



OREGON  
DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION

# Emergency Plans and Drills Guidance: Incident Command System for Schools

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# School Safety and Emergency Management



## Incident Command System for Schools

The Incident Command System (ICS) is an organizational model that is used to control disaster response. It is scalable and flexible in its application. The larger the incident, the greater the need for organizational efficiency. Disasters can easily become overwhelming when an organizational structure is not in place. Schools do not typically organize themselves with a rigid command structure during day-to-day operations. Because of this, it is both useful and necessary to explain how first responders will be organized and how schools can develop their own organizational approach to emergency management.

In this third of six guidance sections, the *what* and *why* of school implementation of Incident Command System fundamentals will be explained. This guide is a reference for school leaders who need a starting point or who may want to fill in potential gaps in their current Emergency Operations Plan so that they can better manage and coordinate emergency response. The intent is to break down key concepts related to ICS and provide an explanation of how that can look in a school setting. This guidance addresses the following areas:

- What is ICS and why do schools need it?
  - Fundamentals
  - Basic Structure
  - Applying Fundamentals
- ICS Fundamentals and how to implement:
  - Common terminology
  - Unity of command
  - Span of control
  - Unified command
- Connecting ICS in schools with emergency responders.

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### Incident Command System: What is it?

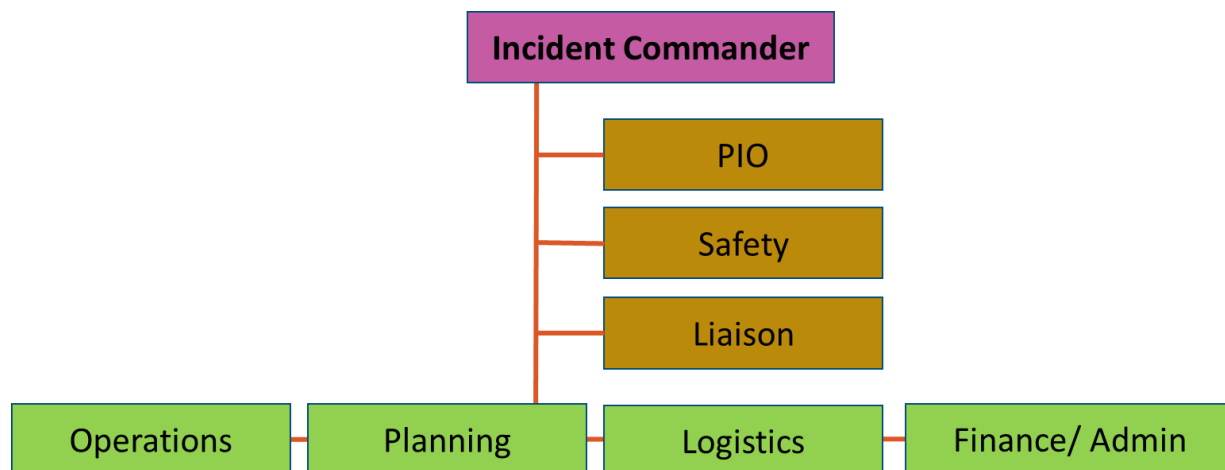
The Incident Command System is a standardized, on-scene, all-hazards incident management concept. It is not a plan but rather a flexible framework that incorporates a standard command structure and fundamental concepts that are necessary for its implementation. By applying ICS fundamentals and its command structure into a response plan, an organization—in this case a school or district—will reduce confusion, conflicts of command and disruption during the response.

**Fundamentals:** ICS relies upon a few fundamentals that are key to its implementation. Each of these fundamentals will be explained in more detail in the follow-on section (ICS Fundamentals: How to Implement). The fundamentals that are required of ICS and that schools should keep in mind are:

- **Common Terminology:** Use common language and avoid jargon.
- **Unity of Command:** Each person should only report to one supervisor to avoid confusion.
- **Span of Control:** A concept that describes the appropriate ratio of people supervised per supervisor.
- **Unified Command:** when multiple organizations work together with independent commands, they should work together to avoid conflicts of command.

Work with your local emergency responders to develop a method to incorporate these fundamentals. While the ICS structure is scalable, the fundamentals should be applied consistently every time. A response that does not incorporate one of the above fundamentals is asking for confusion and disarray.

**Basic Structure:** The ICS command structure itself is scalable. A school or district may not have enough staff members to fill every position in the ICS command structure. However, the ICS command structure should be considered as a list of responsibilities that need to be managed during an incident response. Applying the fundamentals in ICS typically results in a standard command structure that looks like this:



The public information officer (PIO), the safety officer and the liaison all work on the command staff and report directly to the Incident Commander. They, like the other sections below the Incident Commander, describe functions that are necessary during an incident response. The Incident Commander is responsible for the overall incident response. The PIO and the function of the PIO is responsible for communicating with the public on the incident. For schools, this would include communication with staff and families. ODE has two valuable resources that will help with

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communications planning and development before, during and after an incident (included in the Resources and Guides section). The safety officer and the function of the safety officer is responsible for ensuring activities are conducted as safely as possible. The liaison officer and the function of the liaison officer is responsible for liaising with other agencies and organizations during the response.

For the ICS sections (operations, logistics, planning, and finance and admin), these are the responsibilities (and roles) that carry out the activities of the response including its support and facilitation.

- **Operations:** This is the section that conducts the response and is likely the first section that will need to be set up during a response. During a response that requires an evacuation and relocation, these would be your teachers and aids who have to move their classes to an assembly area and then onto the busses.
- **Planning:** This section plans the response and is more prevalent during an incident that lasts an extended period of time. The planning section must collaborate with all the other sections to sufficiently consider capabilities and develop a plan that can actually work. In a school setting, this will likely include administrative staff who know the internal capabilities and external points of contact. They may need to know who at the bus yard can confirm the number and availability of busses needed, or who to contact in local law enforcement for traffic control. An administrator assigned to the planning section may not directly control specific capabilities, but they will need to know what those capabilities are and how to develop a plan that captures those real capabilities.
- **Logistics:** This section is responsible for supplying and providing function to the incident response. This function is responsible for communication, transportation and supply staging. In a school setting this would include the transportation department (or equivalent), and likely the food service staff as these will both be needed during a relocation and reunification. Consider how your school will move students and staff, and how they will be fed during an extended reunification effort. A school may not need to consider logistics for a multi-day response, but it will need to consider things such as food and transportation for the whole school over several hours should a relocation and reunification become necessary.
- **Finance and Administration:** This section is responsible for ensuring that the bills get paid and that people get tracked. These responsibilities will also include record keeping and procurement for additional assets and personnel as needed. In a school setting this may include your front office staff who will be needed to pull the attendance logs so that every student in the building is accounted for during a relocation and reunification.

Each of the above roles and responsibilities could be collapsed into one position or expanded so that every section is staffed. The conditions and scale of the incident will dictate how many people are required to fill each of those roles. For a small school, the Incident Commander may be the principal who also assumes the responsibilities of all the roles except operations, which are handled by a few teachers. For a larger, district-level response, a superintendent may delegate Incident Command responsibilities to a subordinate who then assigns each role and section based on the scale of the incident and the capacity of the district.

**Applying the fundamentals:** Regardless of how large or small an incident may be, or how many people are available to fill each role or section, schools of all sizes should be applying the fundamentals.

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Applying the fundamentals will ensure a more organized response and will also improve collaboration with emergency responders. When a school knows where their students and staff are and what they are doing, response coordination will be made that much easier.

### ICS Fundamentals: How to Implement

Schools that ignore the ICS fundamentals will end up making a simple response a confusing and annoying mess. Consider a school with 20 teachers, a principal, an assistant principal and one front office worker. A routine evacuation may see one assistant principal getting accountability from 20 different teachers. Not only would this process take longer than necessary, any problems with accountability could end up disrupting the organization of a necessary search. The following fundamentals will be explained with an example of how to apply them in a school setting.

**Common Language:** Keep the language simple and descriptive. Implementing procedures such as the Standard Response Protocols from the I Love U Guys Foundation ensures that every student and staff member in school knows just what is required. It also helps with family notifications and coordination with first responders. Letting people both inside the building and outside the building know that the school is conducting a secure drill (alert language: “Get inside, lock outside doors.”) helps simplify the message and reduces the need for additional explanation. Apply this same idea to directions, actions and other communication both internally and externally.

**Unity of Command:** Each person should only report to one supervisor to avoid confusion. Not only does the concept of one report to one supervisor avoid confusion, it will also avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. A common problem during an incident response is when a higher-level supervisor (or administrator) tries to help out during an incident and starts asking for updates or information from people at various levels. This effort may be borne out of a desire to help, but it can end up confusing response activities and it ultimately introduces an unnecessary distraction. This is a particularly important thing to keep in mind for district-level staff who may be managing a larger incident that school staff cannot manage independently. Applying the fundamental of unity of command (one report to one supervisor) will allow the people handling the lower and middle levels of an incident response the ability to effectively complete the tasks in front of them.

**Span of Control:** This is a concept that describes the appropriate ratio of people supervised per supervisor. The golden ratio is one supervisor to five subordinates. The Federal Emergency Management Agency recommends between 1:3 and 1:7. So the previous example where an evacuation is being conducted with 20 teachers would require an adjustment to the span of control for that incident. 20 teachers should not be reporting accountability to a single assistant principal. Instead, break down the school into reporting teams. Consider organizing your evacuation assembly areas by reporting teams. Just remember to keep them to seven or fewer reporting to one person collecting those reports. Implementing a span of control does a couple of things: it prevents overwhelming a single person who will juggle multiple reports, and it allows problems in one section be resolved in that section without affecting the rest of the incident response.

**Unified Command:** When multiple organizations work together with independent commands, they should work together to avoid conflicts of command. A simple way to think about this one is to make

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sure you are coordinating your activities with those of the emergency responders showing up to your school. A school should know who is going to show up to handle the emergency, how they operate and what it is they need to do their jobs effectively. Likewise, emergency responders should know a school's unique needs so they do not block bus access or respond to the wrong location. Share plans with emergency responders ahead of time and also plan on coordinating with them during the response.

### Connecting ICS in Schools with Emergency Responders; Final Considerations

Schools must consider that how they organize themselves during an emergency will affect their coordination with emergency responders and it will affect how quick and effective an incident response will be.

First, take into account the size of your school or district. Do you have four teachers and a couple support staff? You may only need to designate one person who will act as the Incident Commander during an emergency and who will also handle most of the other roles and responsibilities that the individual teachers don't already cover. Four to six people reporting to that one person is absolutely feasible under ICS fundamentals. But that person needs to know where the fire trucks will show up and how to ensure law enforcement can effectively respond as well. That person also needs to ensure that, in their absence, the next in line knows how to manage an emergency response. What if your school has 80 teachers and a couple dozen other staff and administrators? Then any response plan for this school should include how groups are broken down for span of control purposes. Try to keep the span of control to no more than one supervisor to seven people reporting to them. A school of this size should have an organizational plan in place ahead of time so that everyone knows who they report to and what they need to do.

Finally, here are a couple of considerations that should be kept in mind for any school when it comes to implementing ICS fundamentals and coordinating with emergency responders doing the same:

- A major event will bring in a lot of equipment that can overwhelm even the smallest of incidents. If a real fire breaks out in your building, you won't see just one fire engine. You will likely also see a command truck show up to organize the fire response. And also police cruisers that show up to direct traffic. The point here is that you should expect your school grounds to get overwhelmed with emergency response vehicles and equipment. But we have a nifty organizational tool that will help us navigate even the most complex incident: the Incident Command System. We already know that first responders will be using this system. So if we know that then we know that somewhere in that chaos will be an Incident Commander who is taking charge of all the responding units. Know who that is ahead of time, what vehicle they will show up in and, if possible, have a mutual plan in place for where they can stage so that your Incident Commander can coordinate with them to fulfil that ICS fundamental of unified command.
- The ICS command structure and its fundamentals will help during complex incidents requiring a multi-agency response. When a disaster escalates, the stress levels go up. They go up even more when people are confused about a situation or don't know how to act. We can mitigate that

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stress when we give our teachers and staff something to do and give them the knowledge on how to do it.

Remember that ICS is scalable and adaptable to the organization and complexity of an incident. Plan ahead to organize your school or district using ICS fundamentals to prevent confusion or disruption during an emergency. Links to the communication guides and other ICS resources can be found in the Resources and Guides section at the end of this document.



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## Resources and Guides

- Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Schools:
  - <https://training.fema.gov/programs/emischool/el361toolkit/siteindex.htm>
- FEMA's National Incident Management System (NIMS) Resource Page:
  - <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/nims>
- FEMA's Independent Study-100.C: Introduction to the Incident Command System:
  - <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-100.c&lang=en>
- FEMA's Independent Study-200.C: Basic Incident Command System for Initial Response:
  - <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-200.c&lang=en>
- FEMA's Independent Study-362.A: Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Schools:
  - <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-362.a&lang=en>
- FEMA's Independent Study-700.B: Introduction to the Incident Command System:
  - <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-700.b&lang=en>
- Department of Homeland Security; Presidential Policy Directive / PPD-8: National Preparedness:
  - <https://www.dhs.gov/presidential-policy-directive-8-national-preparedness>
- Oregon Department of Education's (ODE) Sample Communications Plan Annex:
  - [https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Documents/Office%20of%20School%20Facilities/SSEM/Training/Communications\\_Annex\\_%28Example\\_Template%29.docx](https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Documents/Office%20of%20School%20Facilities/SSEM/Training/Communications_Annex_%28Example_Template%29.docx)
- ODE's Emergency Communications Plan Guidance:
  - <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Documents/Office%20of%20School%20Facilities/SSEM/Training/Emergency%20Communication%20Plan%20%28ORS%20339.324%29.pdf>
- Oregon Department of Education's School Safety and Emergency Management Program:
  - <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Pages/School-Safety-and-Emergency-Management.aspx>
- I Love U Guys Foundation: The Standard Response Protocol:
  - <https://iloveguys.org/The-Standard-Response-Protocol.html>
- Oregon Department of Emergency Management Local and Tribal Emergency Managers List:
  - [https://www.oregon.gov/oem/Documents/locals\\_list.pdf](https://www.oregon.gov/oem/Documents/locals_list.pdf)
- Oregon State Fire Marshal contact list for Deputy State Fire Marshals:
  - <https://www.oregon.gov/osfm/fire-service-partners/pages/deputy-state-fire-marshals.aspx>
- Oregon Health Authority, Local Public Health Authority Directory:
  - <https://www.oregon.gov/oha/ph/providerpartnerresources/localhealthdepartmentresources/pages/lhd.aspx>