

# Exceptional Plans for Exceptional Students: Understanding Emergency Crisis Policies and Protocols in K-12 Schools

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## Abstract

We surveyed almost 50 K-12 classroom teachers and special educators across the United States and interviewed 12 of them to understand their experiences with students with exceptional needs during real or simulated school-based crisis situations, the kind of training they received (if any) to meet the needs of all students during such situations, and what kind of support they need (if any) to ensure the safety of exceptional students during real or simulated school-based crisis situations. Preliminary analysis of the data suggests that classroom teachers and special educators are not prepared enough and are not receiving specific training to support exceptional children during school crisis situations even though almost all of them have experienced such situations.

## Purpose

Schools in the United States have plans for emergency situations such as natural disasters (e.g., tornadoes, fires) and violent behavior (e.g., active shooters). However, there is no national model for school-based crisis preparedness (Clarke, Embury, Jones, & Yssel, 2014). Even more concerning is that students with exceptional needs “face greater challenges in the event of a crisis in school.” (Embury, Clarke, & Weber, 2019, p. 2). For example, students with exceptional needs may be unable to follow safety procedures like staying quiet, walking quickly down stairs, or hiding in a closet.

Clarke et al. (2014) recommend adding crisis procedures into Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). However, there is no empirical research on K-12 classroom teachers’ and special educators’ training and/or efforts to include crisis procedures in IEPs. The purpose of this study is to learn from K-12 teachers and special educators across the United States and understand their experiences with students with exceptional needs during real or simulated school-based crisis situations, the kind of training they received (if any) to meet the needs of all students during such situations, and what kind of support they need (if any) to ensure the safety of exceptional students during real or simulated school-based crisis situations.

## Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval, a link to a 10-question survey was sent out via Twitter and Instagram with various hashtags (e.g., #spedchat, #teachersofinstagram) to increase visibility. Text on the posts included a brief explanation of the study.

## Survey Findings

There were 49 participants who completed the survey. Responses came from nine states, the majority from North Carolina (n = 40).

About two-thirds (68%) of the respondents have been teaching for nine years or less; 35% (n = 17) are special educators, 57% (n = 28) are classroom teachers (K-12), 14% (n = 7) indicated another role (e.g., AIG teacher, ESL teacher), and 92% (n = 45) work at a public school.

Forty-five participants (92%) said that they have experienced a real or simulated crisis situation at school with exceptional children under their supervision.

However, 84% (n = 41) reported that their training for such situations DID NOT include any plans or protocols for exceptional students; only 12% (n = 6) received training that included special considerations for those with exceptional needs.

Further, only 18% (n = 9) have seen mention of crisis plans in IEPs, and only 37% (n = 18) reported that their school has a plan for exceptional children during crisis situations.

Thirty-nine percent (n = 19) of the participants feel minimally prepared or not prepared at all for crisis situations with exceptional children, 43% (n = 21) feel adequately prepared, 18% (n = 6) feel very prepared, and only one respondent (2%) feels exceptionally prepared.

## References

Clarke, L. S., Embury, D. C., Jones, R. E., & Yssel, N. (2014). Supporting students with disabilities during school crises: A teacher’s guide. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 46(4), 169-178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059914534616>

Embury, D. C., Clarke, L. S. & Weber, K. (2019). Keeping our students safe during crisis. *Physical Disabilities: Education and Related Services*, 38(1), 1-9.

## Interview Quotes

“If there’s a real fire and we are on the 3rd floor... we’re kinda out of options”

“I would like to think I’ll do what is best for my students in a situation like that; it would be nice to have something to fall back on”

“We can do better in the actual situation if we do the drill situations as close as how we want them to do it as possible”

“We do practice but it’s not authentic”

“We need real actual plans in place instead of leaving it up to the teachers to figure out”

“If the fire started next to my classroom, I might be panicky and might need to fall back on something”

“Even though I’m not a special ed teacher, knowing their plans would be nice”

“The plan is that we have a bag of lollipops that the kids don’t know about”

“In that moment you are using whatever you have”

“If there is a real fire I wanna know how your kid is going to react”

## Significance

Keeping all children safe during real or simulated school crisis situations is of paramount importance. However, our preliminary data suggests that classroom teachers and special educators are not prepared enough and are not receiving specific training on how to support exceptional children during school crisis situations even though almost all of them have experienced such situations. Such data can be used to advocate for more training for all teachers to ensure the safety of all students, especially those with exceptional needs.