

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR ACTIVE ASSAILANT EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Exercises and Training



This document's information reflects current recommended practices, regulations, and legislative requirements for Maryland PreK-12 schools and will be reviewed and updated regularly.



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410-281-2335



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Executive Summary

Training and emergency exercises are fundamental components of a comprehensive school safety preparedness program and should incorporate a wide range of activities. These activities should blend direct instruction (training and walkthroughs) and experiential learning (drills and exercises) methods. This blended approach helps to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for a school's response to all-hazards.

Paramount to the design and conduct of emergency preparedness activities is a commitment to minimizing potential trauma for students and staff participating in them. Balancing the need to teach students and school staff what actions to take during an emergency within the appropriate amount of information about the emergency for context can be incredibly challenging. As training and drills become more complex or realistic, participants may experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety¹ as they recall past experiences or imagine being involved in a future experience. Therefore, the psychological well-being of students, faculty, and staff must be considered when designing and conducting any type of emergency training or exercise.

In an effort to increase positive student and staff outcomes following training and drills, Maryland enacted legislation that specifically prohibits schools from using techniques that simulate an active assailant scenario.² These banned techniques include simulated gunfire, explosions, and individuals acting as intruders.

This document is intended to serve as a valuable resource for public school leaders as they navigate new legal requirements and enhance overall preparedness to create safe and supportive learning environments. The guide will (1) **outline** key legislative requirements and restrictions, (2) **describe** the history of school-based active assailant drills, and (3) **promote** best practices for active assailant training and drills.

NOTE: This guidance document may include terminology you are not familiar with thus a list of definitions are included in [Appendix B](#) before continuing.

¹ Farra and Smith, *Anxiety and stress in live disaster exercises*, Journal of emergency nursing 45.4 (2019): 366-373.

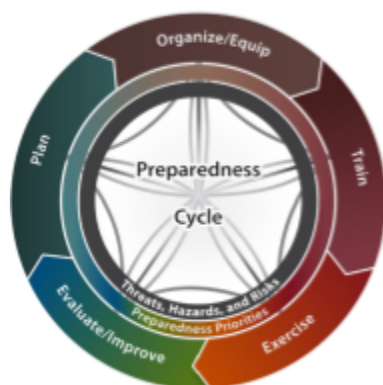
² Maryland House Bill 416, 2024 Session (Chapter 182).

Overview

The ability of schools and governments to respond effectively to emergencies hinges upon a strong foundation of:

- regular building safety/security assessments;
- well-developed all-hazard emergency plans;
- consistent training on those plans;
- regular exercise (i.e., testing) of these plans; and
- a formal process to identify and address improvements.

Schools that test capabilities through a consistent cycle of assessing needs, training and exercising, conducting after-action reviews, and tracking completion of corrective actions are better positioned to improve response capabilities and enhance resilience within their communities.³



"The Integrated Preparedness Cycle of planning, organizing/equipping, training, exercising, and evaluating/improving is a continuous process that ensures the regular examination of ever-changing threats, hazards, and risks. The Cycle involves the assessment of threats, hazards, and risks; new and updated plans; and improvements implemented from previously identified shortfalls or gaps. The preparedness priorities are developed to ensure that the needed preparedness elements are incorporated. This cycle provides a continual and reliable approach to support decision making, resource allocation, and measure progress toward building, sustaining, and delivering capabilities based on an organization's threats, hazards, and risks."

FEMA, Integrated Preparedness Cycle, Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program (2020)

Drills are a specific type of exercise designed to refine an organization's ability to execute specific steps or actions, validate school emergency plans, and develop staff ability to respond to an emergency.⁴ While drills are invaluable tools for enhancing preparedness, it is crucial to understand their primary purpose. **Drills are not intended to prevent emergencies but rather to equip students and staff with the knowledge and confidence to act decisively when faced with an emergency.**⁵

However, it is important to keep in mind that students and staff may be negatively impacted by emergency training and drills in schools, particularly when they are conducted with increased intensity. As such, it becomes critical for schools to have "clearly defined drill procedures incorporating best practices, coupled with

³ Amy K. Donahue & Robert V. Tuohy, *Lessons We Don't Learn: A Study of the Lessons of Disasters, Why We Repeat Them, and How We Can Learn Them*, Homeland Security Affairs 2, no. 2 (Jul. 2006).

⁴ FEMA, *Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program Doctrine* (Jan. 2020).

⁵ Schildkraut et. al (2023) *Can School Lockdowns Save Lives? An Assessment of Drills and Use in Real-World Events*, Journal of School Violence, 22:2, 167-182.

instructional training [to] help schools prepare for emergencies without creating trauma for participants.”⁶

When developing training and exercises to test response for emergencies like active assailant incidents, schools must consider the needs of various stakeholders, students, school staff, parents, and first responders. For example, first responders (e.g., law enforcement officers, fire, and medical services), especially those tasked with responding to active assailant incidents, require specialized training and benefit from participating in very complex training and exercises to ensure a coordinated tactical response to an emergency. As such, exercises for first responders often simulate very high-stress environments in an effort to prepare personnel for the challenges they may encounter in a real emergency. The ultimate goal of these exercises is to enhance first responders' ability to protect lives and minimize damage during an active assailant incident.

Conversely, training and drills for students and staff must use developmentally and age-appropriate techniques⁷ that are trauma-informed to practice emergency response actions and protocols. While preparing students and staff for potential emergencies is essential, it is equally important to safeguard participants' mental health during these activities and schools must balance the need for preparedness with the prevention of unnecessary fear, anxiety, or trauma. Additionally, open communication before and after drills is crucial for addressing concerns, misconceptions, or emotional reactions, fostering a supportive learning environment.

The 1999 Columbine High School tragedy marked a pivotal moment, fundamentally altering how schools and law enforcement approach active assailant incidents. Since then, emergency protocols, both within and outside school grounds, have undergone continuous refinement in response to evolving threats and lessons learned.

Schools commonly employ lockdown⁸ procedures to secure facilities when a threat is inside the building. Additionally, many schools train students and staff in options-based approaches, which empower individuals to make informed decisions in the face of crisis.⁹ Popular active assailant response frameworks include Run, Hide,

⁶ Schildkraut, J., Greene-Colozzi, E.A. & Nickerson, A.B. *Emergency Preparedness Drills for Active and Mass Shootings in Schools*, *Curr Psychiatry Rep* 26, 304–311 (2024).

⁷ Maryland House Bill 416, 2024 Session (Chapter 182).

⁸ “Lockdown is followed by “Locks, Lights, Out of Sight” and is the protocol used to secure individual rooms and keep students quiet and in place.” I Love You Guys Foundation, *The Standard Response Protocol K-12: 2025* (May 30, 2024).

⁹ NASP, NASRO, Safe and Sound Schools, *Best practices for schools in active shooter and other armed assailant drills*, (Apr. 2021), <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/systems-level-prevention/best-practice-considerations-for-armed-assailant-drills-in-schools>.

Fight;¹⁰ Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events (CRASE);¹¹ and ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate).¹²

While these strategies offer guidance, public schools are required to utilize non-sensory methods for training and exercises (e.g., drills) conducted during school hours. This requirement aims to balance the need for preparedness with the prevention of unnecessary fear or trauma among students and staff.

Common Terminology

Regardless of the hazard, when we think about emergency response training and drills, it is important to distinguish between the hazard scenario and the response action or protocol used in response to a specific scenario. For example, fire drills are used to test the alarm system (e.g., lights, sounds, notifications to the fire department) as well as staff and student actions in response to hearing the alarm (e.g., evacuating the building). In this case, “fire” is the hazard scenario and the response action is often “evacuation of the building.” Using hazard scenario names to describe the type of drill can be helpful in allowing the school community to understand what is being or has been tested. However, when training or exercising the school’s response to an active assailant scenario, we recommend schools use the name of the action they are testing (e.g., lockdown) versus the hazard scenario (i.e., active assailant or active shooter). Thus, a test of the school’s response to a threat inside the school building, may be referred to as a “lockdown drill.”

Using the name of the action being practiced instead of the scenario, may reduce psychological harm to participants.

In addition to using response action terminology when announcing drills, a major finding following several real-world events¹³ and exercises is that all stakeholders including public and private schools across Maryland, public safety agencies, families, media, and the general public, would benefit from schools implementing common terminology for the actions taken in response to an emergency. Similar to national standards like NIMS that recommends the use of “shared vocabulary, systems, and processes”¹⁴, having standardized vocabulary for emergency response actions, (e.g.,

¹⁰ The original *Run, Hide, Fight* training video was developed by the City of Houston with funds from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The Federal Bureau of Investigation and DHS continue to use this training strategy.

¹¹ CRASE uses Avoid, Deny, Defend techniques. https://alerrt.org/course_types/CRASE.

¹² <https://www.alicetraining.com/>

¹³ See MCSS Critical Life-Threatening Incident Reports, <https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Pages/RES-CLT.aspx>.

¹⁴ Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Incident Management System *October 2017* (3rd Edition).

Hold, Secure, Lockdown),¹⁵ allows everyone involved, both within and outside the school, to clearly understand the actions any Maryland school is taking during an emergency.

MCSS and other organizations¹⁶ recommend that schools and school systems adopt the evidence-based response and reunification protocols *Hold, Secure, Lockdown, Evacuate, and Shelter*, developed by the “I Love U Guys” Foundation. These protocols were created through the identifications of best practices gathered from school administrators, psychologists, public space safety experts, families, and first responders.

	Hold is followed by the Directive: "In Your Room or Area" and is the protocol used when hallways need to be kept clear of occupants.		Lockdown is followed by "Locks, Lights, Out of Sight" and is the protocol used to secure individual rooms and keep occupants quiet and in place.
	Secure is followed by the Directive: "Get Inside. Lock Outside Doors" and is the protocol used to safeguard people within the building.		Evacuate may be followed by a location, and is used to move people from one location to a different location in or out of the building.
			Shelter and state the Hazard and Safety Strategy for group and self protection.

The “I Love U Guys” Foundation, Standard Response Protocol K-12 (2025)

For students and staff, having a standardized vocabulary for emergency protocols in every school throughout the State allows them to remain prepared even when they move schools, especially when that move is across school districts. Because the core language remains consistent, it would not be necessary to relearn entirely new protocols or terminology. Additionally, shared language and protocols create a more predictable incident scene, facilitating clear communication and coordinated action among different responding agencies.

Once a school system has identified response action terminology, it is essential to communicate these – terms and correlating actions – to the school community, including students, staff, parents, first responders, and the media. **Knowing the specific response action terminology used by a school is crucial for schools, media, and local responders to accurately communicate information during emergencies.** If a school is under a *Secure* protocol, meaning they are securing exterior doors and continuing indoor school activities while monitoring the situation,

¹⁵ “I Love You Guys” Foundation, Standard Response Protocol (SRP) K-12 (2025).

¹⁶ In May 2024, the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) USA K-12 Caucus published [Best Practices for K-12 Emergency Management. A Guide for K-12 Education Emergency Managers \(May 2024\)](#) encouraging schools to adopt the “I Love You Guys” Foundation SRP (pg. 31).

but the media or first responders incorrectly report it as a *Lockdown*, it can create unnecessary panic and anxiety among parents and the community. This misinformation can lead to false alarms, resource misallocation, and potential disruptions to the school's operations. By understanding the school's response terminology, media outlets can provide accurate information, while first responders can deploy resources effectively and efficiently.

The communication of terms should go beyond simply defining each term and focus on fostering an understanding of the situations where each response is most appropriate. Focus should be on teaching staff and students each action, but moving beyond rote memorization to incorporating instructions on how staff and students can use various decision-making frameworks (options) to guide them in selecting the most effective response based on the evolving situation. For example, staff should understand the indicators for a *Lockdown* versus a *Secure* and when those may evolve or require individuals to decide to *Evacuate*. Providing training, particularly for staff, and conducting regular practice through exercises and drills can reinforce these skills and ensure a coordinated response during an actual emergency.

One key component of staff training should focus on helping them understand and respond effectively to dynamic emergency situations that may require a transition between different protocols. For example, a school might initiate a *Lockdown* in response to an immediate threat, but as the situation evolves, it may become safe to release staff and students from lockdown status to a *Hold*. A *Hold* allows students and staff to return to some normal activities, such as eating lunch or accessing certain areas, while still maintaining clear hallways and other safety measures. By training staff to recognize and adapt to changing circumstances, schools can ensure that their emergency response plans are flexible and effective in a variety of situations.

By standardizing emergency response action terminology across all schools, we can enhance preparedness, facilitate effective communication, and ensure a more coordinated response to emergencies. By investing in training and regular drills, schools can equip their staff and students with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions and take appropriate actions during critical situations, ultimately safeguarding the safety and well-being of the entire school community.

Research Study

Maryland Education Article, § 7-1502(g)(22) and (g)(23) mandates MCSS to investigate the efficacy and psychological impacts of active shooter drills and training in schools. As such, MCSS formed a partnership with the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH) at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. MCSS and NCSMH will undertake an evaluation to determine the impact of active shooter drills on both student and staff safety and well-being. As part of this effort, NCSMH will conduct ongoing national research reviews as well as analyze information collected from Maryland public school drill participants. These ongoing efforts will inform future updates to these guidelines.

Effectiveness and Psychological Impact of Active Assailant Drills in Maryland Public Schools 2024 Literature Review has informed the development of this guide and will inform future updates.

Best Practices

Administrators, school-based mental health professionals, school resource officers, safety-crisis team members and other staff should work closely together to develop a plan for preparing staff and students for active assailant incidents. Although the first version of this guide is to provide public schools with best practices specifically for conducting active assailant training and drills, the information in this guide may also be helpful when designing and conducting other emergency preparedness training or exercises.

In addition to this guide, there are several publications that inform this guide and can assist school leaders in preparing staff and students for how to respond to any hazard or emergency. It is recommended that school leaders familiarize themselves with various emergency preparedness guidelines and best practices including:

- MSDE's Emergency Planning Guidelines (2019);
- NASP, NASRO, Safe and Sound Schools, Best Practice Considerations for Armed Assailant Drills in Schools (2021);
- Safe and Sound Schools, Especially Safe: An Inclusive Approach to Safety Preparedness in Educational Settings (2021);
- NASP, School safety drills and exercises for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD): Tips and resources for educators;
- FEMA, Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program (Jan. 2020); and
- IAEM, Best Practices for K-12 Emergency Management, A Guide for K-12 Education Emergency Managers (May 2024).

Links to these and other resources are available in [Appendix B](#) of this document.

As you review these best practices and considerations, keep in mind that although we use “drills” throughout the best practices section, the practices should be considered when conducting all emergency training and exercises in your school.

General Guidelines

Training and drills used to prepare students and school personnel for an active assailant incident should “be appropriate to [a student’s] developmental level and physical abilities, and take into consideration prior traumatic experiences, special needs, and temperaments.”¹⁷ [Maryland law](#) places specific limitations and requirements on how active assailant training and drills may be conducted. We will discuss areas of consideration within this section of this document that your planning team should consider as you begin designing training and drills that will be conducted during the regular school day. This includes training and drills on procedures for students or school personnel to secure or barricade classrooms and entries, taking refuge, or escaping from a classroom or the school.¹⁸

Effective school safety and crisis response must include a common understanding of purpose and procedures among all participants, a respect for each other’s roles and perspectives, and a shared commitment to ensure school safety and well-being. Schools should plan for the rare possibility of an armed assailant as part of a comprehensive crisis preparedness effort; however, the nature and extent of those preparedness activities must be based upon a risk assessment of the crisis events a given school is most likely to confront. How this training is conducted must carefully account for students’ developmental levels, physical abilities, school culture and climate, and features specific to each school community (such as geography, weather, crime, and environment).

NASP, NASRO, Safe and Sound Schools, *Best practices for schools in active shooter and other armed assailant drills*, (Apr. 2021).

¹⁷ NASP, NASRO, Safe and Sound Schools, *Best practices for schools in active shooter and other armed assailant drills*, (Apr. 2021).

¹⁸ Md. Ann. Code Ed. Art. §7-1509(b).

In Maryland, active assailant drills in public schools must:

- Be announced;
- Be designed in a manner that is developmentally and age-appropriate;
- Not simulate gunfire or explosions;
- Not include individuals posing as active assailants; and
- Not include other activities that may cause trauma to students or staff.¹⁹

The use of weapons (real or fake), scripted acting of assailants or victims (including screaming or yelling), or attempting breaches of occupied classrooms or facilities, must not be used as part of a training or drill conducted during regular school hours.

Although there are restrictions on training, drills, and other exercises conducted during school hours, activities conducted with volunteers, outside of the regular school day, are not restricted.²⁰ Conducting training and exercises with first responders not only improves the overall preparedness of the school community but also enhances the capabilities of local responders to handle a wide range of emergencies. Such training can include tabletop exercises, simulations, and real-world scenario full-scale exercises that help participants understand their roles and responsibilities in responding to incidents. By working together, schools and local responders can develop effective strategies and protocols for managing crises, ensuring the safety and well-being of the entire community.

Multidisciplinary Planning Team

A multidisciplinary school-based emergency preparedness planning team is essential for developing and testing a comprehensive school emergency plan. To be effective, this team should include a diverse group of stakeholders from both inside and outside the school.

Identifying members of the team

To ensure that the plan addresses the specific needs of all members of the school community, the team should represent the school's demographics, including students, parents, and staff from various backgrounds. Special attention should be paid to including individuals with disabilities, English language learners, as well as racial and religious minorities.

Additionally, the team should possess a broad range of expertise, skills, and perspectives, with an aim to balance technical and non-technical expertise, to

¹⁹ Maryland House Bill 416, 2024 Session (Chapter 182).

²⁰ Maryland House Bill 416, 2024 Session (Chapter 182), Ed. Art. §7-1509(d)(1).

address the various aspects of school safety. This includes individuals with knowledge in areas such as security, safety, school psychology, nursing, special education, facilities management, transportation, food services, and family services.

Collaboration with first responders and emergency management officials is crucial for ensuring that the school's safety plan aligns with local response plans. By working together, the school can develop coordinated procedures and protocols that will be effective in the event of an emergency.

The size of the school safety team should be carefully considered. The team should be large enough to represent various perspectives and ensure that all relevant stakeholders are involved, but small enough for effective collaboration and decision-making. The goal is to strike a balance between representation and efficiency.

Role of the Planning Team

The planning team plays a pivotal role in determining the frequency and type of drills a school should conduct. By carefully considering factors such as costs, benefits, state and local requirements, parent involvement, and cultural diversity, the team can ensure that training and exercises are both effective and appropriate. The age of the student population should also be considered, as younger students will require simpler and more age-appropriate exercises.

Before diving into the specifics of drill frequency and planning, it's crucial to start with a level-setting meeting at the beginning of each school year. These meetings are essential for ensuring that the planning team is aligned on goals, roles, and responsibilities. With team changes, departures, and new additions, it's vital to revisit the team's mission, discuss any updates to school policies or procedures.

To ensure that exercises are inclusive and relevant to the school community, the team should consider involving parents and consider the cultural diversity of the student body. By designing drills that reflect the experiences and perspectives of all students, the team can foster a sense of ownership and preparedness among the entire school community.

The frequency of drills should be determined based on the school's specific needs and risk profile. While regular exercises are important, it is essential to prioritize quality over quantity. By conducting drills under different conditions and involving community partners, the team can ensure that the exercises are realistic and provide valuable insights into the school's emergency response capabilities.

Following each exercise, the team should conduct a thorough review and identify any shortcomings, and document lessons learned. Based on the findings of the report, the team can make necessary modifications to the school's emergency operations plan and procedures. For more information on the role and

responsibilities of a multidisciplinary planning team, review the FEMA, Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program (Jan. 2020).

Key considerations - Multidisciplinary Team

Representation: The team should reflect the school's diversity, including students, parents, and staff. Take special care to include representatives for individuals with disabilities, English language learners, as well as racial and religious minority leaders.

Expertise: Include individuals with knowledge in areas such as security, safety, school psychology, nursing, special education, facilities management, transportation, food services, and family services.

Community involvement: Collaborate with first responders (e.g., law enforcement, fire, emergency medical services) and emergency management officials to ensure plans, training, and exercises align with local response plans.

Size: The team should be large enough to represent various perspectives but small enough for effective collaboration.

Tailored Exercises: Factors such as student age, parent involvement, and cultural diversity should be considered to create exercises that are relevant and effective.

Continuous Improvement: All exercises should include a formal process to evaluate the drill, which includes identifying strengths, lessons learned, and areas for improvement.

Drill Notifications

Active assailant drill schedules in Maryland must be shared²¹ at the start of the school year. Emergency training and exercise planning activities for schools should begin well before the school year starts and include identifying and meeting with the planning team, gathering input from staff, students, and parents, developing a progressive training and exercise plan,²² and providing an annual schedule of drills to all stakeholders. By following these steps, schools can create effective emergency plans and mechanisms to test those plans that address the specific needs of their community as they prepare for all-hazards.

In addition to providing the drill schedule, schools should describe the types of drills that will be conducted throughout the year. By providing an explanation of what to expect during a drill, schools can alleviate anxiety among students and their families, foster a sense of preparedness, and ensure that everyone knows their role in keeping the school community safe. This explanation should include details about the types of drills that may occur (e.g., lockdown, evacuation, shelter), the specific procedures

²¹ Maryland House Bill 416, 2024 Session (Chapter 182).

²² These should be based on the framework provided by FEMA, *Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program Doctrine* (Jan. 2020).

to follow, and the purpose of each drill.²³ By communicating this information effectively, schools can help students and staff feel confident in their ability to respond appropriately to emergency situations.

Not every individual may have the ability or desire to participate in every type of school emergency drill. Therefore, schools should provide opt-out procedures for families who may have concerns or reservations about their child participating in emergency drills. These procedures should be communicated to families prior to the drill being conducted and should outline the steps necessary to request an exemption. It is important to note that while opting out of drills may be an option for some families, schools should also explore alternative ways to ensure that all students, including those who have opted out, are prepared to respond effectively to emergency situations. This could include providing alternative learning activities or resources, or involving students in other safety-related activities. By offering families a choice and providing alternative measures, schools can demonstrate their commitment to the safety and well-being of all students.

Key Considerations - Drill Notifications²⁴

Clear communication: Distribute a detailed drill schedule to parents, staff, and students at the start of the school year.

Explanation of drills: Provide clear explanations of the purpose of each drill and what participants should expect.

Opt-out procedures: Establish a process for students and staff to opt out of drills if necessary due to medical or other reasons.

Training and Drill Preparation

When preparing drill materials, it is important that those materials be language-inclusive and accessible to individuals with disabilities, including those who are visually, hearing, or cognitively impaired. This can be achieved by using plain language, translations, providing visual aids, and offering alternative formats such as braille or audio recordings.

Identifying individuals who may require additional support before, during, and after a drill or training is crucial for ensuring their safety and well-being. This includes students with disabilities, English language learners, staff members, and those who have experienced traumatic events. These individuals may have unique needs that require accommodations to ensure their full participation and understanding.

For example, students with sensory sensitivities may require modifications to the environment, such as reduced noise levels or visual stimuli. English language

²³ See COMAR 13A.02.02.04 for the list of drills required to be conducted by Maryland public schools.

²⁴ Maryland House Bill 416, 2024 Session (Chapter 182).

learners may benefit from translated instructions or visual aids. Staff members who are responsible for the care of students with disabilities may need additional training or support to ensure their safety during drills and training activities. Additionally, individuals who have experienced traumatic events may require emotional support or counseling to help them cope with the stress of drills and training.

By proactively identifying and addressing the needs of these individuals, schools can create a safe and inclusive environment for all students and staff. Accommodations can be made to ensure that everyone feels comfortable and prepared to participate fully in drills and training activities, ultimately enhancing the overall safety and well-being of the school community.

Key Considerations - Preparation

Inclusive Training Materials: Develop training materials that are language-inclusive and accessible to all students, including those with disabilities.

Individualized Support: Identify individuals who may need additional support before, during, and after drills or training.

Staff Training: Provide staff with clear instructions on how to respond if they or a student becomes distressed during a drill.

Accommodations: Plan for how the school will provide accommodations for students with disabilities, English language learners, or those who have experienced traumatic events to allow them to participate fully in emergency preparedness activities.

Conducting the Drill

Although drills often are conducted during usual classroom hours, emergencies typically do not happen at convenient times. Therefore, it is recommended that drills be conducted at various times of day including at the start of the school day, during lunch and recess, and during class changes. Schools should also consider how they will test response procedures for an incident that occurs after hours during school sponsored events (e.g., sporting events, clubs, performances). This helps to simulate real-world emergency scenarios that can occur at any time. By conducting drills during different times of the day, schools can ensure that staff and students are prepared to respond effectively to emergencies regardless of when they occur.

While drills are essential for preparedness, it's important to be mindful of individuals who may experience physical or mental distress during the exercise. This is especially true for students with anxiety, trauma, or other sensitivities. To accommodate these individuals, schools should have a clear system in place for reporting distress. Staff members should be trained to recognize signs of distress and to provide support or

assistance as needed. Additionally, a mechanism should be established to pause or stop the drill if necessary. This might involve a predetermined signal or code word that can be used to alert staff and students to halt the exercise. By considering the potential for distress and implementing appropriate measures, schools can ensure that drills are both effective and safe for all participants.

Key Considerations - Conducting the Drill

Vary Times: Drills should be conducted at various times of day (e.g., lunch, class change) to simulate real-world emergencies and ensure staff and students are prepared to respond effectively at any time.

Stop When Necessary: Be prepared to address an individual in distress and have systems in place for reporting and stopping the drill if necessary.

Pre-drill Notifications: Send notifications to parents about drills; include details about the drill type, procedures, and outcome.

Post Drill Activities

Following a drill, it's essential to conduct a comprehensive review and debriefing to evaluate the effectiveness of the response, identify areas for improvement, and ensure the well-being of all participants. A well-executed debriefing and review can help to strengthen the school's emergency preparedness and build trust within the community.

After the drill, it is essential to conduct a thorough check-in with all students and staff to ensure their well-being. This can involve conducting a headcount to verify that everyone is accounted for, assessing for any injuries or physical discomfort, and identifying any students or staff members who may be experiencing emotional distress. It is important to provide immediate support to those who need it, whether through counseling, reassurance, or simply a listening ear.

One effective approach to conducting a debriefing involves a multi-tiered process. Classroom teachers can begin by facilitating a community circle with their students, providing an opportunity for open discussion and reflection. Simultaneously, the school's leadership and security team can conduct their own debriefing, focusing on operational aspects and identifying any issues or challenges. Following these initial discussions, a debriefing session--which may be conducted using surveys--should be held with all staff members to gather feedback from teachers, students, and other school personnel. Finally, the planning team can analyze all the information gathered and determine any necessary changes or improvements to the school's emergency plans and procedures.

In addition to checking on individuals, it is crucial to send a notification to parents informing them the drill took place and its purpose. This helps to build trust and transparency between the school and the community, and can also help to alleviate any concerns or anxiety that parents may have. The notification should provide clear information about the type of drill that was conducted, the procedures that were followed, and the overall outcome. By keeping parents informed, schools can strengthen their relationship with the community and ensure that everyone feels safe and supported.

An evaluation of the drill should involve multiple stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, and first responders. The evaluation process should focus on assessing the following areas:

- ***Drill Execution:*** Was the drill conducted as planned? Were procedures followed correctly? Were there any communication breakdowns or delays?
- ***Student and Staff Response:*** Did students and staff understand their roles and responsibilities? Did they respond as expected? Were there any instances of confusion?
- ***Communication:*** Was communication clear and effective throughout the drill? Were all relevant parties informed of the situation and the appropriate response?
- ***Overall Effectiveness:*** Did the drill achieve its intended goals? Were there any areas where plans or procedures could be improved?

After the evaluation is complete, the school should develop an action plan to address any identified weaknesses or areas for improvement. This may involve revising the emergency plan, providing additional training, or implementing new procedures. Regular evaluations and ongoing refinements are essential for maintaining a high level of preparedness and ensuring the safety of the school community.

Finally, as required by law,²⁵ MCSS has partnered with NCSMH to develop a survey that will gather feedback from staff, parents, and students about the effectiveness and psychological impact of active assailant drills or training.²⁶

Key Considerations - Post Drill Activities

Check-ins: Conduct a thorough check-in with everyone to ensure their safety and well-being. This includes counting students and staff, assessing for injuries, and providing emotional support to those who need it.

²⁵ Maryland House Bill 416, 2024 Session (Chapter 182).

²⁶ Maryland House Bill 416, 2024 Session (Chapter 182).

Evaluate: Implement a well-defined drill evaluation process to identify areas of strength and areas in need of improvement and continually refine plans and procedures as well as training and drills as necessary.

Survey: Send the survey link provided by MCSS to staff, students, and parents.

Considerations for Specialized Populations

It is important to ensure that all students, including those with specialized needs, feel safe, included, and prepared during emergency drills. By considering the unique needs of specialized populations, schools can develop more effective and inclusive emergency response plans that benefit the entire school community.

Key Considerations - Individuals with Disabilities

The unique needs of the community, including the needs of individuals with disabilities, must be carefully considered when developing and conducting emergency drills of any kind. Maryland law requires that public schools include detailed plans on “addressing accommodations for students with disabilities in emergency events.”²⁷

When conducting drills, it is essential to consider the unique needs of your school’s students with disabilities. These students may require accommodations or modifications to emergency procedures to ensure their safety and well-being during drills. The National Association of School Psychologists as well as Safe and Sound Schools have each developed guidance materials that would be useful for your school as you plan in this area.²⁸

Specifically, as you begin planning your drills, consider the following:

Individualized Emergency Plans: Schools should work closely with students’ Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to develop specific emergency procedures that address individual student needs. There should be a plan for all students with disabilities that addresses what procedures will be followed in an emergency.

Communication: Clear and concise communication is crucial for students with disabilities, especially those with sensory loss, including vision or hearing loss. Schools should use appropriate communication methods, such as sign language, Braille, or assistive technology, to ensure that all students understand the drill procedures.

²⁷ Md. Ann. Code Ed. Art. §7-1510(d)(1)

²⁸ Safe and Sound Schools, Especially Safe: An Inclusive Approach to Safety Preparedness in Educational Settings (2021), National Association of School Psychologists. School safety drills and exercises for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD): Tips and resources for educators (2020).

Physical Access: Ensure that emergency exit routes and safe spaces are accessible to students with mobility needs. Remove any physical barriers that may impede their movement. Ensure that there is a plan in place to support any students who may have limited mobility and require additional support in the event that the students need to exit the building. This should be developed in conjunction with school team members, which may include the physical therapist.

Emergency Equipment: Provide students with necessary emergency equipment, such as evacuation chairs or personal alarm systems, to assist them during drills.

Training and Support: Train staff on how to assist students with disabilities during emergencies and provide them with the necessary support and resources.

Practice Drills: Conduct regular training or drills to help familiarize students with emergency procedures and allow them to practice their responses in a safe and controlled environment. Some students may require additional supports and scaffolds to prepare them for practice drills, such as social stories or visual supports to aid in preparation before the practice drill.

Feedback and Evaluation: Gather feedback from staff, students, and families to identify areas for improvement and ensure that the drills are meeting their needs.

Key Considerations - English Language Learners

When conducting active assailant drills with English Language Learners, it's essential to consider their unique linguistic and cultural needs. By using clear and simple language, employing visual aids, providing translated materials, and being culturally sensitive, schools can ensure that ELLs understand and can effectively participate in these drills. Regular practice, individualized support, and gathering feedback from ELLs and their families can further improve the effectiveness of these drills.

Specifically, as you begin planning your drills, consider the following:

Clear and Simple Instructions: Use clear and simple language that is easy for ELLs to understand. Avoid using complex vocabulary or idioms.

Visual Aids: Utilize visual aids, such as diagrams, pictures, or gestures, to reinforce verbal instructions and help ELLs comprehend the drill procedures.

Translated Materials: Provide translated materials, including instructions, safety plans, and emergency contact information, in the languages spoken by ELLs.

Cultural Sensitivity: Be mindful of cultural differences and avoid using language or imagery that may be offensive or confusing to ELLs.

Practice and Rehearsal: Conduct frequent drills and provide opportunities for ELLs to practice emergency procedures in a safe and supportive environment.

Individualized Support: Offer individualized support to ELLs who may require additional assistance or accommodations during drills.

Feedback and Evaluation: Gather feedback from ELLs and their families to assess the effectiveness of the drills and identify areas for improvement.

By incorporating these considerations, schools can ensure that active assailant drills are accessible and effective for all students, including English Language Learners.

Key Considerations - Developmental

Children and adolescents at different developmental stages may respond to emergencies differently. Younger children may require more explicit instructions and reassurance, while older students may be more capable of independent thought and action. Schools should tailor drill procedures to the developmental needs of their students.

Additionally, the way adults act in emergency situations can significantly impact the physical and psychological safety of students. Therefore, the effectiveness of active assailant drills/training hinges on providing adults with thorough, responsible, and ongoing education. Students look to faculty and staff, their trusted adults on site, for direction and guidance. When adults are well-trained and maintain composure, students are more likely to follow their lead and develop confidence and coping skills.²⁹

Schools must carefully choose safety vocabulary that is appropriate for students' developmental levels. Using clear and direct terms like 'go,' 'get out,' and 'evacuate' can help students respond calmly and orderly to emergency situations. Avoid using emotionally charged words like 'escape' or 'run' that may increase anxiety or fear. For more information on developmental considerations, refer to the NASP, NASRO, Safe and Sound Schools, *Best practices for schools in active shooter and other armed assailant drills*, (Apr. 2021), Appendix 3: Developmental Considerations Associated with School Safety Procedures, Activities, and Drills.

Key Considerations - Cultural, Educational, and Personal

The effectiveness of school emergency drills can be significantly influenced by the diverse cultural, educational, and personal profiles of students and staff within a community or classroom. Schools must consider individual psychological backgrounds, previous trauma experiences, including community trauma, special needs, and personalities when planning and conducting drills.

Specifically, as you begin planning your drills, consider the following.

²⁹ NASP, NASRO, Safe and Sound Schools, *Best practices for schools in active shooter and other armed assailant drills*, (Apr. 2021).

Cultural Considerations: Cultural beliefs and practices can impact how individuals perceive and respond to emergencies. Schools should be mindful of cultural differences and ensure that drill procedures are culturally sensitive and respectful.

Educational Factors: Students' educational backgrounds can also influence their understanding and response to emergencies. For example, students who have received safety training in another school may be more prepared to follow emergency procedures. Schools should ensure that all students, regardless of their previous school safety training, have the necessary information and training.

Personal Factors: Individual personalities and experiences can also impact how people respond to emergencies. Some individuals may be more anxious or fearful than others, while others may be more resilient. Schools should be aware of individual differences and provide support to students who may need additional assistance during drills.

By following these best practices and utilizing the recommended resources, schools can significantly enhance their preparedness for active assailant incidents, while minimizing the negative psychological impact on students and staff. Regular training and drills ensure that staff and students are equipped with the knowledge and skills to respond effectively in such emergencies. Remember, the goal is not to create fear but to instill confidence and preparedness. By working together as a community, schools can foster safe and supportive learning environments.

Appendix A: Mandated Requirements

In 2024, House Bill 416 ([Chapter 182](#)) added requirements for the State to conduct research on the impacts of active shooter drills. Public school systems have requirements that include announcing drills to staff, students and parents; identifying students and staff that may need additional support during and after a drill and providing those supports; and placing limitations on the way active assailant drills are to be conducted in Maryland public schools.

Most importantly, except for drills outside of school hours that may include staff or student volunteers, active assailant drills and training *shall not* include any activities intended to simulate a real active assailant incident that may traumatize students or staff including:

- Loud sounds imitating gunfire or explosions; or
- Individuals role-playing as active shooters or victims.

The law sets forth specific requirements for organizations as outlined below.

Requirement Education Article	Description	Responsible Party
State Requirements		
Research Study § 7-1502 (g)(22)	In consultation with an institution of higher education or other research entity, study the effectiveness and psychological impact(s) of active shooter safety drills or training by researching and analyzing the data collected from the LEAs. (Fall 2024 - Ongoing)	MCSS
Data Collection § 7-1502 (g)(22)	Collect data from local education agencies on the effectiveness and psychological impact of drills and training. (Fall 2024 - Ongoing)	MCSS
Drill Best Practices § 7-1502 (g)(23)	Identify and publish best practices for active assailant drills and training and update regularly. (Oct. 1, 2024 - Ongoing)	MCSS
School Drill Regulations § 7-1502 (g)(23)	Review drill best practices and update drill regulations as appropriate. (Sep. 2025 - Ongoing)	MSDE
Gun Storage Laws § 7-1509 (g)	Develop model content, in consultation with the Maryland State Police, that informs parents of the State's firearm storage laws. (Jul. 1, 2025 - Ongoing)	MCSS

Complaints § 7-1509 (d)(2)	Investigate complaints of local public-school drills or training that does not meet the intent of trauma-informed conduct. MCSS, in consultation with MSDE, will make the final determination. (Ongoing)	MCSS
Local Education Agency (LEA) Requirements		
Drill Restrictions § 7-1509 (D)	Except for a voluntary drill or training occurring after school hours, active shooter safety drills or trainings <i>shall not include</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • loud sounds intended to imitate gunfire or explosions; • live exercises with individual's role-playing as an active shooter or a victim; or • similar activities that may cause the drill or training to be traumatic for students or school personnel. (Ongoing)	LEA
Drill Notifications § 7-1509 (f)(2-4)	Local school systems are required to provide: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parents with an annual schedule of drills and training • staff and students with advance notice of drills or training • parents with notification following a drill or training (Fall 2024 - Ongoing)	LEA
Mental Health Supports § 7-1509 (f)(5-6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify students or school personnel who may require additional support and provide support during and after a drill or training. • Provide a mental health follow-up for students and school personnel after a drill or training. (Fall 2024 - Ongoing)	LEA
Data Collection § 7-1502 (g)(22)	Submit data collected from parents, students, and staff on the effectiveness and psychological impact of drills and training. (Fall 2024 - Ongoing)	LEA

Appendix B: Definitions

Term	Definition
Active Assailant / Active Attacker/ Active Shooter	MCSS, as part of the Maryland Active Assailant Interdisciplinary Workgroup (AAIWG), uses the term Active Assailant in place of Active Attacker or Shooter. Within this document, these terms can be considered synonymous. The FBI defines an active shooter as “one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area.”
Drill	A practice exercise designed to test a function of a school emergency plan in an effort to prepare students and staff for how to respond to various emergency situations.
Evacuate	An action used when school officials need to move students and staff from one location to another in response to an emergency.
Exercise	An activity designed as discussion or operational used to assess or validate emergency plans and capabilities. These can range from discussions to complex simulations involving multiple entities.
Full-Scale Exercise	A full-scale exercise is a type of exercise which simulates an actual emergency event. It involves the mobilization and deployment of real personnel, equipment, and resources to mimic a real-world response. Like a dress rehearsal for a disaster; it tests the entire emergency response system in response to a simulated emergency.
Functional Exercise	A simulated event that tests an organization's ability to respond to a specific emergency scenario. Unlike a tabletop exercise, which is discussion-based, a functional exercise involves actual actions and procedures being carried out, albeit in a simulated environment. It's a step closer to a full-scale exercise but without the full deployment of resources.
Hold	An action used when school officials need to keep students and staff in their current location in response to an emergency.

Lockdown	An action used when school officials need students and staff to secure themselves in a classroom or designated safe area in response to a threat, typically inside the building. Staff and students are expected to lock classroom doors, move away from windows and doors, and remain quiet until released.
Secure	An action used when school officials need to secure all outside doors in response to a threat outside the building. Depending on the severity or nature of the threat, schools may opt for the school to lockdown.
Shelter	An action used when school officials determine it is safer for students and staff to remain inside or in one area.
Tabletop Exercise	A tabletop exercise is a discussion-based meeting where participants talk through potential emergency situations. Participants discuss their roles and responsibilities in response to an emergency scenario without actually taking physical action. The goal is to identify strengths and weaknesses in emergency plans and improve response capabilities.
Training (Emergency Preparedness)	An education and practice designed to prepare individuals and organizations to effectively respond to and manage crisis situations. Formats may include presentations, group discussions, and often involve experts sharing knowledge and best practices. Participants learn about emergency response plans and procedures.
Trauma-Informed	Refers to an approach that acknowledges the prevalence of trauma and its impact on people's lives. It emphasizes creating environments and practices that promote safety, healing, and empowerment for people who have experienced trauma.

Appendix C: Resources

Maryland House Bill 416, 2024 Session (Chapter 182),
https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2024RS/Chapters_noln/CH_182_hb0416e.pdf.

MCSS, *Effectiveness and Psychological Impact of Active Assailant Lockdown Drills in Maryland Schools*, 2024 Literature Review (publication pending).

MSDE, *Emergency Planning Guidelines* (2019),
https://marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DSFSS/SSSP/EPSS/LSSEmergencyGuidelines_Dec2019_Accessible_8.17.22Version.pdf.

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), the National Association of School Resource officers (NASRO) and Safe and Sound Schools (2021), *Best practices for schools in active shooter and other armed assailant drills*, (Apr. 2021),
<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/systems-level-prevention/best-practice-considerations-for-armed-assailant-drills-in-schools>.

Federal Emergency Management Agency, *National Incident Management System*, October 2017 (3rd Edition),
https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema_nims_doctrine-2017.pdf.

“I Love You Guys” Foundation, *Standard Response Protocol K-12* (2025),
<https://iloveguys.org/The-Standard-Response-Protocol.html>.

FEMA, *Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program Doctrine* (Jan. 2020),
<https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Homeland-Security-Exercise-and-Evaluation-Program-Doctrine-2020-Revision-2-2-25.pdf>.

Maryland AAIWG, *Active Assailant Exercises Weapons Guidance* (Feb. 2024)
https://aaiwg.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/35/2024/04/AAIWG-Active_Assailant_Exercises-Weapons_Guidance-Feb-2024.pdf.

Safe and Sound Schools, *Especially Safe: An Inclusive Approach to Safety Preparedness in Educational Settings* (2021), www.safeandsoundschools.org.

National Association of School Psychologists. *School safety drills and exercises for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD): Tips and resources for educators* (2020).
[https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-resources/school-safety-drills-and-exercises-for-students-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-\(asd\)-tips-and-resources-for-educators](https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-resources/school-safety-drills-and-exercises-for-students-with-autism-spectrum-disorder-(asd)-tips-and-resources-for-educators).

IAEM USA K-12 CAUCUS, *Best Practices for K-12 Emergency Management, A Guide for K-12 Education Emergency Managers* (May 2024),
https://www.iaem.org/Portals/25/documents/2024/Best-Practices-for-K-12%20-EM-Guide.pdf?ver=qgL40x_eY2nZ8QMEz0os9Q%3D%3D.

Resource links were last checked at the time of publication of this document.