

Family Reunification: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Response Teams

Students should be reunited with their primary caregivers and families as soon as practically possible (Brock et al, 2016). Reestablishing social support is one of the oldest and most powerful interventions for reducing risk of traumatic stress. When considering the posttrauma psychological environment, levels of social support have been found to have implications for the mental health outcomes of children and adolescents (Pine & Cohen, 2002). Particularly in the acute phase posttrauma, the child’s perception of social support has been found to have a moderate impact on how symptoms present (Hitchcock et al., 2015).

School emergency operation plans should be developed in preparation for school crises (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2013). Among the guidance recommendations stipulated in this document is the development of Functional Annexes and the course of actions developed to carry them out. There are 10 such annexes, one of which is the Reunification Annex. In most cases, more than one annex is initiated once a crisis occurs. The Family Reunification Annex details how students will be reunited with their families or guardians. Districts and schools should consider the following when developing its goals, objectives, and courses of action in relation to reunification:

- How to inform families and guardians about the reunification process in advance, and how to clearly describe their roles and responsibilities in reunification.
- How to verify that an adult is authorized to take custody of a student.
- How to facilitate communication between the parent check-in area and the student assembly and reunion areas.
- How to ensure students do not leave on their own.
- How to protect the privacy of students and parents from the media.
- How to reduce confusion during the reunification process.
- How frequently families will be updated.
- How to account for technology barriers faced by students, staff, parents, and guardians.
- How to effectively address language access barriers faced by students, staff, parents, and guardians.

The reunification begins with using the Communication and Warning Annex. This annex includes communication and coordination during emergencies and disasters—both internal communication and communication with external stakeholders (DOE, 2013). Initial messaging should state general information and let parents know that student safety is the first priority and that they will be notified as soon as the school is ready to begin reunification. Provide a timeline for when they will be notified.

For example: Parents, we appreciate your cooperation. We have evacuated the school, and all students are safe and accounted for. We will be transporting students to an off-site reunification location and will provide additional information in 30 minutes as to this location. Please do not come to the school because we need roads to remain clear. A reminder: the person picking up your child(ren) must be on the emergency card and must show a picture ID. Thanks for your cooperation. More information in 30 minutes. (Reeves et al., 2019).

In addition to the Communications and Warning Annex, another Functional Annex typically used with reunification is the Accounting for All Persons Annex. This annex focuses on developing courses of action for accounting for the

whereabouts and well-being of students, staff, and visitors, and for identifying those who may be missing. Also, when evacuation is being considered, the Evacuation Annex is initiated and focuses on courses of action taken to evacuate school buildings and grounds. In some cases, a Lockdown or Shelter in Place Annex could precede reunification.

There are some critical aspects to planning reunification activities. Among these important considerations are the careful selection of the reunification team. These individuals need to have the right temperament to deal with emotional parents, staff, and students; be able to defuse situations; have good organizational skills; and be approachable. Site selection is also important as schools need to have multiple sites selected in advance and agreements need to be in place with those sites. Schools must also consider accessibility, parking, traffic flow, ability to quickly move students to designated points, communication needs, security, and sufficient, preferably separate, entrances and exits to avoid congestion.

The Logistics Section needs to set up the reunification sites, whether they are on school grounds or at off-site evacuation areas. Caregivers can be expected to arrive at the reunification location immediately after learning of the location of their children. The movement and management of large numbers of people within the reunification areas need to be carefully planned to help reduce crowding and to facilitate traffic flow (Keyes, 2011, 2018).

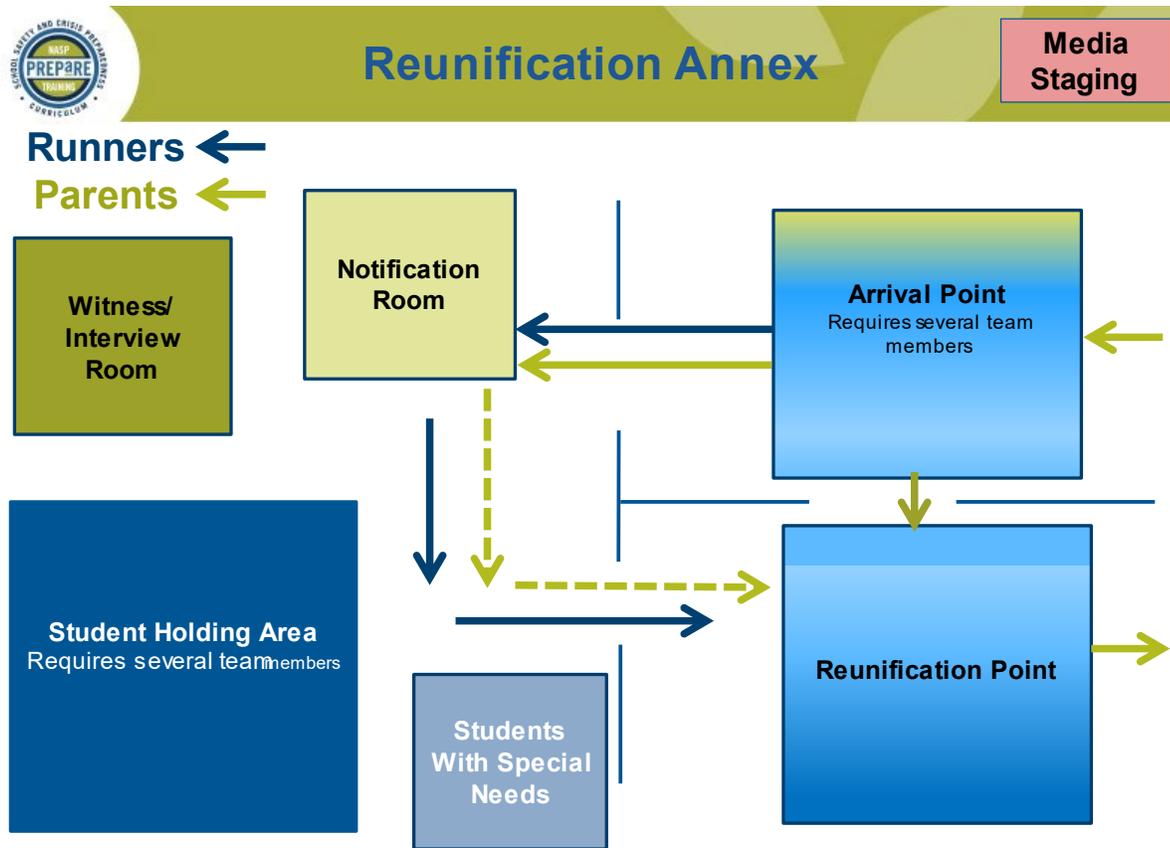
Other considerations include:

1. Will the evacuation and reunification site be the same? It could be, as long as the site can also accommodate the large numbers of individuals that are involved in reunification. The site also needs separate and private spaces for working with students with special needs and for death notification.
 - a. Capacity – Is the reunification site large enough to accommodate all students, staff, and parents?
 - b. Traffic flow – Is there ample parking? Enough space for parents to wait in line out of the weather and be sheltered? Hallways large enough to accommodate movement? Enough space to set up check-in tables? Enough rooms to separate groups appropriately?
 - c. Basic needs – Are there enough bathrooms, drinking fountains, and places to serve food, if needed?
 - d. Technology needs – Is there strong internet capability? Enough electrical outlets, phones, fax, and computers? TV/monitors to entertain students?
2. Coordination and practice – Reunification teams must practice using staff and volunteer parents. Plans can look great on paper but not work in a real situation. At minimum, teams must conduct reunification tabletop exercises at least twice a year.
3. Mental health supports – These are critical to have available at the reunification site (Gay & Reeves, 2018). These personnel must be trained in crisis response, vetted for appropriate skills, and comfortable with working with all ages. PREPaRE Workshop 2 training is highly recommended. Caregiver training as taught in this workshop can be a great resource and structure for telling parents about the event and providing supports for working with their student(s) during recovery (Brock, 2019).

There are three logistical reunification models to consider:

- On-site – Evacuation is to a specific part of the building or school grounds, with activation of an alternate dismissal procedure as indicated.
- Drive-through – This involves picking students with leaving vehicles. A sign can be put in the front window and caregivers hand the reunification form to the attendant standing outside of the vehicle. This works extremely well in cases where caregivers are used to transporting their children and there is already a drive-through system in place.
- Off-site – This option was briefly discussed earlier. Other considerations, though, must be taken into account. Two or three sites should be selected in advance as event variables may dictate one site being better than another for a specific event. The best locations to use are places that do not have people using the site during the day, including places of worship, sporting facilities, or other large facilities in the community. Using another school can be convenient, as the district has control over the use of that school and the physical boundaries. However, it can also create confusion as to which school is being evacuated, and the large number of students and families now at one campus can be difficult to manage.

Figure 1. Representation of a Reunification Site



Note. Adapted from *PREP_aRE Workshop 1, Third Edition, Comprehensive School Safety Planning: Prevention Through Recovery* by M. A. L. Reeves, A. Nickerson, C. Conolly, & S. Jimerson, 2019, National Association of School Psychologists. Copyright 2019 by the National Association of School Psychologists. Adapted with permission.

Districts and schools must be familiar with the Incident Command System (ICS) framework as it provides a common set of concepts, principles, terminology, and organizational processes to be used in planning for, preparing for, and responding to a crisis. All federal, state, local, and tribal departments and agencies are required to use this framework (Reeves et al., 2019). The basic premise of ICS in schools is that when school staff respond to crises, they transition from their day-to-day jobs to perform similar functions within the crisis response team, in this case the roles required as delineated in the Reunification Annex.

While understanding the key components to any crisis response plan is important, the plan itself is insufficient without exercises which allow members of the team, as well as key stakeholders such as parents, students, and other community members, to practice and understand what implementation would entail as both those delivering the supports and those accessing the supports. Effective use of exercises and drills allows a school team to identify actual or potential flaws in the plan which may then lead to modifications. An example of the benefits of engaging in the practice of reunification was highlighted in the After-Action Report created for University High School (Illinois State University, 2018). With the support of Illinois State University, the school district conducted a full-scale reunification exercise involving both the parents and students. Examples of lessons learned from this full-scale reunification exercise included issues with bottlenecks at check-out tables, inconsistencies with clear instructions provided to parents by greeters regarding next steps, check-in lines not being proportionately occupied, and siblings not being unified. While these examples demonstrate areas for the school to improve on, practice and drills also help school teams identify where their strengths are to ensure these continue to be supported as well.

Parents and caregivers also play a key role in a successful reunification. In a video created by Adams 12 Five Star Schools (2014), a link to which is provided in the resources below, three main points are highlighted for the parent, including (a) staying home, (b) staying informed, and (c) being ready for reunification. While staying home feels counter to a parent’s natural instincts, it is important that the scene at the school be maintained by responding agencies in order to address safety, and the presence of parents at that time may counter these efforts as well as potentially remove resources or cause distraction. Parents can assist with reunification by ensuring that they remain informed. This includes being aware of the school’s methods of communication, keeping a phone nearby that is charged, and providing the school with up-to-date contact information. It is important for parents to be aware that while their child may be instructed to text them, they should not call or text their child as this may disclose their location and cause a safety concern. Additionally, instead of calling the school, parents should check the school’s website and the news for updates. Parents can be ready by arriving at the reunification site when instructed with a photo ID, pen or pencil, and patience for the process which will include completing a reunification card and being guided through the specific steps for reunification. Lastly, there are instances in which a student might self-evacuate, in which case it is helpful for parents to review with their child the importance of contacting them in this situation, and then the parent should inform the school as well.

Table 1. Key Resources

<u>I Love U Guys Foundation</u>	Includes resources for a standard reunification method which includes operational guidance, parent handouts, and sample reunification cards. Materials in English, Spanish, French, and Arabic.
<u>Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans</u>	Guide describes the building blocks of a plan, an intervention to help school communities recover after disasters, and ways to respond to an active shooter situation. Includes information regarding Functional Annexes.
<u>CDC Reunification Guidance</u>	Includes links to additional resources for schools, families, and other caregivers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).
<u>Conducting Secure, Safe, and Successful K–12 Family Reunification Process</u>	Access a 1 hour webinar from REMS Technical Assistance Center.
<u>School Emergency Reunification Video</u>	Brief 6 minute video by Adams 12 Five Star Schools-ESC.
<u>Sample Reunification Full-Scale Exercise After Action Report</u>	The exercise tested the recently completed Relocation and Reunification Plan, including a number of support services offered to parents and students.
<u>PREPaRE: School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum</u>	Featured in the Best Practices Registry of the Suicide Prevention Resource Center.

Table 2. List of the Roles and Responsibilities Specific to Reunification

Role	Responsibility
Incident Commander (IC)	Works closely with the other command staff to oversee the reunification of students with their primary caregivers; works with other agency ICs in a unified command situation.
Public Information Officer	Communicates with caregivers and the press; coordinates use of mass calls, text messages, and social media posts.
Social Media Coordinator	Posts information on social media sites and monitors social media for facts and rumors.
Safety Officer	Observes assembly and reunification areas and addresses any safety concerns; helps establish and oversee physical security of the site.
Liaison Officer	Communicates with fire, medical, law enforcement, and community response agencies.
Mental Health Officer	Coordinates the mental health support needed for students, staff, and caregivers; ensures that the needs of mental health crisis intervention providers are being met; communicates with community mental health agencies and professionals.
Operations Section	Establishes and manages operational staff. Chief communicates directly with Incident Commander and Reunification Team Leader.
Reunification Team Leader	Is responsible for the execution of the reunification process; communicates directly to the Operations Section Chief, guides setup, assigns roles and duties, maintains flow, troubleshoots, and makes final accountability decisions.
Greeters	Present a familiar face; help manage the caregiver waiting area and inform caregivers about the reunification process; help verify the identity of caregivers who arrive without identification; locate caregivers whose children are injured and direct them to the notification room.
Checker	Examines IDs; verifies custody rights of caregivers; checks emergency cards and cross-references them; directs caregivers to reunification point.
Accountant (From Accounting for All Persons Annex)	Cross-checks names and checks for accuracy; verifies attendance lists; communicates with checkers and greeters regarding children who are injured or unaccounted for.
Runner	Receives reunification cards from check-in; retrieves students from student holding area and brings them to reunifier at reunification point.
Reunifier	Presents a familiar face at the reunification point; double checks reunification cards and verifies that it is appropriate to release the student; provides encouraging messages.
Herder	Helps organize student holding areas; gathers students and takes them to student holding area; helps identify students who may need mental health crisis intervention.

Role	Responsibility
Mental Health Crisis Responder	Provides mental health crisis intervention to students, staff, and caregivers; provide crisis intervention support for those in acute distress; can help facilitate caregiver training.
Teachers and Staff	Help supervise students who are waiting for caregivers; provide psychological first aid and mental health crisis intervention.
Entertainer	Leads student activities and entertainment.
Traffic Controller	Sets up parking area with directional cones and signs; maintains order in parking areas; reports any crowd control problems to the Safety Officer.
Planning Section Chief	Thinks ahead regarding possible reunification needs; helps develop reunification plan.
Scribe	Observes, records, and documents events and actions taken during the reunification process, including timelines, what is working well, and what will need to be improved; helps manage information.
Logistics Section Chief	Thinks ahead and gathers information about the supplies needed for reunification.
Stage Hands	Initially set up check-in area, place signs to direct caregivers to the appropriate areas, and set up student staging area; gather materials and supplies needed during reunification; may be assigned to operations when setup is completed.
Finance Section Chief	Keeps track of expenses associated with the reunification process.

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