

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.



Letter from the Director

October 2026

I am pleased to present the **2026 edition** of the ***Best Practice Guidelines for Active Assailant Emergency Preparedness***.

Comprehensive school safety is never the result of a single policy; it is built through a multi-layered approach. By balancing physical security measures with a positive school climate and deep personal connections between students and staff, we create an environment where safety is foundational. These guidelines focus specifically on the emergency preparedness layer, ensuring that our schools are not just secure, but ready.

Since the initial 2024 release and the 2025 revision, we have continued to refine our recommendations based on emerging data and stakeholder feedback. This latest version includes:

- **Evidence-Based Insights:** Integration of the latest Maryland lockdown drill survey results, conducted in partnership with the National Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.
- **Community School Considerations:** A dedicated new section addressing the unique operational and social needs of Community Schools.
- **Refined Psychological Safety:** Updated strategies to minimize "drill fatigue" and trauma while maximizing skill retention.

These guidelines and the [Active Assailant / Lockdown Drill resources](#) on our website serve as a vital roadmap for public school leaders navigating evolving legal requirements and as a comprehensive resource for nonpublic school leaders. Together, we can ensure that Maryland's schools remain safe havens for learning, growth, and community.



Kate Bryan
Executive Director

Document Revision History		
Revision Description	Revision #	Revision Date
No new requirements or substantive changes were made. A new research source was added. Legal citations were updated. Formatting and language changes were made to provide better clarity. A section for <i>Key Considerations for Students and Staff New to the School</i> was added (see pg. 26). A new appendix was added for LEAs that includes drill communication examples (see pg. 30).	2025.01	Oct. 1, 2025
New sections added that address considerations for Community Schools (see pg. 25) and strategies to minimize drill fatigue (see pg. 21). A new appendix was added, Lockdown Drill Study 2025-2026 Findings (see Appendix E).	2026.01	Oct. 1, 2026

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Executive Summary

Training and emergency exercises are fundamental components of a comprehensive school safety preparedness program that 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 schools develop the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively respond to emergencies.

Paramount to the design and conduct of emergency preparedness activities is a commitment to minimizing potential emotional impact for students and staff participating in those activities. Balancing the need to teach students and school staff what actions to take during an emergency with 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 a realistic 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 the 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) **highlight** best practices for active assailant training and drills.

The restrictions and guidelines in this document apply to any drill or training conducted to prepare students and staff for active assailant incidents, regardless of what a school calls the drill or training (e.g., lockdown).

This guidance document may include unfamiliar terminology. Therefore, a list of definitions is provided in [Appendix C](#) for your reference.

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

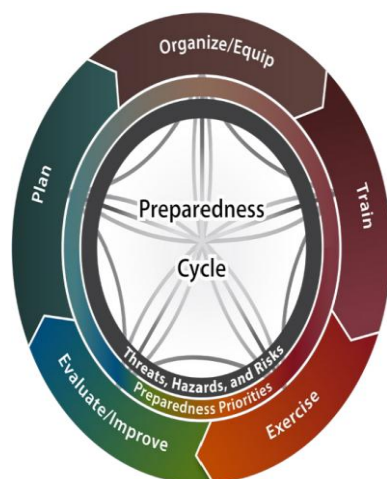
² Maryland House Bill 416, (Chapter 182, 2024).

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

FEMA. Integrated Preparedness Cycle. Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation

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

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

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

When developing training and exercises to test the response to 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, during, 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 structured lockdown procedures to secure facilities when a threat is inside or near the building. In addition to standard protocols, some school systems incorporate options-based frameworks designed to foster critical thinking and situational decision-making during an active crisis.⁸ These decision-

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 (Chapter 182, 2024).

⁸ 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->

based strategies emphasize that emergency responses are not one-size-fits-all; depending on the situation, appropriate actions may include securing in place, creating distance from the threat, or taking defensive measures if directly confronted.

Options-based approaches are primarily tailored for adult personnel, who possess the cognitive capacity to evaluate dynamic, high-stress environments and determine the safest course of action. In an options-based model, lockdown is not a standalone response, but one essential component within a broader matrix of emergency contingencies. A complete crisis management strategy integrates lockdown protocols alongside regular building evacuations, transportation emergency drills, and mandatory functional exercises conducted throughout the school year.

While adult staff should be trained in situational decision-making—including preparing to evade or defend if an immediate area is breached—**routine student drills must remain structured, predictable, and age-appropriate. Complex counter-strategies or tactical response models are generally not suitable for younger students, individuals with disabilities or functional/access needs, or those with trauma histories.**

Standard Response Protocols ("I Love U Guys" Foundation SRP) provide the recommended baseline framework for student drills in Maryland schools. Options-based principles, if implemented, should supplement—not replace—standard protocol training. This dual approach ensures adult staff have the flexibility to make critical decisions in dynamic scenarios, while students practice clear, non-traumatizing instructions ("Locks, Lights, Out of Sight") within a safe and supportive learning environment.

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 (i.e., 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 (e.g., lockdown) instead of the scenario (e.g., shooter), may reduce psychological harm to participants.

In addition to using response action terminology when announcing drills, a major finding following several real-world events⁹ 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,"¹⁰ having standardized vocabulary for emergency response actions allows everyone involved, both within and outside the school, to clearly understand the actions any Maryland school is taking during an emergency.

Organizations like MCSS¹¹ recommend that schools adopt the evidence-based response and reunification protocols *Hold, Secure, Lockdown, Evacuate, and Shelter*, developed by experts with the "I Love U Guys" Foundation.¹²

				
HOLD	SECURE	LOCKDOWN	EVACUATE	SHELTER
Hold! is followed by "In your room or area. Clear the halls" and is the protocol used to keep students and staff in their current location in response to an emergency. This is	Secure! is followed by "Get inside. Lock outside doors" and is the protocol used to secure all outside doors in response to a threat outside the building.	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. Staff and students are expected to lock classroom doors,	Evacuate! (a location may be specified) is the action used when school officials need to move students and staff from one location to another in	Shelter! is followed by a hazard and a safety strategy, and is the protocol used when it is safer for students and staff to remain inside or in one area.

⁹ See MCSS Critical Life-Threatening Incident Reports, <https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Pages/RES-CLT.aspx>.

¹⁰ Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Incident Management System *October 2017* (3rd Edition).

¹¹ 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).

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

done to clear the hallways.	Depending on the threat, schools may opt for a lockdown.	move away from windows and doors, and remain quiet until released.	response to an emergency.	
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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, but the media incorrectly report it as a *Lockdown*, this inaccurate reporting 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 the appropriate resources effectively and efficiently.

The communication of terms goes beyond simply defining each term and centers on fostering an understanding of the situations where each response is most appropriate. The purpose of each drill should be teaching staff and students each action, but also 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 a situation 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 training should specifically focus on helping staff 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 move staff and students from *Lockdown* status to a *Hold position*. A

Hold allows students and staff to return to some typical activities, returning to their seat for instruction to continue, 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 for a variety of situations.

By standardizing emergency response action terminology across all Maryland 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 have undertaken 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 lockdown drill participants. These ongoing efforts will inform future updates to these guidelines.¹³

Best Practices

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

There are several publications that inform these guidelines and can assist school leaders in preparing staff and students for how to respond to any hazard or

¹³ All reports and data from our lockdown drill research study is available on our website, <https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/preparation-security/active-assailantlockdown-drills-exercises>.

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 D](#) 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.”¹⁴ [Maryland law](#) places specific limitations and requirements on how active assailant training and drills may be conducted. *These restrictions and guidelines apply to any drill or training conducted to prepare students and staff for active assailant incidents, regardless of what a school calls the drill or training (e.g., lockdown).* We will discuss areas of consideration within this section of this document to support you 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.¹⁵

¹⁴ NASP, NASRO, Safe and Sound Schools, *Best practices for schools in active shooter and other armed assailant drills*, (Apr. 2021).

¹⁵ Md. Code Ann., Ed. Art. §7-1509(b).

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).

In Maryland, active assailant (i.e., lockdown) 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.¹⁶

The use of unholstered weapons (real or fake), scripted acting of assailants or victims (including screaming or yelling), false or deceptive alerts, attempting breaches of occupied classrooms or facilities, or any other actions that could be perceived by a reasonable person as a threat, shall 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.¹⁷ 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.

¹⁶ Maryland House Bill 416, (Chapter 182, 2024).

¹⁷ Md. Code Ann., Ed. Art. §7-1509(d)(1).

Multidisciplinary Planning Team

A multidisciplinary school-based emergency preparedness planning team is essential for developing and testing a comprehensive emergency plan. Establishing a diverse planning team increases the overall effectiveness of lockdown drills while decreasing fear and anxiety. Involving stakeholders across various roles helps shape drill logistics and empowers leaders to guide their respective constituent groups in preparing for emergency exercises.

Identifying Members of the Team

To ensure the plan addresses the specific needs of all members of the school community, the team should reflect the school's demographics—including students, parents, and staff from diverse backgrounds. Particular attention should be given to including representatives for individuals with disabilities, English language learners, and racial or religious minorities.

In addition to broad representation, the team should possess a wide range of expertise, skills, and perspectives, balancing technical and non-technical knowledge to address all aspects of school safety. Recommended areas of expertise include security, safety, school mental health, nursing, special education, facilities management, transportation, food services, and family services.

Collaborating with special education staff and school counselors is crucial for ensuring the plan is inclusive and addresses the social-emotional needs of all students. Specifically, special education professionals offer valuable insights into the needs of students with physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities, ensuring that evacuation procedures and communication methods are fully accessible. Similarly, school counselors provide expertise in crisis intervention and trauma-informed care, helping the team develop protocols that support the mental well-being of students and staff during and after an emergency.

Furthermore, collaboration with first responders—including School Resource Officers (SROs)¹⁸ and local emergency management officials—is essential to align the school's safety procedures with community response plans. Through close collaboration, schools and emergency services can establish coordinated, highly effective protocols for critical incidents.

¹⁸ MCSS recommends School Resource Officers (SROs) and School Security Employees (SSE) play an active role on the planning team. These individuals are required to complete the MCSS SRO/SSE Training Academy, which provides specialized training on child and adolescent development, trauma informed practices, disability and diversity awareness, and other topics to support their roles in schools. MCSS SRO/SSE Training Academy (May 2025), https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Documents/Training/MCSS%20SRO%20Training%20Academy%202024_vfl.pdf.

Equally important, schools must actively partner with students and parents to build a robust emergency plan. Students offer a unique perspective on the daily school environment, while parents provide vital insights into family needs and community resources.

Finally, the overall size of the planning team should be carefully managed. The team must be large enough to incorporate essential perspectives and key stakeholders, yet concise enough to maintain efficient collaboration and agile decision-making.

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, local risk variables, 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 after-action 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 Planning 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 law enforcement, security, safety, school mental health, 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 shared with parents¹⁹ at the start of the school year, noting at a minimum the month an active assailant drill will take place. 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,²⁰ 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 to follow, and the purpose of each drill.²¹ By communicating this information

¹⁹ Md. Code Ann., Ed. Art. §7-1509(f)(2).

²⁰ These should be based on the framework provided by FEMA, *Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program Doctrine* (Jan. 2020).

²¹ See COMAR 13A.02.02.04 for the list of drills required to be conducted by Maryland public schools.

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. Individuals who have experienced past traumatic events may be particularly hesitant to practice lockdown drills. Therefore, schools should provide opt-out procedures for students and staff who may have concerns or reservations about participating in emergency drills. Opt-out procedures must be communicated to students, guardians, and staff in a reasonable timeframe prior to the drill being conducted and 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 and staff, schools should also explore alternative methods to help ensure that all students and staff, 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 and staff in other safety-related activities. By offering stakeholders a choice and providing alternative measures, schools can demonstrate their commitment to the safety and well-being of all students and staff.

Following the drill or training, parents should be promptly notified. This notification serves to inform them about the drill's occurrence, its purpose, and any important outcomes or information they need to be aware of regarding the safety and well-being of their children.

Sections detailing notification requirements have been provided in [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#) of this guide.

Key Considerations - Drill Notifications

Clear communication: Distribute a monthly drill schedule to parents at the start of the school year and to staff and students before drills are conducted. Notification to staff should be made in a manner that allows them time to prepare themselves and their classes for the drill.

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. The process should define a timeframe for individuals providing opt-out notification to a designated school official, and the specific method for the individual to receive alternate lockdown procedure instructions.

Post-drill communication: Notify parents following any drill or training. Additionally, share the MCSS drill survey with administrators, staff, students, and parents after every lockdown drill.

Training and Drill Preparation

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

It is also crucial to identify individuals who may require additional support before, during, and after a drill or training to ensure 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 safety, 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 learners may benefit from translated instructions or visual aids. Staff members 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. Making accommodations ensures everyone feels comfortable and prepared to participate fully in drills, ultimately enhancing the overall safety and well-being of the school community.

When providing training on a school's response protocols, be sure to include instructions for situations that extend beyond the classroom. For example, include guidance for performing lockdowns in non-classroom areas like hallways, bathrooms, gymnasium, cafeteria, library, or auditorium. Also, include role-specific training content that outlines responsibilities for different roles (e.g., teachers, cafeteria staff, maintenance, bus drivers, office staff).

Additionally, training for non-traditional hours is also essential. It's important to prepare students and staff for response expectations during after-school programs, sports practices, club meetings, or weekend events. These times present unique challenges, including a different group of people on campus, varied locations of activity, and a limited number of available staff.

Response expectations for these times should be clearly communicated and practiced through specific drills. For instance, a drill for a sports practice may focus on an outdoor location with a limited number of supervising staff, while a drill for an after-school program may focus on a different set of classrooms or common areas. By addressing these non-traditional scenarios, schools can ensure all individuals on campus are prepared to respond effectively, regardless of the time of day.

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.

Non-Traditional Locations/Hours: Training and drills should prepare students and staff for non-traditional scenarios, such as lockdowns while they are in the hallway, library, bus, restroom, cafeteria, or gymnasium. It's also essential to provide training for after-hours events, like sports practices or club meetings, which present their own unique challenges.

Staff Training: Provide staff with clear instructions on their responsibilities specific to their role. Also, provide training for 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 entry and departure, during lunch and recess, and during class transitions. 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 and staff with anxiety, past 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 allow the school or a classroom teacher 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

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

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 stop the drill at any time to support an individual in distress or in response to other real-world situations.

Post-Drill Debriefing and Evaluation

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 timely 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 drill²² should involve multiple stakeholders, including school administrators, teachers, support 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 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,²³ 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. This survey must be shared with students, staff, and parents following an active assailant or lockdown drill. NOTE: It is not required for any other type of drill or training.

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.

²² MCSS has developed an online tool for schools that want to review drills or real-world incidents. MCSS encourages the use of these procedures following drills to increase knowledge and skills on the review process, in the event a review needs to be conducted following a real-world incident.
<https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Pages/RES-AAR.aspx>.

²³ Md. Code Ann., Ed. Art. §7-1509(f)(7).

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 post lockdown drill [survey](#)²⁴ to your staff, students, and parents within 24 to 48 hours after the drill.

Strategies to Minimize Drill Fatigue

While regular preparedness activities are vital for skill-building, frequent, repetitive, or unpredictable drills can inadvertently lead to 'drill fatigue.' This phenomenon occurs when participants experience heightened anxiety, emotional desensitization, or diminished seriousness toward emergency protocols due to excessive or high-stress exposure. To preserve the psychological well-being of students and staff while ensuring high operational readiness, local school systems should be mindful of ways to mitigate drill fatigue.

Key Considerations - Drill Fatigue

Prioritize Skill Mastery Over Frequency: Focus on meeting statutory requirements through high-quality, deliberate practice rather than maximizing drill volume. Define clear learning objectives for every exercise, such as refining door-locking mechanics or hall-clearing transitions.

Utilize Discussion-Based Scenarios for Staff: To minimize operational disruption and physical exhaustion, supplement drills with adult-focused tabletop exercises and guided walkthroughs. These methods allow educators to practice thinking critically through various scenarios and the transition from one response protocol to another, for example hold to lockdown, without having students participate in repetitive lockdown drills.

Scaffold Instruction Progressively: Sequence training from announced, slow-paced instructional walkthroughs—where protocols and rationale are explained—to more standard drills that practice the procedure. Avoid unannounced or sudden drill initiations, which can cause unnecessary panic or disorientation.

Vary Context Without Increasing Volume: Instead of conducting identical whole-school lockdown drills, incorporate contextual variations, such as practicing a lockdown scenario during class transitions, lunch periods, or outdoor activities. These variations build practical adaptability while preventing numbness to standard procedures.

²⁴ Lockdown Drill Survey in Spanish. <https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/media/196>

Embed De-escalation and Normalization: Dedicate 5 to 10 minutes immediately following a drill for teachers to facilitate a structured check-in with students. Normalizing the experience and providing time for an emotional reset allows students and staff to return to academic instruction with a calm baseline.

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.

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.”²⁵

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.²⁶

The standard lockdown procedure relies upon a students' ability to remain silent, sit on the floor touching other students in a defined area of the classroom. Students that engage in stereotypic behavior that include verbalizations or movements to self-regulate, and those who are sensitive to touch and physical proximity, will likely need unique accommodations. Schools must recognize that requiring students with these unique needs to meet the expectations of the standard lockdown procedure will likely lead to an escalation of dysregulated behaviors and defeat the purpose of hiding from an active assailant.

²⁵ Md. Code Ann., Ed. Art. §7-1510(d)(1).

²⁶ 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).

- **Define Unique Procedures:** Consider ways that the standard procedure can be modified for an individual student to meet the overall objective of a lockdown; hiding from an assailant. This would include a specific location that is comforting and specific strategies that are most likely to result in silence or a low volume and limited physical movement.
- **Designated Staff Support:** Assign specific staff member(s) to be the primary adult(s) supporting and practicing the procedure with the student.
- **Practice:** Plan activities in advance that provide students with sequential steps that can be done with repetition and adult support in advance of a drill. Schedule time throughout the year to practice regularly in short intervals to assist everyone in recalling and executing unique procedures.
- **Calming Strategies:** Have a plan to utilize calming strategies (e.g., a quiet space, sensory tools) to help students regulate their emotions after a drill to assist in the return to regular routines.

Key Considerations - Individuals with Disabilities

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. This plan should include supports and accommodations that may be needed before, during, and following a drill.

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.

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.

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.

Key Considerations - English Language Learners

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. Explain the purpose of drills, as these activities may be unfamiliar. Consider how to conduct these drills with enhanced sensitivity to the trauma prevalent in immigrant communities, keeping in mind that there may be triggers for students and parents.

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.

Community Schools²⁷

Community schools require specialized considerations when planning and preparing for emergency situations. Due to the extended reach of community schools, as well as the variability in physical campus use and event scheduling, expanded forethought and planning are necessary. The community school coordinator should be actively engaged in developing emergency procedures and should be considered a key leader in the school building.

Key Considerations - Community Schools

Expanded Stakeholders: Because community schools serve families and community members beyond the enrolled student body, it is imperative that all stakeholders are familiar with emergency procedures. These procedures should be posted and communicated in languages that are accessible to all stakeholders.

Signage and Messaging: Community schools strive to be welcoming and equitable spaces, as such, all procedures regarding sign-in, entry doors, and security must be applied consistently, with warmth and understanding.

Events and Facility Usage Outside Typical School Hours: Community schools frequently host events, activities, and services outside of normal school hours, including before-school, evening, and weekend programs. These occurrences must be integrated into all emergency plans, and specific protocols may need to be established to cover these extended times. This may include designating alternative points of contact, developing unique evacuation plans, or assigning different roles.

- **Resources open to the public:** Because community schools host events open to the general public, plans must be inclusive of these activities. This includes facilities such as school-based health clinics, which may have separate entrances and require distinct procedures.
- **Extended Learning:** Staff, parents, and students participating in before- and after-school programs, after-school clubs, and summer programming must be informed of all relevant procedures and policies. It is recommended that training be conducted with these groups to ensure they understand and can implement these procedures.
- **Communications:** Physical signage and digital emergency plans should be readily available after hours to the staff monitoring these events. Regular and frequent reviews of these plans are recommended.

²⁷ Prioritized under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future to close achievement gaps, community schools serve as central hubs that bring families, partners, and comprehensive supports together to remove barriers to learning. By delivering integrated academic, health, and extracurricular resources, they foster equitable outcomes so every student can thrive.
<https://marylandpublicschools.org/about/pages/dsfss/community-schools/index.aspx>

Community Partners: Community partners should be involved in the school's emergency preparedness planning and must be fully informed of all policies and procedures. Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) should include explicit language requiring partners to both understand and implement the school's established policies.

Age and Grade Level²⁸

Developmental stages for children and adolescents will impact how they respond to emergencies. Younger children benefit from being provided less details about the scenario or situation that required a lockdown but more explicit instructions about the procedures being practiced. Conversely, older students may be more capable of handling details about the scenario being tested and be able to use independent thought and actions during a lockdown. Schools should tailor drill details and 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 school personnel, 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 positive 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.

Key Considerations - Age and Grade Level

Tailored Instructions: Adjust drill scenario details and response protocol instructions based on age. Younger students need simple, concrete directions and reassurance, while older students can be given more detailed, tactical information.

Post-Drill Support: Plan for age-appropriate debriefing sessions. Younger students may need to draw pictures or talk about their feelings, while adolescents may benefit from open discussions or Q&A sessions.

²⁸ 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.

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

Adult Modeling: Emphasize the importance of calm and composed adult behavior. Staff training should include guidance on managing their own stress and anxiety to avoid transferring it to students.

Appropriate Language: Use clear, direct, and non-alarming vocabulary. For example, use "**move to a safe area**" instead of "flee for your life," which can be frightening for children.

Repetition and Routine: Practice drills regularly to build muscle memory and turn the safety procedures into a predictable routine, reducing the element of surprise and fear for students of all ages.

Individual Backgrounds and Experiences

The varied backgrounds of students and staff, encompassing their cultural, educational, and personal histories, profoundly impact the effectiveness of school emergency drills. It is therefore crucial for schools to account for individual psychological states, past traumatic events (including those experienced by the community), specific needs, and personality traits when both planning and executing these drills.

This personalized approach extends to the communication surrounding drills, where clear, empathetic, and culturally sensitive language can alleviate anxiety and foster cooperation. Ultimately, recognizing and addressing these diverse individual factors ensures that emergency drills are not only procedurally sound but also psychologically safe and effective for everyone involved.

Key Considerations - Individual Backgrounds and Experiences

Cultural Considerations: Cultural beliefs and practices can impact how individuals perceive and respond to emergencies. Students, educators, and caregivers are more likely to respond positively when schools are culturally sensitive.

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

Personal Factors: Individual personalities and experiences can also impact how people respond to emergencies. Some individuals may be anxious, while others may be indifferent. Schools should be aware of individual differences and provide support to students and staff who demonstrate the need for additional assistance.

Students and Staff New to the School

Students and staff who are new to a school, either by moving from another level (e.g., elementary to middle school) or transferring from another district, may be familiar with different emergency terms and procedures. A lack of familiarity can lead to confusion and delayed reactions during an emergency. Therefore, comprehensive onboarding and regular training sessions are essential to familiarize all new members of the school community with the established emergency plans. This proactive approach helps to mitigate potential risks and ensures a more coordinated and effective response when an emergency occurs.

Key Considerations - Students and Staff New to the School

Initial Orientation: Provide a clear and concise orientation on emergency procedures for new students and staff at the beginning of the school year or upon their arrival. This should include an overview of all types of response protocols and drills, such as fire, tornado, and active assailant drills.

Visual Guides: Place visual aids, such as maps showing evacuation routes and designated safe zones, in prominent locations throughout the school. This helps new individuals quickly orient themselves to the building layout.

Buddy System: Pair new students with a peer buddy or a staff member who can help them navigate the school and provide support during drills. This creates a trusted point of contact and helps ease anxiety.

Targeted Drills: Consider conducting an extra, smaller-scale drill for new students and staff to allow them to practice the school's specific procedures in a less stressful environment. This provides a safe space for them to ask questions and build confidence.

Family Communication: Ensure that families of new students receive a welcome packet or email outlining the school's emergency procedures and communication protocols. This helps bridge the gap between home and school and ensures everyone is on the same page.

Final Thoughts

Recognizing that active assailant drills, despite their necessity, can be stressful, schools should **prioritize pre- and post-drill debriefing sessions**. These sessions offer a safe space for students and staff to process their emotions, ask questions, and receive reassurance. Additionally, providing access to school counselors or external

mental health professionals can help individuals cope with any lingering anxiety or trauma, reinforcing the message that their well-being is paramount.

Achieving this **balanced approach relies heavily on establishing a dedicated multidisciplinary planning team**. Bringing together school administrators, mental health professionals, special educators, security personnel, English language specialists, facilities staff, and first responders ensures emergency plans are holistic, operationally sound, and trauma-informed. Central to the team's work is an unwavering **commitment to equity and accessibility**: emergency protocols must explicitly integrate tailored accommodations for students with disabilities and accessible linguistic supports for English Language Learners (ELLs). Proactively accounting for the physical, cognitive, sensory, and language needs of students, staff, and families before, during, and after an exercise ensures that every student is protected, informed, and capable of participating safely.

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, inclusive training and drills build the knowledge and skills necessary for staff and students to respond effectively during critical situations. Remember, the goal is not to create fear, but to instill confidence, accessibility, and true preparedness. **By working together as an inclusive multidisciplinary team, schools can foster safe, equitable, and supportive learning environments for all.**

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. (Jul. 1, 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. (Jan. 2025 - 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. (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. (Oct. 2024 - 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 <u>may not include</u> : • 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. (Jul. 1, 2024 - Ongoing)	LEA
Drill Notifications § 7-1509 (f)(2-4)	Local school systems are required to provide: • 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 See Appendix B for sample language. (Aug. 2024 - Ongoing)	LEA
Mental Health Supports § 7-1509 (f)(5-6)	• 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. (Aug. 2024 - Ongoing)	LEA
Data Collection § 7-1509 (f)(7)	Send surveys to parents, students, and staff for the purpose of collecting information on the effectiveness and psychological impact of drills. https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Documents/Training/MCSS%20Lockdown%20Drill%20Impact%20Survey.pdf (Aug. 2024 - Ongoing)	LEA
Gun Storage Laws § 7-1509 (g)(3)	Distribute the model gun storage content to the parents prior to the start of the school year. https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Documents/MCSS%20MD%20Firearm%20Safe%20Storage%202024.pdf (Aug. 2024 - Ongoing)	LEA

Appendix B: LEA Drill

Communication - Sample Language

Included in this appendix is a breakdown of requirements, timing, actions, and sample language for each drill requirement. It is intended to help LEAs meet the legal requirements for drill notifications, data collection, and communication of gun storage laws. It includes example language that should be tailored to the specifics of your school system and emergency procedures.

Drill Notifications

Requirement: Provide parents with an annual schedule of active shooter/lockdown drills or training.

Timing: Start of each school year.

- **Action:** Include in your start of the school year welcome notification.
- **Example Message:** *"To help ensure the safety of all students and staff, our school conducts a variety of emergency preparedness drills throughout the school year. In accordance with Maryland law, all public schools are required to provide advance notification to parents, students, and staff before an active shooter/lockdown drill takes place. This year we will conduct LOCKDOWN drill(s) in [Month(s)]. Other required drills (e.g., fire, shelter) will take place at different times throughout the school year."*

*Students and staff will be notified by email the week before each lockdown drill takes place and by announcements before a lockdown drill begins. The purpose of these drills is to ensure that all members of our school community are prepared to respond effectively in the event of an actual safety incident. It is important to note that **these exercises are carefully planned to be instructive and will not include props, actors, or any simulation of violence** that could cause distress. We will also engage in discussions with students beforehand to explain the importance of these drills and what they can expect.*

For your reference, we have attached the [Standard Response Protocol guidance for parents](#). This document provides detailed information on the specific actions and protocols that may be implemented during a safety-related incident. The safety of our students and staff remains our highest priority. We deeply appreciate your continued partnership in maintaining a secure and supportive school environment."

Requirement: Provide staff and students with notice in advance of active shooter/lockdown drills or training that allows for accommodations.

Timing: Prior to conducting an active shooter or lockdown drill or training.

- **Action:** Distribute a notice to staff and make an announcement to students prior to each drill.
- **Example Message:** *"On [Day] of next week, we will be conducting a LOCKDOWN drill. Please follow the instructions of your teacher or staff member. Those who wish to opt out of participating in the exercise, may do so by [Opt Out Instructions]."*
- **Example Announcement:** *"This is a lockdown drill. This is only a drill. Please follow the instructions of your teacher or staff member."*

Requirement: Provide parents with notification following a drill or training.

- **Action:** Send a follow-up email or message to parents.
- **Example Text:** *"This is a notification that our school has successfully completed a [Type of Drill] drill today, [Date]. All students and staff participated safely and effectively. We will continue to practice these procedures to ensure everyone is prepared for an emergency."*

Data Collection

Requirement: Distribute surveys to parents, students, and staff data on the effectiveness and psychological impact of active shooter/lockdown drills and training.

Timing: Within 24 to 48 hours post-drill.

- **Action:** Distribute the MCSS survey flyer to students, parents, and staff following each lockdown drill.
- **Example Text:** *"Following our recent lockdown drill, we would appreciate your feedback on its effectiveness and any impact it may have had. Your input is valuable as we work to improve our safety procedures and support our school community. <https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Documents/Media-Materials/Posters/Lockdown%20Drill%20Impact%20Survey%20Access.pdf>"*
- **Important Reminder:** *This survey is only required to be sent following an active shooter/lockdown drill. It is **not** required to be sent following training or other drill types.*

Gun Storage Laws

Requirement: Distribute the Maryland safe gun storage content to parents prior to the start of the school year.

- **Suggested Action:** Include this information in a back-to-school newsletter, email, or physical packet.
- **Suggested Text:** *"As part of our commitment to student safety, we are providing information on Maryland's gun storage laws. Secure firearm storage is a critical step in preventing unintentional injuries and accidents. For more information and resources on safe gun storage, please visit:
<https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Documents/MCSS%20MD%20Firearm%20Safe%20Storage%202024.pdf>."*

Appendix C: Definitions

Term	Definition
Active Assailant / Active Attacker/ Active Shooter	MCSS, as part of the Maryland Active Assailant Interdisciplinary Workgroup (AAIWC), uses the term Active Assailant in place of Active Attacker or Active 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 D: Resources

Maryland Center for School Safety, *Active Assailant/Lockdown Drills and Exercise Research Data, Guidelines, and Reports*,
<https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/preparation-security/active-assailantlockdown-drills-exercises>.

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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).

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

Appendix E: Lockdown Drill Study

2025-2026 Findings

The state's adoption of trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate active assailant drill practices is guided by an annual literature review and a comprehensive, data-driven study. This work was required by House Bill 416 (Chapter 182, 2024). The study, the first of its kind in the state, investigated the effectiveness and psychological impact of active assailant lockdown drills in Maryland public schools. It was a collaborative effort between MCSS and the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH) at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

Key Findings

- **Preparedness and Effectiveness:** Most participants reported positive perceptions of lockdown drill preparedness. Approximately 62% of students, 79% of school staff, and 79% of caregivers reported that drills improved their perceived preparedness or confidence in school safety procedures.
- **Psychological Impact:** Most students did not report negative emotional responses; however, 9% reported feeling upset or scared, and 15% reported increased worry about their safety at school following a drill. Students receiving special education services and English language learners reported greater distress and safety concerns than their peers.
- **Communication:** Communication with families remains an area for improvement. Only 59% of caregivers reported receiving advance notice of drills, and 53% agreed that their child's school communicated effectively about the drill.
- **Implementation and Accessibility:** Most students (87%) reported being able to follow lockdown drill procedures easily. However, middle school students were more likely to report mistakes or problems during drills than high school students (21% versus 9%). Additionally, only 37% of schools reported modifying drills for students with disabilities, and 15% reported modifications for English language learners.

Implications and Recommendations

Findings from the second year reinforce the importance of implementing lockdown drills in ways that balance emergency preparedness with the psychological safety and well-being of students and staff. Recommendations include strengthening communication with families before and after drills, involving school mental health professionals and other stakeholders in drill planning, providing developmentally appropriate training, and ensuring that procedures are accessible to students with disabilities and English language learners. Schools are also encouraged to incorporate feedback from students, families, and staff to continuously improve drill practices. Continued evaluation will help identify specific implementation strategies associated with improved preparedness and reduced psychological distress, informing evidence-based school safety guidance across Maryland.