Disaster Will Strike! Are Schools Ready?

Residents of Sonoma County are constantly reminded that natural disasters in California are a matter of when, not if. Earthquakes threaten, fires rage, floods create havoc, and school shootings and bomb threats are frequently in the news. Parents send their children to school believing that they will be safe in the care of the teachers and on-site administrators. Is school safety a top priority for Sonoma County school administrators and staff? Do school personnel plan, practice, and provide for the very difficult situations that will arise when disasters occur? How can parents be assured that Sonoma County schools are well prepared and able to respond when a disaster strikes?

Reason for Investigation

This investigation was initiated by a citizen complaint. The complainant felt the schools of Sonoma County were not adequately prepared to respond to a disaster. A request was made for an investigation to determine if all state mandates regarding safety were in place for the protection of the children.

Many children in Sonoma County are at risk in the event of a natural disaster or attack. Implementing an emergency preparedness plan in each school is essential. Some schools are well prepared and others have not made adequate plans for coping with the difficult task of protecting students in an emergency situation. County government provides no financial support for school disaster preparedness, and support from school districts is uneven around the County. Because of budget cuts at the State level, local support is increasingly necessary to provide financing and training for disaster preparedness.

Investigative Procedures

This investigation focused on Sonoma County Elementary Schools of diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Interviews were conducted with the following individuals and offices:

- Principals of four elementary schools in various socio-economic areas of the County
- Superintendent of a local school district
- Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools
- Emergency Services Coordinator for Redwood Empire Schools' Insurance Group (RESIG)
- City of Santa Rosa School Safety Coordinator

The investigation included review of the following documents:

- RESIG Emergency Services Program Pamphlet and Protocol.
- RESIG RAP (Office Newsletter)
Findings

F1 California Education Code 32281(a) states that "Each School District and the County Office of Education is responsible for the overall development of all comprehensive school safety plans for its schools operating kindergarten or any of grades 1-12 inclusive. Except as provided in subdivision (d) with regard to a small school district, and the schoolsite council established pursuant to section 52012 or 52852 shall write and develop a comprehensive school safety plan relevant to the needs and resources of that particular school. The schoolsite council may delegate responsibility to a school safety planning committee.... (b)(1) As used in this article, 'small schools district means a school district that has fewer than 2,501 units of average daily attendance at the beginning of each fiscal year'.(d)(2) Section 52012 does not appear in the on-line Education Code.

F2 According to California Education Code 52852, "A schoolsite council shall be established at each school... The council shall be composed of the principal and representatives of: teachers.... other school personnel.... parents of pupils,. and in secondary schools, pupils....."

F3 School districts, SCOE and/or schoolsite councils may be unaware that some schools do not have adequate supplies needed in case of emergency.

F4 The Superintendent of SCOE was not aware that the State Education Code mandates the development of a comprehensive school safety plan (Ed. Code 32281) by the County Office of Education or schoolsite councils.

F5 SCOE does not provide funding for training or supplies for disaster preparedness for Sonoma County Schools.

F6 SCOE is not involved in developing emergency preparedness plans for County schools. They are in compliance with State mandates for the schools directly under their jurisdiction (Alternative Education Programs), but do not check for other County schools' compliance.

F7 According to the California Education Code, the school safety plan must be reviewed annually by the schoolsite council and adopted by the school board.

F8 Enforcement of State mandates is lax because of infrequent inspection, which is done "every five years or so," according to an interviewee, and then only for selected schools.


F10 Enrollment in RESIG's school disaster preparedness programs is voluntary, and many schools are not taking advantage of this valuable service.
Findings, continued

F11 If teachers leave the school site to enroll in RESIG's programs, schools must pay for substitute teachers. Most schools are in financial crisis, and funds for training are often not available.

F12 SEMS and NIMS training may be completed on line, but it is time consuming and voluntary.

F13 According to school principals interviewed, school personnel are considered "first responders" to emergencies. If a crisis occurs, they must assess the situation, provide first aid and comfort, and not leave campus until released by the principal. Many school employees do not receive the necessary training to fulfill this role.

F14 The State mandates that schools conduct fire drills at the elementary level at least once a month, at the intermediate level four times a year, and at the secondary level not less than twice a year. (Ed. Code 32001) Earthquake drills must be held once every quarter at the elementary level and once each semester at the secondary level. (Ed. Code 32282)

F15 There is a need for continued training on how to provide for children stranded on campus when a disaster occurs.

F16 The State is placing disaster emergency preparedness responsibility on the schools yet does not provide funding.

F17 No one is accountable to assure that all schools are prepared to protect our children when a disaster occurs.

F18 SCOE's department of school safety suggests training in SEMS and NIMS but does not itself provide training. The office does provide opportunities for training sessions that include emphasis on such matters as bullying on campus and grief counseling.

Conclusions

Some schools in the County are well prepared, rehearsed, and trained in disaster emergency response. These schools take advantage of the program sponsored by RESIG. However, many other schools lack the funding and outside resources to provide sufficient on-site supplies, comfort, and shelter in the event of a disaster. No one is actually responsible to ensure that adequate protection is in effect in such a situation. SCOE does not accept responsibility for the safety of our children in the event of a disaster, and some school districts have neglected to provide for their students.

Recommendations

R1 Parents should ask to review the emergency plan for their school and ascertain whether or not schools are preparing the students with adequate emergency drills.

R2 Parents, PTAs, and community members should become more involved with schools to help provide necessary supplies to those schools which are financially unable to do so.

R3 SCOE should consider assigning personnel to be responsible for making sure our schools are in compliance with State regulations on school disaster preparedness.

R4 SCOE should act as facilitator for disaster preparedness for schools within the Sonoma County Region. This role should include financial help in providing funding for substitute teachers so that classroom teachers can participate in training programs.

R5 Superintendents must require that each school develop a disaster emergency plan designed for their school, and assure that the principal has approved the plan.

Commendations

RESIG provides excellent training programs for disaster preparedness. Some Sonoma County School Districts are well prepared to provide for the safety of their students in a disaster. Many schools have an emergency kit available in each classroom. Some provide portable toilets, mini blankets and food and water for up to three days. These schools are commended for making the safety of the children a priority.
Recommendations, continued

R6  SCOE, Superintendents and Principals must consider disaster preparedness a top priority.

R7  All schools must train their personnel in disaster preparedness.

R8  Annually, all schools must check emergency supplies to assure that they are adequate. Consumable supplies must be checked for freshness and safety.

Required Responses to Recommendations

SCOE \hspace{1cm} R3, R4, R6

Requested Responses to Recommendations

County School District Superintendents \hspace{1cm} R5, R6, R7, R8