



## Recommendations to School Leaders on Lockdowns

### Why is this important?

*“Lockdowns have potential to empower staff and save lives, [but] if not implemented correctly, they can cause harm. Available research supports the effectiveness of non-sensorial lockdown drills (i.e., drill done by calmly walking and talking through the procedures, with no simulation of a real-life event) implemented according to best practices. Especially with younger students, we recommend avoiding highly sensorial drills that involve simulation activities to mimic a real experience as they can be traumatizing.”* (National Association for School Psychologists, NASP, 2021)

### Key Context/Considerations:

- In some states, active shooter simulation lockdown drills are a state requirement.
- In Washington, law HB 1941 - 2021-22 prohibits active shooter scenarios for school safety drills. *“Lockdown drills may not include live simulations of or reenactments of active shooter scenarios that are not trauma-informed and age and developmentally appropriate.”*
- NASP and National Institute for Justice (NIJ) recommend having multiple available mental health professionals (MHPs) involved in the prep, execution of and review of any lockdown drills. However, 90% of US schools are not yet staffed at appropriate ratios for MHPs. (National Survey of Children’s Health 2019-2020).

### Recommendations:

- In preparing for emergencies at school, school leaders should prioritize the planning of adult educators, alongside local police and safety officers, to prepare for a range of potential situations using simulations or “table-top drills” to identify plans and responses: [Crisis Exercises and Drills From NASP](#)
- For a simulated armed-shooter scenario, run the practice when students are not on campus, and ensure all adults have consented to the drill. If your school is in a state where active shooter simulation lockdown drills are required for students, ensure parent/guardian notification, and opt out procedures. Study and utilize the [NASP Armed Assailant Guide Revised 2021](#).

Disclaimer: This guidance is synthesized from all available resources on best practices for safety drills and lockdowns (NASP and NIJ). Given that research on the impact and effectiveness of lockdown drills has not yet been funded, there are no “Evidence-Based Practices” to cite for safety drills.



### Prior to Lockdown Drills

- Utilize or create a multidisciplinary team to plan for and review emergency procedures. Include the school resource officer and school-employed mental health professionals in the planning and evaluation process.
- Teach and practice self-soothing and grounding exercises to students and staff for practice during the drill, especially for students and staff with previous exposure to trauma “ensure staff members are able to recognize traumatic stress reactions and able to support students during a lockdown by for example being able to use stabilization or grounding techniques (which help distressed persons regain emotional control).”
- All drills should be announced to the school community, including parent/guardian communication in accessible formats for language and/or disability.
- Add a discussion of lockdown drills to parent handbooks that includes the rationale for and procedures of these drills.
- Consider posting a message on social media that the school is conducting a drill to help prevent rumors or confusion about the event in the broader community.

### During a Lockdown or Lockdown Drill

- Announce explicitly that a drill is taking place when the drill begins: “This is an emergency drill, not an actual emergency. This is a drill. We are now practicing how to keep safe in the event of an emergency. This is a drill.”
- If the school must go into real lockdown, provide as much clear, direct information as possible and emphasize the importance of following adult direction.
- Communicate clearly during the lockdown whether there is imminent danger to the school or not. Convey factual information as quickly as possible will minimize anxiety and fear.
- Carefully consider the developmental appropriateness of safety vocabulary and verbiage. For example, saying “Go,” “Get out,” and “Evacuate” to younger children instead of “Escape” or “Run” may help support calm and orderly action, as well as mitigate the psychological impact of crisis.
- Include the school resource officer and school-employed mental health professionals in the planning and evaluation process.
- Use the secured perimeter/lockout (modified lockdown) whenever it is safe to do so. This will minimize the potential for psychological trauma and maintain the learning environment. Full-scale lockdowns should be employed only when absolutely necessary due to imminent danger to the school.

### After a Lockdown or Lockdown Drill

- Provide an opportunity for students and staff members to share their reactions to the lockdown. Provide time and space for classroom circles or discussions, and ensure that counselors, psychologists and other MHPs have time to support students or staff who experienced emotional distress as a result of lockdown.
- Ensure that a debrief and evaluation of the lockdown is conducted by the multidisciplinary team overseeing safety procedures and include all staff in notes of the debrief, including next steps.
- Coordinate with law enforcement to determine actual risk related to the triggering event.
- Work with a public information officer to communicate quickly with parents, neighboring schools, and the media with as much factual detail as possible and appropriate.
- As indicated, make use of student–caregiver reunification procedures, with special attention given to reconnecting younger students with their primary caregivers.
- Provide primary caregivers with guidance on how to talk with their children about their concerns or fears related to violence at school or in the community (NASP, 2016).
- As indicated, share actual updates on social media.
- Recognize trauma reactions and offer mental health crisis intervention assistance (Brock et al., PREPaRE, 2016).
- Hold class discussions via circles to debrief on the lockdown, encourage students to share feelings and validate concerns, and gather their input on next steps. See our [Facilitating Tough Conversations with Kids](#) document for responsive discussion supports.