

FIRE AND EXPLOSION SCENARIO

It is November, and a cold rain is falling. The temperature is 34 degrees, and the wind is blowing from the northwest at 18 miles per hour. At 10:15 a.m., the science area of _____ School is rocked by an explosion. In less than a minute, the fire alarm sounds. For the most part, teachers begin an orderly evacuation of the school but, because everyone knows that, this time, it is not a drill, tensions are high and some students begin pushing to get out of the school.

Because no one had time to get their belongings—and because the school has a policy that prohibits the wearing of outdoor coats and hats in the classroom, students, teachers, and staff quickly become soaked.

Scenario Questions:

1. Draw your initial emergency organization, including personnel assigned to each position (by title), in the space below.

Focus on the rationale behind the groups' organization charts. Do not let the groups merely state that the organization is "in the school's emergency plan." Try to draw out the individuals' qualifications for the positions assigned.

Minimally, the groups' organization charts should include an Incident Commander, a Safety Officer, and Section Chiefs. Point out that it is better to keep the span of control small.

2. Where will you establish your Command Post for this incident?

At this point in the scenario, you are unsure of the amount of damage or the risk of additional explosions and/or fire, so you cannot establish the Command Post inside the school. The groups should select a location that is near enough to the school building to view the situation, yet is upwind and out of harm's way. Because the weather is inclement, it may be advisable to establish the Command Post in a school bus or van (if one is available), using two-way radios or cell phones to communicate.

FIRE AND EXPLOSION SCENARIO (CONTINUED)

3. After establishing command, what will you do first? Why?

Size up the situation! Is everyone out of the building and out of harm's way? Is student accounting proceeding? Who is not accounted for? How many people are known to be injured? How seriously? What resources are available to help? What else could go wrong?

Responses of this nature are acceptable. Do not expect the groups to provide a detailed explanation of the exact tasks they would undertake.

4. What is your first concern in this situation?

Your first concern should be the safety of the students, faculty, and staff. Ensure that all who could evacuate did and that student accounting procedures are underway. Ensure that all students stay in the assembly area—at least until student accounting is complete. Then, a decision to release or relocate can be made based on school policy and the information known at the time.

The groups should also mention the need to find shelter from the weather or otherwise protect those who have been evacuated.

5. For what contingencies should you plan?

The groups should list several contingencies, especially the need to protect the students and staff from the weather. Other contingencies might include the possibility that:

- **There are multiple serious injuries and/or fatalities.**
- **There could be additional explosions.**
- **There could be a hazardous materials release.**

FIRE AND EXPLOSION SCENARIO UPDATE #1

[Distribute this update 20 minutes into the exercise!]

It is now 10:25 a.m. and both fire and police have arrived. The police have set up a cordon around the school as the firefighters begin to extinguish a fire that has erupted in the area of the explosion. Firefighters have also requested additional trucks to organize a search and rescue operation for the 32 missing students and two teachers who were in adjacent labs at the time of the explosion. Firefighters are having difficulty extinguishing the fire because it is being fed by the natural gas jets in the lab.

The temperature is forecast to drop through the day, with the rain changing over to freezing rain by mid-afternoon.

Update #1 Questions

1. What information will you provide the incoming Incident Commander (the fire captain) as you transfer command of the incident?

Minimum information that should be provided to the incoming Incident Commander includes:

- **The current situation, including the number of persons who are unaccounted for and the number of injuries among those evacuated (if known).**
- **The location of the utility shutoffs.**
- **Resources that are available to assist.**
- **Current staffing assignments.**
- **Known resource needs.**

If the incoming Incident Commander does not already have a diagram of the facility, one should be provided, or the floor plan of the school should be described, at this time.

2. How does the new information affect your planning?

The groups should presume that there are injuries among the missing students and teachers and that there may even be one or more fatalities. Critical incident stress debriefings and counseling should be planned for after the incident.

The weather forecast should cause the groups special concern. If they have not already taken steps to call buses or seek shelter for the students, they should do so at this point. The parent/student reunification process should also be implemented.

FIRE AND EXPLOSION SCENARIO UPDATE #1 (CONTINUED)

3. How will you work with the Incident Commander throughout the remainder of the incident?

The groups' responses should focus on cooperation with and assistance to response personnel. Stress that, because school personnel retain the responsibility for the students and staff, they should be included in the Unified Command for this incident.

4. What will you tell parents? How will you notify them?

The groups should describe the emergency notification process outlined in their school plans. Emergency notification should take place through the media and should include:

- **What has occurred.**
- **A request to pick up their children, including the reunification point.**
- **Special information about the routes for ingress and egress.**
- **A request not to call the school or the district office.**
- **Reassurance that emergency personnel are on the scene and that they and school personnel are doing all that is possible to protect the students, faculty, and staff.**

Notification of the parents and spouses of the students and teachers who are unaccounted for should be made by telephone by a senior staff member (e.g., assistant principal—not the school's representative to the Unified Command).

If they do not have a notification process for an emergency of this sort, suggest that they record that as a "lesson learned" for plan revisions after the course.

As the groups describe their notification procedures, ask follow-on questions about where parent/student reunification will take place. The parent/student reunification location will need to be moved a safe distance away from the school building and should not interfere with ingress and egress of emergency vehicles.

5. What does the fact that the natural gas was not turned off tell you about your emergency plan?

Unless (according to the building schematics) the utility shutoffs were in the area affected by the blast, they should have been shut off. Additional instructions and procedures addressing utility shutoff should be added to the school plan.

Note that, after natural gas has been shut off, only a gas company representative can turn it back on.

FIRE AND EXPLOSION SCENARIO UPDATE #2

[Distribute this handout 35 minutes into the exercise!]

It is now 10:35 a.m.. After checking with the bus company, you find out that it is impossible to arrange for bus transportation before 11:30 or 12:00. Some buses may not be available until later than that. Several students have begun exhibiting symptoms of hypothermia.

Several students have begun to wander off the campus. Others have realized that their friends are missing and are crying and trying to console each other. A crowd of onlookers has begun to gather.

Media representatives are arriving en masse. All are requesting interviews with the principal, the superintendent, teachers, students, and staff members. Several have approached students who are visibly upset to ask them about "how they're feeling right now."

Parents are also arriving. Some are extremely upset because they know their students have classes in the lab area but do not know if their children are safe.

Update #2 Questions:

1. What are your options for getting the students out of the weather?

The groups' responses to this question will depend on other large facilities in close proximity to the school, local traffic, and other factors. In some cases, the risk of injury to students walking to other facilities may outweigh the risk of taking no action. (Remind the groups that, even if there is alternate shelter, the students are already cold, wet, and at risk of hypothermia.) In other cases, there may be another large facility nearby that would pose little or no risk if moving the students there.

2. What will you do about the students who are wandering off campus?

School personnel are responsible for the students until they are released to their parents or returned to their homes. They must not be permitted to leave campus. The Planning Section Chief should have a roster of unassigned school personnel. (If a Planning Section Chief has not been assigned, the school's representative to the Unified Command should maintain the roster.) The groups should make the decision to assign additional staff to the school perimeter to stop students from leaving.

3. What will you do about the students who are upset?

The groups should recognize that emotional distress is natural in this situation. The fact that students are consoling each other is a good thing. However, teachers and other school staff should watch for signs that some students are becoming hysterical and assign a member of the crisis intervention team to those students.

FIRE AND EXPLOSION SCENARIO UPDATE #2 (CONTINUED)

4. Draw your current organization in the space below.

5. What will you do about the media?

Media will be an issue in this type of an incident. The groups should have a plan for establishing a Joint Information Center (JIC) so that all media representatives receive the same information at the same time. If the groups have not included a JIC in their school plans, they should record it as a “lesson learned” from this activity and address the issue when they return to their districts. (The JIC does not have to be located indoors, although that is preferable. It can be located in a school bus, a maintenance building, or an unsheltered location so long as its location does not interfere with managing the incident.) Media representatives should be kept away from the staff and students at this time.

If necessary, remind the groups that only one individual should represent the school to the media. This individual should not be the school’s representative to the Unified Command.

FIRE AND EXPLOSION SCENARIO UPDATE #2 (CONTINUED)

6. How will you deal with the parents?

There are actually several issues to address relating to parents. The first deals with parent/student reunification for parents whose children have been evacuated and are uninjured. Parent/student reunification procedures should be implemented as described in the media release.

A second issue involves those parents who arrive to find out that their children are inside the building. These parents should be dealt with personally and should be provided a safe, dry place to wait for news. A school staff person (and a counselor if one is available) should be assigned to this group of parents to attend to their immediate needs. The parents should be provided with updates as new information becomes available. (Note that if a fatality is confirmed among the students, the child's parent(s) should be taken to a private location to be informed, and they should be informed by a senior staff member such as the assistant principal.)

The third issue involves dealing with parents if the decision has been made to move the student body. In this case:

- **The media should be notified of the change in pickup location.**
- **A staff member should remain at the school site to redirect parents who may not have received the updated information.**

7. For what long-term contingencies should you plan?

The groups should definitely plan for:

- **Post-traumatic stress counseling for students, faculty, and staff.**
- **The probability that the school will have to relocate for some period of time after the incident. (Note that relocation causes a host of logistical problems ranging from transportation to scheduling to the provision of learning materials. These problems can be compounded if a decision is made to collocate in another school building.)**

The groups may present other contingencies as well, depending on their school's/district's situation.

FIRE AND EXPLOSION SCENARIO UPDATE #3

[Distribute this handout 60 minutes into the exercise!]

It is 12:30 p.m., and the fire has been extinguished. Some firefighters are in the building ensuring that the fire remains out. Others have begun search and recovery operations. At least seventeen sets of remains have been located, and extrication is underway. Search and recovery teams have reported that the remains are burned beyond recognition.

Several students and one teacher survived the explosion and fire but are suffering from burns and smoke inhalation. Three are unconscious. Rescue efforts are underway. Ambulances have been called to the scene for transport and rescuers are trying to identify the survivors.

There is a roof collapse in the area where the explosion occurred. The science wing of the school also suffered heavy smoke and water damage, including the area below the labs.

Several students have had to be transported to local medical centers for treatment of hypothermia.

Update #3 Questions:

1. What are your long-term recovery concerns?

The groups' responses should include the following types of issues:

- **Grief counseling for students, faculty, and staff.**
- **Repairs to the school building.**
- **Recovery and return of personal belongings from the undamaged areas of the school.**
- **Identification of other facilities in which to conduct classes until repairs to the building are completed.**
- **Identification or procurement of learning materials to replace those lost in the fire.**
- **A memorial service and permanent memorial to those who died in the fire.**
- **Ensuring complete documentation of the incident and damage to facilitate the investigation and insurance payment.**

2. What is your school's/district's procedure for notifying the parents and spouse of the deceased?

The groups should have a procedure in their plans for notification. If not, this should be recorded as a "lesson learned" from this exercise and addressed when the groups return to their districts. Points to make about notification procedures include:

- **Notifications should be made in person by a senior member of the school/district staff. If possible a member of the clergy or a professional counselor should also attend the notification.**
- **Notifications should be made privately.**

FIRE AND EXPLOSION SCENARIO UPDATE #3 (CONTINUED)

3. What insights has participating in this exercise provided you about your school's or district's state of readiness for an emergency situation involving a fire and explosion? What revisions would you recommend to your emergency plan as a result?