. The National Weather Service reports that the storm system responsible for this tornado is headed directly toward our area and has issued an immediate Tornado Warning for our city and the surrounding area.

**Note:** If you’re facilitating a tabletop exercise for a school with multiple locations (e.g., campuses), add this scenario update: “You have no contact with your colleagues in [insert town] at this time and cannot find out if they were impacted.”
TORNADO SCENARIO UPDATE #1 QUESTIONS (suggested time: 20–25 minutes)

1. Based on this updated information, how have your concerns changed? Do you have any new concerns?

2. What is your school communicating to teachers, staff, students, and parents about the Tornado Warning at this time?
   
   **Note:** Once a Tornado Warning has been issued, everyone in the building should take action IMMEDIATELY to move to a Best or Moderate Protective Location. If they have not yet identified the Best or Moderate Protective Locations in your building, visit www.fema.gov/mitigation-best-practices-portfolio/tornado-protection-selecting-refuge-areas-buildings-fema-431.

3. Are there identified locations where people should go in the event of a tornado?
   
   **Prompt:** Do these meet the FEMA standards for a Safe Room, or the International Code Council 500 for a Storm Shelter? If not, are they considered the Best Available Refuge Area as determined by an architect or structural engineer?
   
   **Prompt:** Is there sufficient space for the full workforce and any visitors that may be on-site? Are these protective locations identified and labeled with signage (in multiple languages, if appropriate)? Are they accessible for people with access and functional needs?
   
   **Note:** The best way to minimize injuries and fatalities in tornadoes is to have adequate protection. Explain Best and Moderate Protective Locations from America’s PrepareAthon! How to Prepare for a Tornado guide.

4. Have you identified Best or Moderate Protective Locations for all of the teachers, staff, students, and any visitors that may be on-site? Are these Protective Locations identified and labeled? Are they accessible for people with access and functional needs?
   
   **Prompt:** Has an architect or structural engineer identified the Best Available Refuge Area for your building(s)? Based on your risk profile, should you consider investing in greater protection by hardening existing protective locations or building a Safe Room or Storm Shelter? Could you join with other organizations in your neighborhood to build a community tornado Safe Room?
   
   **Prompt:** Are these areas stocked with supplies? What supplies would be needed? Do you have a system to account for all teachers, staff, students, and any visitors? Can you communicate with each other once you are in your protective locations?

5. Are your teachers, staff, and students aware of where to go in the event of a tornado? Would they be able to guide visitors to a Protective Location?

6. Based on the tornado in [Insert town], how will you handle teachers, staff, and parents seeking information about the safety of their family members and children? What will you do about teachers and staff who wish to leave the building? Do you have policies or guidance that address this situation?
   
   **Prompt:** What are some ways you can promote family preparedness to help ease teacher, staff, and student concerns?
   
   **Note:** For school’s whose staff members work in shifts, ask Participants to address operational decisions regarding incoming shifts and notification.
TORNADO SCENARIO UPDATE #2

Distribute Scenario Update #2 Handout. Read the Scenario Update out loud.

1:18 p.m.: A large tornado has touched down in the outskirts of our city near a highly populated neighborhood. We hear a loud rumbling noise, the power goes out, and the building begins to vibrate. We hear the sound of breaking glass and flying debris. The sound intensifies and then gradually fades.

TORNADO SCENARIO UPDATE #2 QUESTIONS (suggested time: 10–15 minutes)

1. What are your immediate actions and priorities?
   
   **Prompt:** Who is in charge? How will leaders communicate with each other and with teachers, staff, and students? Do you have an alternate plan for communications if traditional systems are damaged or the power is out? Has anyone been trained in the National Incident Management System or the Incident Command System?
   
   **Note:** This question should be limited to the immediate actions taken within the facility, in the first 10–15 minutes.

2. Do you have an identified place to evacuate to in the immediate aftermath of a disaster like a tornado? How do you communicate this evacuation to your teachers, staff, and students?
   
   **Prompt:** Do they know the location of this site? How will you keep teachers, staff, and students safe as they leave? Can you support anyone with access and functional needs?

3. If safe to do so, what critical operations/functions must be shut down before you leave the facility? Who knows how to do this?

4. Do you have a process in place to account for all your teachers, staff, and students? If people cannot be located or contacted, what—if any—processes do you have to account for them?
   
   **Prompt:** How do you know who is on-site at any given time? How is that information communicated to those who need it?

5. Is there adequate staff with first aid skills to help with injuries? Do you have medical supplies on hand?

TORNADO SCENARIO UPDATE #3

Distribute Scenario Update #3 Handout. Read the Scenario Update out loud.

1:38 p.m.: The tornado, determined to be an EF3, has damaged approximately 300 homes and businesses in our city. At least 50 people have various injuries, and an unknown number of people are missing.

Our facility has suffered extensive damage and at least five employees are injured and two are missing. Search and rescue efforts are ongoing. The mayor and fire chief are asking people to leave the affected areas and not return until the area has been declared safe.

TORNADO SCENARIO UPDATE #3 QUESTIONS (suggested time: 25–30 minutes)

1. Who is responsible for identifying and notifying family members about injured teachers, staff, and students and potential fatalities?
**Prompt:** Do you have emergency contact information for all teachers, staff, and students? Where is it stored? Would it be accessible after a major tornado?

2. Now that your school has been declared unsafe/uninhabitable, do you have options that allow you to continue operations? What critical community services do your alternate operations depend upon (e.g., power, transportation)?

   **Note:** If you do not currently have a plan to return to normal operations, visit [www.fema.gov/continuity-operations](http://www.fema.gov/continuity-operations) for more information and planning resources.

3. Can you access copies of your vital documents, such as insurance papers, financial information, and key student documents? Are you aware of the process and requirements to receive post-disaster financial assistance if the President declares the event a Federal disaster?

4. How long could you continue to operate without access to your primary facility? Are there services like power, water and road access that you need in order to resume operations?

5. How are you communicating with teachers and staff regarding their work status? What are your expectations for teachers and staff who cannot work, either because your school is not operational or because they have suffered personal losses?

   **Prompt:** How are these expectations communicated? How will teachers and staff be paid?

6. Experiencing disasters can be upsetting, so it is important to pay attention to the emotional reactions of teachers and staff. How is your school prepared to support individuals who express anxiety or stress?

7. What critical services do your teachers and staff rely upon to be at work (e.g., power, transit, schools/day care)? Do you have contact information for critical infrastructure providers in your area, such as communications and utilities? Do you know how to find out when those services are restored?

   **Prompt:** What can you do if these critical services are not restored for some time, even if your school is operational?

8. What can you do to support the community as it recovers? How can you improve your network and relationships to be better connected to the community to prepare for future events?

   **Note:** This question is directed at actions the school is willing to take or support to assist with broader community recovery. The school should connect with local emergency management to better understand how they can help in the event of a disaster.

**DEBRIEF AND NEXT STEPS (suggested time: 20–30 minutes)**

Ask both Participants and Observers to help identify organizational strengths and weaknesses, priorities, and ideas to make improvements. Suggested prompts:

1. What strengths in your school’s emergency plans did this exercise identify?

2. What weaknesses in your school’s emergency plans did this exercise expose?

3. What unanticipated issues arose during the exercise?

4. What gaps were identified?

5. What are some high-priority issues that should be addressed?

6. What are some new ideas and recommendations for improvement?
End the session by thanking everyone for their participation and their honest feedback. Explain leadership’s commitment to using the exercise as a building block to greater school safety and resilience and explain that the next steps will be a written summary of the exercise discussion, to be circulated for additional comments, and a plan to address identified areas for improvement. Give a targeted timeline to sustain the momentum. Congratulations on taking this important step toward greater resilience and improved operations!

RESOURCES TO ASSIST WITH FOLLOWUP PLANNING

- Share America’s PrepareAthon! How to Prepare for a Tornado with all teachers and staff and use Prepare Your People for Tornado Safety to encourage preparedness.

- Many communities have text alert capabilities, or the school could purchase a Public Alert Radio to receive The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Weather Radio All Hazards broadcasts. For more information on registering for alerts and warnings, see the Be Smart. Know Your Alerts and Warnings worksheet or visit the National Weather Service website at www.weather.gov/subscribe.

- For more information on creating an emergency communications plan for your school, visit www.osha.gov/Publications/osh3088.pdf.

- The National Incident Management System and the Incident Command System are used by emergency managers to provide a standard vocabulary and process to manage emergencies. It is an extremely valuable organizing and management tool for any organization. Free training is available online. Learn more at https://training.fema.gov/IS/NIMS.aspx.

- Based on your risk profile, consider investing in greater protection by hardening existing Protective Locations or building a Safe Room or Storm Shelter or joining with organizations in your neighborhood to build a community tornado Safe Room.

- The American Red Cross Ready Rating program is a free, self-guided program designed to help businesses, organizations, and schools become better prepared for emergencies. Members complete a three-point self-assessment of their level of preparedness and have access to tools, tips, and best practices to help improve their level of preparedness. Visit www.readyrating.org.

- A Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Program can help prepare individuals to help others before professional responders arrive. For more information on CERT, visit www.fema.gov/community-emergency-response-teams.

- The American Red Cross can provide on-site first aid trainings. For more information, go to www.redcross.org/take-a-class.

- To find out about Federal financial assistance after a disaster, visit www.fema.gov/help-after-disaster.

- To help with individuals who may express discomfort or anxiety, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Disaster Technical Assistance Center provides a host of materials for use when discussing disasters. These materials are available at www.samhsa.gov/dtac.

- Followup resources for engaging with the community include:
  - Public-Private Partnerships: www.fema.gov/public-private-partnerships; and
  - Local Citizen Corps Councils include members from all sectors of the community to ensure that the community perspective is reflected in local emergency management practices: www.ready.gov/citizen-corps.
TABLETOP EXERCISE SCENARIO HANDOUTS
TORNADO INITIAL SCENARIO

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