The Big Five

Student Release Guidance for Schools



Coalition for Safe Schools & Communities

SAN MATEO COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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STUDENT RELEASE GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS

The Student Release Guidance for Schools guides the reunification of students with their families after an evacuation or other emergency incident on campus. The guidance includes planning and preparation, roles, supply lists, and logistical considerations for both on-site and off-site student release locations. The guidance includes a flow chart of the student release process and a reunification form to assist in the efficient reunification of students with family members. The guidance is intended to be used in conjunction with Coalition for Safe Schools and Communities safety protocols and tools, including The Big Five Immediate Response Protocols, Communication Guidelines, Incident Command Staff Cards, and the school's/district's Emergency Operations Plan.

STAFFING CONSIDERATIONS

OPERATIONS SECTION:

Every school site is required by law to prepare an Incident Command System (ICS) and update it annually as part of the Comprehensive School Safety Plan. The Operations Section of the ICS is responsible for managing all incident-specific operations of an emergency response. The key responsibilities of Incident Command leaders involved in Student Release processes are:

THE OPERATIONS SECTION LEADER:

- Develops Incident Action Plan with Incident Commander
- Supports/directs on-scene response
- Supervises incident to ensure safety and welfare of all personnel
- Determines needs and requests additional resources
- Communicates concerns between Section Leaders and Incident Commander
- Briefs and assigns operations personnel in accordance with the Incident Action Plan
- Initiates recommendation for release of resources
- Coordinates the After-Action Report with Section Leaders

STUDENT RELEASE TEAM LEAD:

- Establishes and sets up reunification area according to Student Release Plan
- Provides for systematic and efficient reunification of students with parents/caregivers
- Maintains records of students who are released/reunified
- Provides master list of missing students/staff
- Identifies need for law enforcement/security assistance
- Identifies need for crisis support for family notification

REUNIFICATION/STUDENT RELEASE ROLES AND DUTIES

Family Check-In Area	Role	Duties
Families check-in and provide identification for verification	Check-In Area Supervisor	Establishes and manages the check-in process. Supervises greeters, checkers, and flow monitors.
	Greeter/s	Helps coordinate check-in lines, explains process and assists families.
	Traffic Control/Flow Monitor	Assists in guiding traffic flow. Informs families on where to check in, where to park, and whether to stay in vehicle.
	Checkers	Verifies the ID of the person picking up the student. Verifies student is present. Directs family members to Waiting Area or Assistance Area.
	Security/Law Enforcement	Provides crowd and car traffic control and assists with uncooperative or upset family members.

Family Waiting and Family Assistance Area	Role	Duties
Families with a student missing, injured, or detained by law enforcement would be directed to the Family Assistance Area	Family Waiting Area and Family Assistance Area Supervisor	Establishes and manages the Family Waiting Area and the Assistance Area. Responsible for supporting parents of missing, injured, or detained students after being notified by law enforcement or Superintendent. Provides information on next steps, hospital location, and other information.
	Mental Health Support/ Counselor	Provides crisis counseling and support to families receiving notification regarding missing, injured, or detained students.
	Security/Law Enforcement	Provides assistance with uncooperative or upset family members.

REUNIFICATION/STUDENT RELEASE ROLES AND DUTIES

Family Reunification/ Check-Out Area	Role	Duties
Families retrieve student and check-out	Reunification/Check-Out Area Supervisor	Establishes and manages the Reunification and Check-Out Area. Supervises Runners, Flow Monitors, and Checkers, and is the last staff member the student and family see before exiting the site. Offers a friendly face, wave, and goodbye. Is available to answer any questions.
	Runner	Assists in locating students in the Student Assembly Area and bringing them to the Reunification Area where a Checker will reunify the student with a family member.
	Traffic Control/ Flow Monitor	Assists in guiding traffic flow in the parking lot as families and students leave. Informs families on where to exit the Reunification Area and directs them to leave the location in a timely manner.
	Checker	Matches students with family member, using a reunification form, and then documents the student has been reunified.

Student Assembly Area	Role	Duties
Students wait to be retrieved	Reunification/Check-Out Area Supervisor	Responsible for monitoring and caring for students and staff at the evacuation location while waiting for release.

STUDENT RELEASE LOCATIONS

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENT RELEASE LOCATIONS: OFF-SITE

- Ensure the Off-Site Evacuation Location is safe for students while they wait for family to arrive (including shelter, access to restrooms, ability to limit access to people who may pose a risk to students, ability to keep students contained in space)
- Consider developing a **Memoranda of Understanding** with multiple Off-Site Evacuation Locations near the school site
- If applicable, designate a Wildfire Evacuation Location located outside of the potential danger zone (work with local fire department and the San Mateo County Department of Emergency Management to identify a safe location)
    - Develop a plan for transporting students and staff to Wildfire Evacuation Location
    - Ensure the plan includes considerations for students with disabilities (for some of these students, an individual evacuation plan may be necessary)
- Coordinate selection of Off-Site Evacuation Locations with School Nursing and Special Education staff to ensure site accessibility for students with disabilities
- Coordinate transportation needs for students with disabilities to Off-Site Evacuation Location if needed
- Consider parking lot size and accessibility to families while they check in and wait to be reunited with their student. Parking should be near the Check-in Location and the Reunification/Check-Out Location
- Consider reducing the number of ingress/egress points to minimize traffic congestion
- Student Release Site should have four different areas, divided and separated from each other, to maintain separation between students and families until reunification occurs
    1. Family Check-In Area
    2. Family Waiting and Family Assistance Area
    3. Family Reunification/Check-Out Area
    4. Student Assembly Area

STUDENT RELEASE LOCATIONS

- Next to the Family Waiting Area, provide a confidential and private location for family members to be taken by a counselor or trained mental health provider when receiving difficult information such as a missing or injured child or a child detained by the police
    - Provide information regarding the student in a trauma-informed way
    - If the child was injured, provide the family with the location, address, and phone number of the hospital where their child was transported
    - If child was detained, provide family with the location, address, and phone number of the police station where their child was transported and provide case number if applicable
    - If child's location is unknown currently, inform family where they should wait or where they can obtain further information
    - Provide family with trauma grief support resources and/or crisis hotline
- Consider inclement weather, winter storms, or high heat when designating each location. If possible and safe, stage the Student Assembly Area inside or under an awning to protect students and staff from inclement weather
- School site Public Information Officer will organize and staff a media staging area located away from the families and students

STUDENT RELEASE LOCATIONS

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENT RELEASE LOCATIONS: ON-SITE

- On-Site Student Release Location should have four different areas, divided and separated from each other, to maintain separation between students and families until reunification occurs
    1. Family Check-In Area
    2. Family Waiting and Family Assistance Area
    3. Family Reunification/Check-Out Area
    4. Student Assembly Area
- Next to the Family Waiting Area, provide a confidential and private location (Family Notification Area) for family members to be taken by a counselor or trained mental health provider when receiving difficult information such as a missing or injured child or a child detained by the police. Initial notification of missing, injured, or detained students should be performed by Law Enforcement or Superintendent
- Consider inclement weather, winter storms, or high heat when designating each location. If possible and safe, stage the Student Assembly Area inside or under an awning to protect students and staff from inclement weather
- Consider an indoor location or more private location for the Family Waiting Area

STUDENT RELEASE LOCATIONS

- Prior to incident, include other facilities/agencies that operate on the school site (adult school, preschools, community centers) in planning and training
  - Designate evacuation areas for those agencies at the On-Site Location. Coordinate how to implement and include them in Student Release procedures
  - Coordinate Off-Site Evacuation Location and procedures with those property owners
  - Determine if property owners will be included in the protocol or will operate independently and evacuate to a different Off-Site Location
- Organize the Family Check-In Area by alpha or by grade level, depending on the school site (elementary schools may consider by grade, whereas middle and high schools may consider using student last name or class period/teacher)
- Consider parking lot size and accessibility to families while they check in and wait to be reunited with their student
- Consider the number of ingress/egress points to minimize traffic congestion
- School site Public Information Officer will need to set up the media staging area located away from families and students and preferably off school campus

STUDENT RELEASE PROCESS

ON-SITE STUDENT RELEASE PROCESS

An On-Site Student Release may occur for incidents small enough to render the school building unsafe after an **EVACUATION**, but does not require students to be relocated to the Off-Site Evacuation Location. Some incidents may allow for Student Release while students are still in classrooms. Consult with local law enforcement and fire department to best determine location of Student Release (from inside classrooms or from On-Site Evacuation Location). The following are steps to follow for an On-Site Student Release:

- Assume and maintain Incident Command structure
- Contact local law enforcement, if you have not already done so. Provide reason for Student Release and request law enforcement presence if needed
- Initiate an **EVACUATION** if needed
- Contact District Office/Superintendent's Office
- Access Student Release Supplies, **Emergency Response Box**, and Evacuation Supplies (water and snacks) if needed
- Assign Student Release Roles and set up pre-determined On-site Student Release stations (Student Assembly Area, Family Check-In Area, Family Waiting Area, Reunification/Check-Out Area, and Family Assistance Area)
- Communicate next steps to teachers and staff who are with students at the Evacuation location and convey the situation is under control. Establish and move students to the Student Assembly Area, if different from the Evacuation location
- Communicate to families an Evacuation has occurred and a Student Release has been initiated. Instruct family members to bring a valid ID and notify them of where and when to arrive. Provide them with as much information as possible and thank them for being patient with the process
- Implement predetermined school plans for students who have transported themselves to school (walked, biked, or drove) or who rode the bus (public or school district's)

STUDENT RELEASE PROCESS

OFF-SITE STUDENT RELEASE/REUNIFICATION PROCESS

An Off-Site Student Release may occur for incidents where the school site is deemed unsafe or following an **EVACUATION** to the Off-Site Evacuation Location as required by law enforcement. In these cases, the Student Release process needs to be away from campus to ensure safety. The following are steps to follow for an Off-Site Student Release:

- Assume and maintain Incident Command Structure
- Contact local law enforcement, if you have not already done so. Provide reason for Student Release to Off-Site Evacuation Location and request law enforcement presence if needed
- Provide route to be taken and Off-Site Evacuation Location information
- Initiate an **EVACUATION** if needed
- Contact District Office/Superintendent's Office
- Access Student Release Supplies, Emergency Response Box and Evacuation Supplies (water and snacks), if needed, and transport to the Off-Site Evacuation Location
- Assign Student Release Roles and set up pre-determined Student Release stations (Student Assembly Area, Family Check-in Area, Family Waiting Area, Reunification/Check-Out Area, and Family Assistance Area) at the off-site location
- Communicate to teachers and staff who are with students once at the Evacuation Location. Share next steps and convey the situation is under control
- Communicate to families that an Off-Site Evacuation has occurred and that a Student Release has been initiated
    - Instruct families to bring a valid ID
    - Give the exact location of where and when to arrive
    - Provide families with as much information as possible when they arrive at the Off-Site Evacuation Location
    - Thank them for being patient with the process

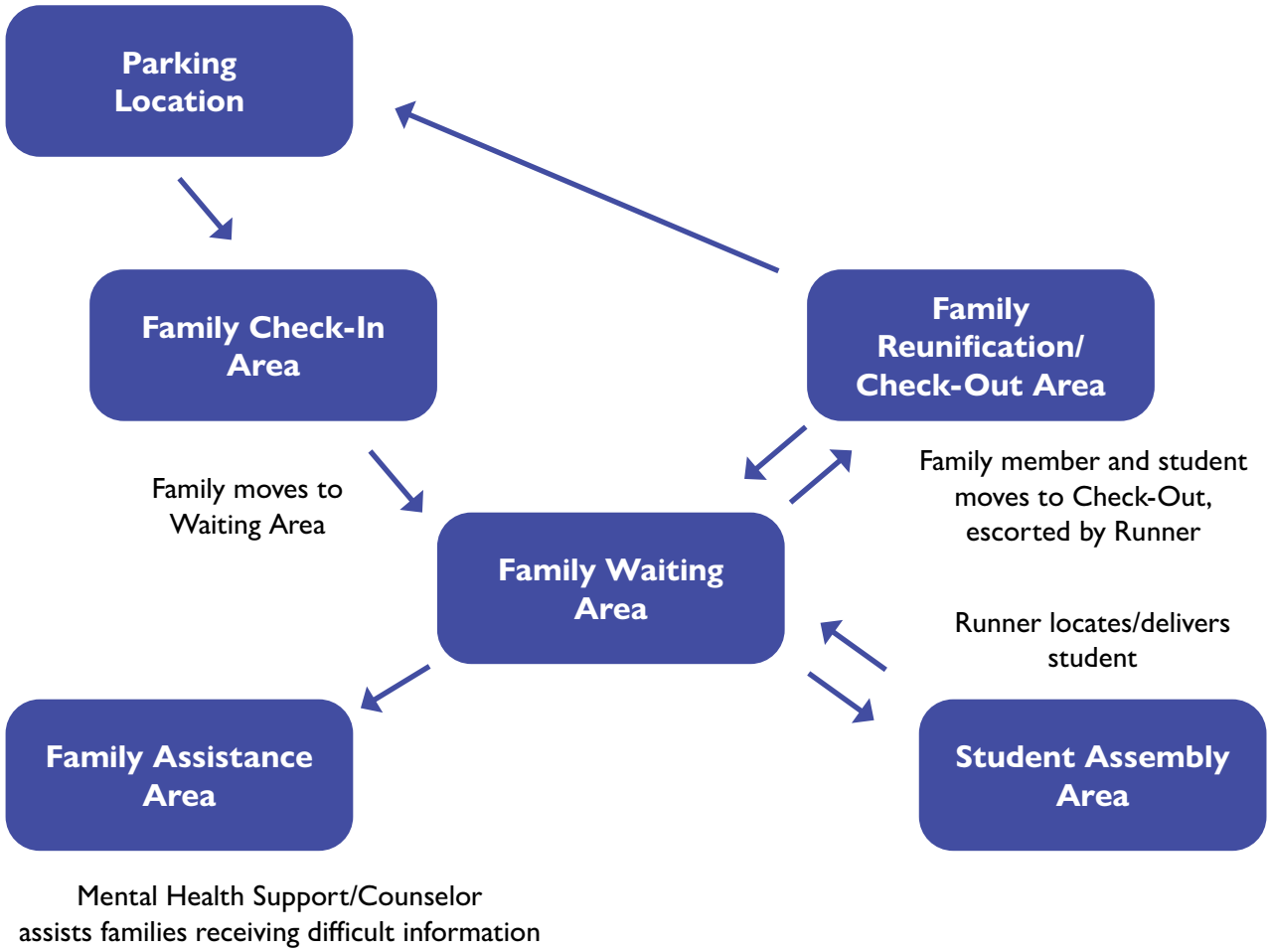
STUDENT RELEASE PROCESS

STEP-BY-STEP STUDENT RELEASE

- Send notification to families regarding need for Student Release
  - Location of Student Release Area (On or Off Site)
  - Instruct families to follow signs to the **Family Check-In Area**
  - Remind families that:
    - Person picking up student(s) must be listed on the Emergency Contact Form as someone authorized to pick student/s up
    - Parents/guardians may not pick up other students for whom they are not an Emergency Contact
    - Valid Form of ID will be required to verify identity
    - Reiterate need for patience, understanding, and cooperation
- Families arrive at Student Release Location
  - Traffic Control/Flow Monitors control parking area and direct families to **Family Check-In Area**
- Families arrive at **Family Check-In Area**
  - Greeters welcome families and ask them to complete the **Student Reunification Form**
  - Provide form, pen, and clipboard or table to write on
  - Families submit the completed form and show valid identification to Checker for emergency contact verification
  - Checker notes location of student based on Student Reunification Form and returns verified form to the family member to take to the Family Waiting Area and give to a Runner
  - If a student is listed as missing, injured, or detained, the Supervisor will bring the family to the Family Assistance Area where Law Enforcement or Superintendent will notify them, and a Mental Health Support/Counselor will be available for support

STUDENT RELEASE PROCESS

- Family is directed to **Family Waiting Area**
  - Family member hands Runner-verified Reunification Form. Family member retains the bottom portion of form. Runner takes the top portion of form to retrieve the student
  - Upon return, Runner delivers the student and then escorts the parent/guardian and student to **Reunification/Check-Out Area**
- Family Member is directed to **Reunification/Check-Out Area**
  - Traffic/Flow Monitors help ensure the parent/guardian completes check-out procedures and then leaves the area immediately
  - Checkers attach the verified portion of the form to the family member receipt portion and maintain records
  - The Reunification Supervisor is present to say goodbye to students and families as they leave



STUDENT RELEASE/REUNIFICATION FORM

Thank you in advance for your patience with this process. Our common goal is to get family members reunited with their student(s) safely and quickly.

Please complete this form and bring it, along with a valid form of identification, to the Family Check-In Area. A Checker will verify you are an official emergency contact for each student listed on this form.

Student's Name	Teacher's Name	Date of Birth	Student Grade

Name of person picking up student(s):

Phone number of person picking up student(s):

Relationship to student(s) being picked up:

Signature of person picking up student(s):

****** Top portion for verification by Family Check-In Area – Runner takes form to retrieve student(s) – Family Reunification Check-Out Area to match to Parent Portion *******

Family member: Submit form at Family Reunification Check-Out Area upon release of your student(s)

Student's Name	Student Grade

Name of person picking up student(s):

Emergency contact verification by:

Reunification confirmation by:

Date/Time: **Attach both portions of the form and retain for records**

FAMILY ASSISTANCE AREA

The Family Assistance Area is located next to the Family Waiting area, a confidential and private location for family members to be taken by a counselor or trained mental health provider when receiving difficult information such as a missing or injured child, or a child detained by police. In this setting, initial notification of missing, injured, or detained students should be conducted by Law Enforcement or Superintendent. Below are considerations for the identified space:

- Bottled Water
- Tissue
- Wellness Box
  - Paper/Pencil/Coloring Sheets
  - Fidgets/Stress balls/Small puzzles
- For larger situations:
  - Snacks, power strips, charging stations, white noise machine

STUDENT DRIVERS/COMMUTERS

Identify and communicate procedures release procedures for students who have an independent mode of transportation (e.g. bicycle, scooter, e-bike, walking). Below are considerations:

- Identify if students must be picked up by a parent/guardian/emergency contact.
- If permitted to leave via their usual mode of transportation:
  - Keep record of permission to leave in the event of a student release event
  - Assess for shock and wellness prior to the student leaving
  - Determine who may be transported with the student (e.g., sibling, etc.)
  - Determine exit route that does not block or impede first responder access to the school

FAMILY ASSISTANCE AREA

When a parent/guardian is not able to be reached:

- Document the time of each email/call/text; note the type of communication
- Make a minimum of three attempts to reach the parent/guardian
- Leave a message each time a call is made
- Contact each emergency contact listed for the student
- Notify the site designee (e.g., administrator, counselor, mental health professional) to support the student's wellbeing as needed and to provide updates to them
- Remain with the student
- Notify the Superintendent or District designee
- Transfer the student to an appropriate agency, (e.g., Children and Family Services) as determined, dependent upon the nature/duration of the event

CONSIDERATIONS

CUSTODY

- Do not release a student to anyone not noted as a parent, guardian, emergency contact, or individual authorized in writing by a parent/guardian
- If a disagreement regarding custody arises, remind the parents that the school district does not enforce custody orders, and that the student may be release to either parent unless a court order requires otherwise
- Notify the Superintendent, if necessary
- Document the interaction, documents reviewed, actions taken, and note if law enforcement was contacted

SELF-RELEASE BY STUDENT

Under 18 years old:

VERIFY: Verify that the student left the school site; document the time their absence was discovered

CONTACT: Contact the parent/guardian; document the time; leave a message if you receive voicemail

NOTIFY: Notify the Superintendent or designee; Notify law enforcement, as appropriate

DOCUMENT: Note the time, circumstances, actions taken, and persons notified

Emancipated Students or Over 18 years old: Follow Check-Out process.

ROLE OF SUBSTITUTES AND AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM STAFF

Substitutes and after school program staff are integral to the the functioning of a school when present. Staff who are hired by the school district follow district policies and may be requested to support in a student release/reunification event role, other than supervising students. Staff who are hired by an outside agency follow the guidance of the agency, per MOUs or other agreements. Role cards specific to substitutes and after school program staff can be found in the Student Release Guidance for Schools Toolkit.

MEDIA MANAGEMENT

- Be respectful, calm, and concise
- Connect media contacts with the district or site Public Information Officer
- See Section 7 of the Emergency Communications and Templates Guide, Working with the Media
- See Section 10 of the Emergency Communications and Template Guide, Student Release, for communication templates
- Use consistent messaging
- Do not share unverified information
- Do not share student confidential information, including names

VERIFICATION OF PARENT/GUARDIAN/EMERGENCY CONTACT ID

Accepted Forms of Photo Identification:

- Driver's License (State-issued)
- Passport
- Military ID
- State-issued Photo ID card
- Student ID Card (if applicable)
- School-approved Digital ID/PIN (e.g., electronic sign-out)

VERIFICATION OF PARENT/GUARDIAN/EMERGENCY CONTACT WITHOUT ID

In extreme events requiring a student release, there may be a situation in which a parent/guardian or emergency contact is unable to present valid ID due to situations beyond their immediate control. In such an event, the following alternate forms of authorization can be considered, per the authority of the Superintendent or designee:

- **Written/Electronic Permission:** A signed note, email, or digital app message from the parent/guardian to the school principal or office, in the presence of the Checker.
- **Emergency Contact Form:** Ensuring the person is already listed on the school's emergency release form is the most secure method. Twice a year at minimum and send period updates; notify the office if receive notification of a change so that they can update the information.
- **Caregiver's Authorization Affidavit:** Used for non-parent caregivers (e.g., relatives) to allow for school pickup.
- **Visual confirmation:** Visual confirmation of parent/guardian or emergency contact by designated site/district personnel

TRAUMA-INFORMED RESPONSE

Recognizing and responding with compassion and empathy to the physical, emotional, and mental health needs of students and staff during a student release event creates a more effective emergency response and a more resilient school community. Refer to the Trauma-Informed and Inclusive Practices Guidance for specific guidance. Below are considerations during a Student Release event:

GOALS OF TRAUMA-INFORMED RESPONSE

SAFETY: Support physical, emotional, and mental health safety for students, staff, and families

TRUST and TRANSPARENCY: Share information that can be shared; provide frequent communication updates

SUPPORT: Provide opportunities for staff check-ins and family check-ins in the waiting area

COLLABORATION: Train and prepare staff, students, and families on the Student Release process

EMPOWERMENT: When possible, offer choices. Adapt to identified and known physical, emotional, and mental health needs. Practice leveled drills to prepare staff, students, and families.

HUMILITY: Acknowledge and respond to barriers that may impact safety, trust, and well-being.

RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENT:

- Focus on safety, predictability, and wellness
- Create clear flow maps that account for physical disabilities
- Prepare signage with visuals, wellness box, and supplies
- Maintain a communicated, predictable structure of what to expect for staff, students, and parents/guardians; provide frequent updates and reminders
- Reduce sensory input when/where possible
- Provide information in multiple languages as possible

RESPONSIVE COMMUNICATION:

Keep statements and requests clear and concise; be specific

Ex. This is what we know right now... Ex. Students are waiting with their teachers. Ex. We're taking attendance now. Ex. Our first step is... Ex. You'll follow signs to the Family Waiting Area.

Respect expressed feelings with empathy

Ex. I hear your frustration with the process. Ex. You're right, this is a stressful situation. Ex. We're working together to get you connected with your child. Ex. I can see how worried you are, this can feel stressful. Ex. We know being separated from your child is really hard.

Use respectful, and inclusive language

Ex. We have two place that you can wait, which do you prefer?. Ex. Your questions are valid- this is what I know right now...

Promote connection

Ex. Thank you for working with us to connect you to your child. Ex. Your concern is important to us. Ex. Let us know if you need accommodations.

STUDENT and STAFF WELLNESS

A student release event can be stressful. Preparation and training is key to as successful a release process as possible. Below are considerations for student and staff wellness before, during, and after a student release event.

STUDENT WELLNESS

Before	During	After
Train students Student Release Process Expectations Communication Drill Practice - Leveled	Exercise empathy Use a Trauma-Informed Approach Prioritize communication: frequent, clear, inclusive, transparent (as able to) Provide opportunities for restroom breaks Provide access to a counselor Provide water/snacks; dependent on event duration	Debrief as a classroom; individually as needed Provide access to a counselor/mental health professional Provide wellness materials to families Conduct followup wellness check-ins

STAFF WELLNESS

Before	During	After
• Train staff • SR Process • Radio Use • Communication • Drill Practice • Role clarity • Have a plan ready in case you must stay after hours • Forms of communication • Consistency of messaging	• Exercise empathy • Prioritize communication • frequent, clear, inclusive, • transparent (as able to) • Provide opportunities for breaks • Provide opportunities for • wellness check-ins • Identify a quiet space • Provide water/snacks	• Debrief as a staff • Debrief SR core team • Debrief IC staff • Debrief with district leadership • Provide access to a counselor/ mental health professional, dependent on the nature and duration of the event • Provide wellness materials • Followup meeting with staff • after debrief with any changes to the site plan/approach • Conduct wellness check-ins

SUPPLY LIST

SUPPLY LIST

- Tables
- Tape
- Pens
- Stapler with extra staples
- Signage– areas and directions for parents; multi-lingual
- Release/Reunification Forms
- Clipboard
- Bins with lids for paperwork by grade level
- Emergency contact binder
- Cones
- Consider: rain/wind shelter

Essential	Optimal	Comprehensive
Reflective traffic cones	Multiply sizes of cones	Portable PA system
Stop/Slow paddles	A-frame signs (pre-labeled)	Portable generator
Barricade tape	Portable barricades	Extension cords/power strips
High-visibility vests	Directional arrow signs	
Role ID badges	Chalk or temporary marking spray	
Two-way radios	Traffic wands	
Whistles	Megaphones/bullhorns	
Printed flow map	Multilingual signage	
Flashlights		

RADIO/WALKIE TALKIE USE and TIPS

TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Use of radios or walk-talkies by staff can be a helpful communication tool in the student release process. Clear, concise, and specific communication supports efficient and mindful communication.

EQUIPMENT TIPS

Check Equipment: Ensure radio is on, charged and set to the correct channel

Listen First: Wait for a pause to avoid interrupting

Wait for the Beep: Press the speak button, wait for the beep, and wait one second to avoid cutting off your first words

Identify Yourself: State who you are, your location, and the intended recipient process

Be Concise: Keep message short and to the point to keep channel free for other users

Use, Don't Abuse: Keep tone professional and volume moderate; no casual chatting

Mindful: Be mindful of student specific and protected information; do not share confidential information

SAMPLE CODES and LINGO

Go Ahead: I can listen and respond, go ahead with message
Say Again: Repeat your last message
Stand By: I acknowledge your transmission, but I am unable to respond now
Confirmed: Message Received
Copy: Message understood
Affirmative: Yes (Avoid: Yup, yeah, nope, etc.)
Negative: No
Over: End of transmission - I have finished speaking - expecting a reply
Out: End of transmission- no reply needed. Channel is available for others to use

SAMPLE SCRIPT

Incident Commander: Staff Name, this is Name, do you copy?
Staff Member 1: Confirmed, this is Name in Room #, Go ahead
Incident Commander: Staff Name, please advise on attendance, over
Staff Member 1: Room # is missing Student Name/Staff Name, all others accounted for, over
Incident Commander: Copy that, stand by
Incident Commander: Attention staff. Please advise if Student Name is with you/in your room/area, over
Staff Member 2: Incident Commander, this is Name in Room #. Student Name is with us. Over
Incident Commander: Copy that, SM2. SM1, Student Name is accounted for in Room #. Over
Staff Member 1: Copy that. Over and out