

Indiana Office of School Safety Tabletop Toolkit #2

School Safety Tabletop Exercises [2025]

The Indiana Department of Homeland Security's Office of School Safety has developed a Tabletop Toolkit featuring 10 discussion-based exercises. These scenarios are designed to engage school officials, administrators, educators, SROs and staff in evaluating their responses to various safety situations. Each exercise includes a brief scenario followed by targeted questions that prompt reflection and dialogue. Tabletop exercises are flexible, often completed in just a few minutes, and serve to reinforce participants' understanding of emergency operations plans.

TABLETOP EXERCISE OVERVIEW

Step 1 PREPARE

Select a relevant scenario and identify staff members to participate.

Step 2 EXERCISE

Allocate time for staff to discuss the scenario and respond to guiding questions.

Step 3 ANALYZE

Review responses to identify strengths, gaps and potential training needs.

Scope

Designed for 5–10 minute discussions during school safety team or all-staff meetings.

Mission Area(s)

Prevention, Protection, Response and Recovery

Contact

For any questions, help or more resources feel free to contact the Indiana Office of School Safety.

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EXERCISE 1: MEDIA SNAFU

SCENARIO

On Tuesday during lunch, a student allegedly made a verbal threat to bomb the school. The incident was investigated, and disciplinary action was taken, though the outcome was not publicly disclosed due to student privacy laws. That evening, another student who witnessed the threat told their parents about the student and what happened. This prompted a Facebook post from that parent questioning why the student wasn't suspended. The post quickly spread across local forums, and by Wednesday morning dozens of comments expressed fear, outrage and demands for transparency. Some parents are threatening to withdraw their children or contact the media.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What are your initial thoughts/actions?	
What assumptions might parents or students be making based on the rumors?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What is your immediate response to the Facebook post? Do you engage, monitor or stay silent?	
How do you prepare front office staff to handle incoming calls or walk-ins from concerned parents?	
Should the student who made the threat remain in school during this public reaction? Why or why not?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

Were there any gaps in your internal notification or decision-making process?	
What proactive steps could prevent similar social media escalations in the future?	

EXERCISE 2: HEATWAVE IN THE HALLS

SCENARIO

On Thursday after lunchtime, your school experiences a power outage due to an incoming storm. Due to this outage, your school's HVAC system shuts down, causing rising indoor temperatures. Classrooms begin to feel increasingly warm, especially those without windows or airflow. The district is contacted, and the superintendent is consulting with facilities and the HVAC vendor. Initial estimates suggest repairs may not be completed until after dismissal. Meanwhile, parents are beginning to call with concerns, and some are seeing social media posts about students feeling ill or uncomfortable.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What are your immediate concerns with the power outage and HVAC failure?	
What are the legal and ethical responsibilities regarding student safety in this situation?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

Who needs to be notified immediately?	
What criteria would you use to determine if early dismissal is necessary?	
How do you communicate with staff/parents to ensure consistent messaging and a calm response?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

How could your school better prepare for HVAC or power failures in the future?	
What protocols should be reviewed or updated based on this experience?	

EXERCISE 3: ONE SNAP TOO FAR

SCENARIO

During lunch, several students receive a video through a group messaging app (Snapchat). The video, recorded earlier in the day, shows a student in a compromising situation in a locker room, partially dressed and unaware they were being filmed. Because the messaging app allows rapid sharing, the video spreads quickly among students. By mid-afternoon, staff begin hearing reports of the video circulating. It's later discovered that the clip has also been posted to a public social media account, where it's gaining views and comments.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What are your immediate concerns upon learning the video is circulating?	
What are the legal and ethical implications of the video being recorded and shared?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

How do you communicate with students and staff to stop sharing and reinforce digital boundaries?	
What steps should be taken to identify the student who recorded and shared the video?	
What message, if any, should be sent to parents or the school community?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

What gaps did this incident reveal in your digital conduct policies or locker room supervision?	
What updates should be made to your crisis communication plan for digital incidents?	

EXERCISE 4: UNSCHEDULED DISMISSAL

SCENARIO

The school secretary informs you that local police are investigating a serious domestic incident involving the father of two students, a fifth and seventh grader. He may have forcibly taken their stepmother earlier that morning, shortly after the children boarded the bus. A neighbor saw his vehicle speeding away, and police have been unable to locate him or the stepmother since. Authorities suspect he may be heading to the school and advise securing all exterior doors and limiting movement. Minutes later, the father calls the school, calmly requesting to pick up his children in 10–15 minutes for a “forgotten dentist appointment.” His tone is casual, but the timing raises concern.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What are your immediate concerns after speaking with law enforcement?	
What are your legal responsibilities regarding custody, release of students and safety?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What steps do you take to secure the building and limit movement without causing panic?	
What protocols guide your decision to release—or not release—a student to a parent under investigation?	
How do you communicate with front office staff about handling the father’s arrival?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

How could your team better prepare for unexpected parent-related threats?	
What training or drills could help staff respond calmly and effectively in similar situations?	

EXERCISE 5: OFF THE RECORD

SCENARIO

You are the designated recipient of reports from your district's anonymous reporting system. You receive a tip that has been sitting in the system for several days. It alleges that a school staff member is regularly meeting with a student off school grounds for tutoring sessions at the public library and a local café. The report includes suspicious photos showing the two together on multiple occasions, and notes that the meetings appear informal and unsupervised. The staff member is not the student's assigned tutor, and there is no documentation of these sessions through the school's academic support program.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What are your first impressions after reading the report?	
What are the potential risks (ethical or legal) associated with these meetings?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What steps should be taken to verify the accuracy of the report?	
How do you determine whether disciplinary action or further investigation is warranted?	
How do you ensure future reports are reviewed in a timely manner?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

How effective is your response protocol for anonymous tips?	
What training or guidance could help staff better understand boundaries and reporting expectations?	

EXERCISE 6: PERIMETER ALERT

SCENARIO

At approximately 9:30 AM, the principal receives a call from the local police department. Officers inform the school that a hostage situation is unfolding just two blocks away from campus. The suspect is believed to be armed and barricaded inside a residence. Law enforcement advises the school to take the necessary safety precautions.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

How do you assess the level of threat to students and staff given the proximity of the incident?	
What are your immediate concerns after receiving the call from law enforcement?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What safety measures do you implement?	
How do you coordinate with law enforcement for updates and next steps?	
What considerations are needed for students arriving late, leaving early or transitioning to other buildings?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

Are there any gaps in your lockdown or shelter-in-place procedures?	
What training or drills could help staff respond more confidently in similar situations?	

EXERCISE 7: SOUND THE ALARM

SCENARIO

A student runs into the front office visibly shaken and reports hearing what sounded like gunshots near the science wing. At the same time, a teacher calls from a nearby classroom reporting loud bangs and students screaming in the hallway. Moments later, the school resource officer confirms over radio that there is an individual with a weapon inside the building.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What are your immediate priorities upon hearing reports of gunshots and weapons on campus?	
How do you confirm the severity of the threat while acting swiftly?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

Who activates the lockdown protocol, and how is it communicated throughout the building?	
How do you coordinate with law enforcement and other public safety agencies in real time?	
How do you prepare for public communication & reunification once the threat is resolved?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

What emotional or mental support is needed for student and staff recovery (short & long term)?	
Did you learn anything new that could translate to your emergency operation plan?	

EXERCISE 8: FUMES AND THE FALLOUT

SCENARIO

During a supervised experiment involving mild acids and reactive metals, a student accidentally adds an incorrect compound to a beaker, triggering an unexpected chemical reaction. The mixture rapidly bubbles over, releasing fumes and causing a small explosion that shatters glassware. Three students nearby are injured: one with a minor burn, another with a cut from broken glass and a third experiencing respiratory distress from the fumes. The fire alarm is triggered automatically by the lab's sensor system, prompting a building-wide evacuation. However, confusion arises as some staff are unsure whether this is a drill or a real emergency.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

How do you assess the severity of the incident and determine the appropriate emergency response?	
What assumptions might staff or students make when the fire alarm sounds?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

How do you ensure injured students receive prompt and appropriate medical attention?	
What steps do you take to secure the lab and prevent further exposure or injury?	
What documentation is required following a lab incident involving injuries and evacuation?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

How effective are your evacuation and communication strategies?	
Do you need to update your chemical safety protocols or emergency drill procedures?	

EXERCISE 9: SCHOOL STALKER

SCENARIO

During a quiet afternoon in the media center, a student approaches the librarian after finding a USB drive plugged into a public computer. The screen displayed a folder labeled “The List”, the student curiously opened the file and saw her name, which immediately raised concern. The librarian reviews the contents of the drive and discovers multiple folders named after current students. Each contains screenshots of social media posts, daily schedules, club involvement, and, most troubling, photos of students outside of school, including what appear to be candid shots near their homes. Several documents outline patterns of student movement and mention isolated locations with timestamps. The librarian quickly realizes this may be a targeted threat and alerts you to what she has found.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What assumptions might students, staff or families make if word spreads?	
How do you assess whether this is a credible threat or a disturbing but non-actionable situation?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What steps do you take to secure the USB drive and preserve digital evidence?	
What protocols guide your response to potential stalking or targeted threats?	
What message, if any, should be sent to families or the school community?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

Are there gaps in your digital security or supervision of public-access computers?	
How do you support the emotional well-being of students named in the files?	

EXERCISE 10: STAIRWELL SLIP

SCENARIO

During a quiet transition between classes, a student with a mobility impairment leaves her second-floor classroom early to access the accessible restroom on the first floor. Upon reaching the elevator, she discovers it is temporarily out of service and opts to use the stairs instead. While descending, she loses her balance, falls and strikes her head, rendering her unconscious on the landing. Moments later, the bell rings and students begin transitioning through the building. The school's directional flow system designates specific stairwells for "up" or "down" traffic, and students hesitate to enter the stairwell upon seeing the fallen student, unsure if they're permitted to proceed. Confusion quickly escalates, causing congestion in the hallways. A nearby teacher hears the commotion and rushes to the scene as students crowd around, some trying to help, others unsure how to respond.

EXERCISE QUESTIONS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

What are your immediate concerns upon learning that a student has fallen and is unconscious in a stairwell?	
How does the elevator outage factor into your assessment of accessibility and risk?	

ACTION RESPONSE STRATEGY

What steps do you take to secure the area and prevent further injury or crowding?	
How do you communicate with staff and students to redirect hallway traffic and reduce confusion?	
What message, if any, should be sent to families or the school community?	

AFTER ACTION REVIEW

Are there gaps in your accessibility planning?	
Should updates be made to your building flow system, or staff supervision during transitions?	

