



PASS

Partner Alliance
for Safer Schools

PASS Recommendations for Appropriate Drills: Why They Are Essential to Every School Safety Program

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PASS Recommendations for Appropriate Drills: Why They Are Essential to Every School Safety Program

Creating a safe environment so children and educators can focus on learning is the goal of school security and safety professionals. Drills and exercises are part of a comprehensive approach to ensuring a safe learning environment, and our best practices should reflect this.

Drills are common in the school environment, whether in language or math education, sports practice or safety. Exercises are common to improve skills in specific areas or disciplines.

School safety drills and exercises are no different. We want to ensure a safe environment during the school day, so common drills repeated during the school year are the accepted practice. For years, the standard “fire drill” practice has been to line up, exit the classroom single file and march to a safe rally area, such as the schoolyard.

The need for “lockdown” drills has grown due to the unique circumstances of the active shooter or assailant. Whether in a school, business or other public space, best practices now dictate having a lockdown protocol as the major component of an effective safety plan when escape is not possible. Other components may include methods to secure your area prior to sheltering (for best practices, please see the [PASS Guidelines](#)), notification and communication during an event.

In the school safety context, it is critical to distinguish between drills and exercises. Drills are educational opportunities to test processes, procedures and technologies. Exercises are mainly for first responders to test their training.

Designing a Drill

Lessons learned from decades of school fire drills may be employed here. So, what is an appropriate approach for our schools to take as they plan, prepare and practice for protecting our children and staff from danger that is inside the building?

We should start with standardizing the term by calling these drills “lockdown” drills, as called for by the National Association of School Resources Officers (NASRO) and National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and not “active shooter” drills or “active assailant” drills, and we support NASRO and NASP’s [position](#) on designing drills. A lockdown should be looked at as an active threat situation, or a situation that presents an immediate and ongoing danger to the safety of students, staff and visitors. In addition to individuals using firearms (active shooters), other types of weapons and erratic behavior can also create active threat (lockdown) situations. These are matters of urgent concern not only to schools, but also to other public spaces nationwide.

A Note of Caution When Designing Drills

Some have called for making these drills realistic; however, we don't set our schools on fire to practice fire drills. We also don't have firefighters running through the building yelling at students and staff during fire drills. Firefighters use practice "exercises" to train in fighting fires. Schools have "drills" to educate/train students on how to evacuate the building in the event of a fire. Drills should be conducted in an educational way – there is no need for violent simulations.

What Should Be Taught in a Drill?

Both staff and students should be educated about the options that can be used in an active threat situation. Realistically, students and staff are not always in their classrooms or behind closed doors as they go throughout their busy school days; because of this, students and staff should be taught additional strategies that go beyond just sheltering in a classroom. For example, there are other shelter options that should be taught, like what a staff member or student should do when in a bathroom, cafeteria, or hallway if an active threat arises. This is where evacuation (evade) or distraction (defend) strategies could come into play. Another critical option that staff and students can be educated on is care, which could be first aid or just being helpful to others in these situations.

When a lockdown drill occurs at an elementary school, it should be conducted when the majority of the school is sheltered inside and when some classes are outside are at recess. The staff and students at recess could practice how to safely leave the school grounds to safety. Students in a secondary school can be taught what do if they are caught in different locations inside and outside the school. Those at recess need to know what their options are outside the building, and they should be guided through the options. Age-appropriate strategies can also be offered as classroom lessons, wherein students are told about the different options that they may consider in an active threat situation.

PASS Chairman Guy Grace and his team has been successful in training students of all ages in age-appropriate awareness trainings incorporating these elements for more than eight years. As an example, [this video from Littleton Public Schools](#) serves as a discussion starter for students in fourth grade and above to help inspire questions and answers afterwards.

8 PASS Recommendations for Conducting School Safety Drills

- 1. Purpose:** Drills should be conducted in a way that is educational and involves the practice and testing of established processes, procedures and technologies. They should not involve violent simulations that could be traumatizing to participants.
- 2. Scheduling:** Drills should be announced to staff, students and parents and include a scheduled time frame in which the drill will be conducted (e.g., Monday between 9:00 a.m. and noon). Drills should not be conducted in a "surprise" fashion.
- 3. Duration:** Drills should be short and conducted as quickly and efficiently as possible.

4. **Times and locations:** Drills should be done at varying times of the school day – recess, passing periods and lunch time – and also during after-hours activities such as child care and athletics.
5. **Evaluation:** Staff should be debriefed immediately following a drill where feedback can be exchanged. Drills should be run for other groups such as after-school child care and athletics.
6. **Frequency:** At least two lockdown drills should be conducted each school year. It is recommended to practice within the first 20 days of the start of the school year and within the first 20 days after winter break.
7. **Drills vs. exercises:** Any participants selected for “exercises” should be volunteers and be carefully selected, given the significant difference between a drill and an exercise. Drills involve all or most occupants of a school facility to test processes, procedures and technologies. Exercises are mainly for first responders to test their training.
8. **Safety awareness levels:** Drill design should be tailored to desired levels of safety awareness, which will vary depending on the developmental levels of students and a capabilities and training of staff involved. PASS recommends referring to Safe and Sound Schools’ [Developmental Levels of Safety Awareness resource](#) to help guide this process.



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