

How technology can help district leaders prepare for emergencies

The increasing role of EdTech in K-12 emergency operations planning



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Skyward Best Practices

Expect the best, but prepare for the worst. This tried and trusted model of readiness has far-reaching implications in the world of K-12 education. Thankfully, there are a myriad of resources available to help school district leaders prepare for and prevent disaster.

The Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center (rems.ed.gov) is a great resource for schools and districts looking to define or improve upon their plans for emergency preparedness. The website includes a summary of Presidential Policy Directive 8, breaking down the directive into five key areas: Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery. The definitions found in this article for all five areas are taken directly from the REMS website. It should come as no surprise that technology has a supporting role to play at every step in the process.

When you think of education technology, your mind may default to an image of the hardware or applications that are used by students in a classroom setting. In reality, a healthy portion of a school district's technology budget is often dedicated to non-instructional tech, much of which is used to support the pivotal, behind-the-scenes processes that keep schools functioning. While there is no substitute for a principal's keen eye or a teacher's compassionate intervention, technology can also help reduce the burden on educators to support the five mission areas of emergency preparedness.

Prevention

The capabilities necessary to avoid, deter, or stop an imminent crime or threatened or actual mass casualty incident. Prevention is the action schools take to prevent a threatened or actual incident from occurring.

Prevention is not possible without identification. The role of technology here is to aid in identifying and monitoring areas of concern in student performance, patterns and trends (such as discipline, location or time), and building or network vulnerabilities. It may be easy to second-guess issues after a tragedy has occurred, but the goal of preventative measures is to give educators the resources they need early so they can still make a difference, rather than being left to reflect on what could have been done differently after the fact. The most important stories are the ones that never make the news.

Accessible analytics can help educators identify the perpetrators and victims of bullying before either party reaches a point of no return. It is vital for school counselors, administrators, and support personnel to be able to easily access discipline, survey, and performance records in order to provide targeted intervention for students who have been a party to bullying or are heading down a destructive path. Custom reports, consistent analysis, and real-time information are crucial to this process, as they help clear the obstacles that otherwise might stand in the way of trained professionals making informed decisions.

Protection

The capabilities to secure schools against acts of violence and manmade or natural disasters. Protection focuses on ongoing actions that protect students, teachers, staff, visitors, networks, and property from a threat or hazard.

Protection is the second line of defense, providing a buffer between our schools and people with ill intentions. No matter how much effort gets put into preventing disastrous incidents, schools can't possibly catch every potential event before it happens. Technology has a role to play in the protection of both property and people.

As we continue to collect more and more data about students, cyber security will only grow in importance. Hacking, whether for the purpose of stealing sensitive data, changing records, or bringing down the system, can cause significant disruptions both in school operations and students' lives. Any investment in technology should come with a thorough review of security procedures. Is your network being actively monitored for intrusion attempts? Are your security settings properly configured to ensure that information is accessible only to those who need it?

Visitor management solutions have become a popular physical security measure for schools. Rather than relying on the subjective observation of office staff or liaison officers, schools now have access to technology that can run instant background and sex offender checks, verify student pickup authorizations, and print activity-specific identification badges. With real-time information as to who is on-premise and why, school officials are in a better position to monitor, take action, and even deny entry in order to keep kids out of harm's way.

Mitigation

The capabilities necessary to eliminate or reduce the loss of life and property damage by lessening the impact of an event or emergency...or reducing the likelihood that threats and hazards will happen.

If an unforeseen winter storm or flash flood makes transportation impossible, is your school prepared to serve as a makeshift overnight community shelter? Will your students have access to water, blankets, flashlights, and other necessary supplies? Nature is not always convenient, nor is it discriminating; disaster can strike just as easily in the middle of the school day as it can on the weekend.

Technology can help mitigate the effects of natural disasters by giving school districts the tools they need to ensure adequate emergency supply and distribution. Inventory and warehouse management solutions offer district staff at-a-glance statistics regarding low inventory, physical resource allocation, and historical projections. Purchasing departments can leverage technology to anticipate keeping up with district growth and manage outside donations. When school district staff are aware of what supplies are available, where

they're stored, and how they are being distributed, the entire process can move faster and more efficiently, even in the midst of a crisis.

Response

The capabilities necessary to stabilize an emergency once it has already happened or is certain to happen in an unpreventable way; establish a safe and secure environment; save lives and property; and facilitate the transition to recovery.

Communication, above all, is the key to effective response. When an emergency occurs, it is essential that all stakeholders, including students, parents, and school staff have accurate and timely information. An effective and proven emergency notification system can make all the difference in a disaster, both saving lives and helping to put them back together in the aftermath.

Far too many times, we have read stories of automated emergency notification systems failing when they are needed most. It is a sad day when school districts that have invested tens of thousands of dollars and hours of training over the years have to witness their technology fall flat the first time a crisis arises. The best preparation includes both a sound partnership with an experienced vendor and thorough documentation and training at the district level. School districts should consider how many people have access to the notification system, what practices are in place to keep an up-to-date subscriber list, and whether or not there is transparency regarding what constitutes an emergency and when notification needs to be sent.

Recovery

The capabilities necessary to assist schools affected by an event or emergency in restoring the learning environment.

“Restoring the learning environment” no longer means getting new textbooks and chalkboards into a classroom. In today’s landscape, everything from assignments to grade books and even district paychecks is dependent on technology, which can be just as susceptible to the effects of disaster as any physical resource. Districts that host their data on-premise face the risk of losing it all to a hurricane, fire, or other unforeseeable catastrophe if they do not have an effective disaster recovery plan in place.

Even cloud-based solutions are not created equal in terms of their ability to get schools back up and running in the aftermath of disaster. Failover capabilities, virtualization options, and redundant data centers are all crucial features to look for in school technology systems. Do you know what your district’s RTO and RPO are for your Student Information or Learning Management Systems? Are the numbers low enough to satisfy the objectives of your emergency preparation plan, or is it time to look for something better? These are important questions that need to be asked before the situation calls for it.

In a perfect world, our children would be shielded from disaster their entire lives. Unfortunately, such hopes are not realistic. While there's nothing wrong with expecting the best, we owe it to our kids to prepare as well as we can for the worst. While planning, communicating, and practicing emergency responses, it is also vital to evaluate and test your education technology solutions to support those efforts at every turn. Does your district have an emergency prep plan in place? Do you have the technology to support all of your goals? There has never been a better time to conduct a self-assessment and ensure that you are adequately prepared.

For More Information

To learn more about how Skyward's technology solutions can help your district's leaders prepare for emergencies visit www.skyward.com or call your Skyward Account Executive at 800-236-7274.

About Skyward

Skyward is a leading provider of K-12 school administrative software that surpasses districts' needs in state reporting, improves operational capabilities, and opens communication between schools and families. Today, you can find Skyward's School Management System™ in more than 1,800 school districts worldwide, ranging from districts with as few as 50 students to state configurations supporting more than 1 million students. Founded in 1980, Skyward serves school districts with its integrated student, finance, and human resources suite of products and is proudly made and supported in the U.S.A. Visit online at www.skyward.com.

