

Recovery Planning for Schools and Institutions of Higher Education in the Immediate Aftermath of a Significant or Federally Declared Natural Disaster

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Introduction

Schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education (IHEs) (hereafter referred to as schools) offer more than teaching and learning. Schools provide critical services nurturing the health, safety, and well-being of their school community while also serving as critical partners supporting the health, safety, and well-being of the broader community. This is especially true in the immediate aftermath of a community-wide disaster; therefore, it is critical for schools to collaborate, coordinate, and integrate resources with the communities they serve following a disaster to help ensure that they can efficiently access the available Federal, state, and local resources aimed at the well-being of the school community and the community they serve as well as restore education services following a disaster.

Schools initially structure this work by developing emergency operations plans (EOPs) and related annexes in advance; participating in advance, steady-state recovery coordination activities with the communities they serve; and subsequently developing incident-specific recovery plans with the collaborative recovery Joint Field Office (JFO) and its working groups providing supports, as described in the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF). Incident-specific coordination and planning through the Recovery Support Functions (RSFs) group will address the specific needs of the school community and the broader community, considering the recovery continuum — short-term (days), intermediate (weeks to months), and long-term recovery (months to years). JFOs can supplement efforts of the whole community when a disaster's impact outweighs the available local and state resources.



The National Disaster Recovery Framework and the Recovery Support Functions Leadership Group

A key component of the NDRF structure is JFOs, the temporary offices stood up in the impacted region following a significant or federally declared disaster. The collaborative JFOs, which include representatives from all levels of government, are established to assist with the coordination of recovery activities at the local level, including restoring educational systems. The JFO manages the RSFs, which are aimed at finding and activating customized solutions for the impacted communities. A primary role “of the RSFs is to facilitate the identification, coordination and delivery of Federal assistance needed to supplement recovery resources and efforts by local, State, Tribal and Territorial governments, as well as private and nonprofit sectors.”¹

Once the JFO is activated, education officials and school safety practitioners will be working with their community partners through the RSFs and contributing to planned activities to help inform the deployment of critical resources to the schools.

Working With Recovery Support Functions

The primary way that all levels of government collaborate and coordinate resources during recovery is through the six RSFs: Community Planning and Capacity Building (CPCB) RSF; Economic RSF; Health and Social Services RSF, Housing RSF; Infrastructure Systems (IS) RSF; and Natural and Cultural Resources RSF. In the event of a disaster, state education agencies, schools, school districts, and community partners will participate in the applicable RSFs to access resources and support in a coordinated manner as well as collaborate on incident-specific recovery planning. Following a disaster, schools will work through their governance structure to access the JFO and the supporting RSFs. For example, a school would work with its district, districts would work with their state education agency, and a satellite campus would work with its IHE to determine how they would work with the JFO and RSFs. The state authorizing agency or body is a critical partner for all schools and will communicate key information and data to the JFO,

facilitate entry into the JFO working groups, and help identify and prioritize the deployment of appropriate resources to school communities. These activities will be supported by the existing recovery plan.

As part of the planning process, a school system should be prepared to collect from its community and share with its authorities a common set of information demonstrating the impacts of the event, often including its operating status (e.g., open, closed, remote); possible damage; and service interruptions, including communications, nutrition services, etc. An effective strategy is to build from existing groups, ideally, dedicated, steady-state working groups, which are prepared to collect and report this information if an emergency were to occur. This critical information will be needed daily to help inform immediate recovery planning, both for the school and for the community it serves, as well as for the state education partner to help inform the deployment of resources by the RSFs.

Following are some sample activities, or courses of action in the EOP, demonstrating how education officials might interact with an RSF; recognize that participation will always be customized on the basis of the incident-specific impacts, the state education partner, and the JFO.

- The IS RSF helps to protect and restore key infrastructure systems across the community, including schools. After a disaster, a school might participate in and contribute to the IS RSF by collecting and sharing information on its infrastructure status. The school can also participate in the assessment activities to help determine the feasibility of its infrastructure and systems, including the status of its buildings and grounds, infrastructure technology and communications systems, transportation system, and nutritional services system, and of its alternate locations to determine how and when the school community would resume services.
- The CPCB RSF supports continual capacity building, planning, and implementation of recovery plans. Following a disaster, CPCB helps coordinate community-wide, whole-of-government, incident-specific planning. Given the critical role schools play during recovery, CPCB might take steps to ensure that education officials are included, provide recovery training as applicable, and work

with education officials to understand the school's needs in order to restore operations as well as how it might support the overall community recovery.

- The Health and Social Services RSF helps ensure that critical services, such as health care, behavioral, and mental health services, are available to the whole community, including schools. Schools can participate in this RSF to help ensure that they have the resource to restore a safe and supportive learning environment. For example, a school will work to create a cohesive set of social, emotional, and mental health services promoting the well-being of its school community, from helping train school staff on signs and symptoms of students struggling and strategies for supporting them following traumatic events to creating a long-term program to foster the development of coping skills along with developing tools to help identify students needing additional supports.
- A key activity, which will be informed by the work with all the RSFs, is the development of an incident-specific, long-term recovery plan. The six-step planning process put forth in the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) and the [Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education](#) can inform this collaborative process for the school system.

Conclusion

The NDRF serves as one of five national frameworks supporting the focus areas of the National Preparedness System — prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery. The framework puts forth principles for effective recovery planning across the community as well as actions that communities can take before, during, and after a

disaster. The NDRF emphasizes a whole community approach, and schools and IHEs are critical entities that can participate in the working groups to better support students and families throughout the recovery continuum while also providing key information to support the overall community recovery.

Resources

Further Reading — National Resources, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

- [National Disaster Recovery Framework](#), publication
- [Recovery Support Functions](#), Website

Further Reading — Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center Resources

- [Recovery for Schools and School Districts](#), fact sheet
- [Emergency Management Functions](#), Web page

Further Reading — EOP Development

- Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans, publication
- Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education, publication

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2020, July 20). Recovery Support Functions. Retrieved from FEMA.gov at <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/frameworks/national-disaster-recovery/support-functions>

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