



## Los Angeles, United States

### Pillar 2: School Disaster Management

#### Organisations:

- *Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Office of Emergency Management*
- *Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)*

#### Schools Impacted:

- 1,000 public schools



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# Developing School Plans and Performing Drills in Los Angeles

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## Overview

In California, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Office of Emergency Services has some of the most comprehensive disaster management strategies in the United States. Every one of the nearly 1,000 schools in LAUSD develops a Safe School Plan. The LAUSD Office of Emergency Services distributes apps to educate users on hazard risks and has each school participate in a global earthquake drill.

The heart of their success lies in the creation of a comprehensive template that local schools use to create and annually update their Safe School Plans. The template addresses multiple natural and social hazards and has detailed emergency planning information and guidelines for plan completion. The LAUSD Office of Emergency Services directs each of its over 1,000 schools to create a committee of teachers, non-teacher staff members, students, parents, and a local law enforcement officer – a process that integrates participation and responsibility across multiple groups.

*Keywords: Los Angeles, emergency response, earthquake, drills, emergency planning, safe schools, Great Shakeout*

## Hazard and Education Context

It is no surprise that the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) leads the United States in school disaster management. California is a hotbed of natural hazard risk. While the state deals with various hazards, earthquakes have spurred much of the action. In the past 100 years, several earthquakes have caused structural damage and disrupted educational activities in the Los Angeles region. Fortunately, only one – the Whittier Narrows earthquake of 1987 – occurred while students were in school.

The near misses spurred Californians to adopt safe school construction policies early on. Following the 1933 Long Beach Earthquake, in which 70 schools were destroyed and 120 damaged, the state enacted the 1933 Field Act. The act required that schools be built with stricter construction standards and monitored more closely during construction. Five years later, the Garrison Act of 1938 applied these new standards to existing schools (Petal & Green, 2009). Three decades later, the 1971 San Fernando Valley earthquake left many schools built before 1933 damaged, prompting Los Angeles to replace 90 pre-1933 schools and retrofit 100 others (Jennings & Housner, 1973).

Alongside these safer school facilities policies, California began developing disaster management legislation. In 1945, the state adopted the California Disaster Act, which created a single state agency for preparing and

responding to disasters. This agency and its predecessors wrote the California State Emergency Plan, an overarching emergency response document that recognised school districts as local government authorities and mandated that they be prepared to respond to all emergencies that occur within their jurisdictions.

## State Policies for School Disaster Management

With policies in place to ensure safer school construction and designate school districts responsible for responding to emergencies, California turned to developing robust school disaster management plans. The Katz Act of 1984 required that all public and private elementary and high schools with 50 students or more develop an earthquake disaster plan that defined emergency roles and protocols for staff and students. The Act also required schools to hold regular “drop, cover, and hold on” and evacuation drills. These regulations were later supplemented by California Education Code Sections 32280–32289, which mandated that all schools develop Safe School Plans by March 1, 2000. The plans were to include natural hazard risk, school and home violence, and traffic safety with annual updates submitted to the governing board of their school district.

Over the next decade, California state emergency management requirements evolved until, ultimately, the state created the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), the set of requirements LAUSD schools must comply with today.

SEMS was incorporated into state and local emergency planning, including school plans, in 1996. After the 1991 East Bay fires in Oakland, which claimed 25 lives, the California legislature passed the Petris Act in 1993. The act directed the Governor’s office to develop a system for managing emergencies when multiple jurisdictions and agencies with designated roles in the State Emergency Plan were involved. SEMS instructed higher levels to support emergency response coordination among lower levels (California Emergency Management Agency, 2009). SEMS also established inter-agency coordination to ensure rapid communication and decision-making, and a state mutual aid programme amongst fire departments, police departments, and health facilities.

SEMS derived its main functions from the Incident Command System (ICS), a concept originally developed in the 1960s with the purpose of more effectively combatting wildfires in California. ICS is characterised by its division of emergency response into five functions:

- **Management:** Policy planning and coordination of relevant government agencies and private organisations.
- **Operations:** Coordination of emergency plan execution consistent with policy.
- **Planning and intelligence:** Collection, analysis, documentation, and dissemination of information.
- **Logistics:** Coordination of facilities, services, equipment, and human resources.
- **Finance and administration:** Documentation and coordination of funding.

When ICS is implemented in a school context, school staff and local and state agencies involved in emergency response divide up the five ICS functions,

### Problems:

- High regional risk of earthquakes, fires, and school violence.

### Goals:

- Ensure safety of students in emergency situations.
- Coordinate emergency response among LAUSD, first responders, and local government.
- Train and educate students and staff on proper behavior in emergency situations.
- Ensure all schools have a complete school safety plan.

### Intervention:

- Development and incorporation of SEMS into emergency planning.
- Mandating of regular earthquake and other emergency drills.
- Development of a Safe School Plan template for school use.

***“The Katz Act of 1984 required that all public and private elementary and high schools with 50 students or more develop an earthquake disaster plan ...”***

improving coordination and communication between school site personnel, first responders, and emergency management offices at the local and state levels (California Emergency Management Agency, 2009).

The Petris Bill required all school districts to incorporate SEMS into their school safety plans by 1996. Each plan also had to include documentation of the use of SEMS in plans, training, and exercising. Non-compliant districts risked losing financial compensation from the state for emergency-related personnel costs (California Emergency Management Agency, 2009).

In 2003, the National Department of Homeland Security developed the National Incident Management System (NIMS), an ICS-based incident-management system that coordinates multi-jurisdictional response to domestic emergencies, requiring that all local and state agencies in the United States adopt it to be eligible for certain federal grants. Because California jurisdictions had already adopted SEMS, another ICS-based system, they were generally already compliant with NIMS. However, California school districts legally must comply with NIMS by national law and with SEMS by state law.

## Supporting School Emergency Plan Development

Few school administrators had the time or expertise to develop school disaster management plans that fully complied with the complex state and national policies for emergency response. They needed support from the LAUSD Office of Emergency Services, yet with so many schools in its district, the office could not help each school individually.

The LAUSD Office of Emergency Services developed a 600-page template for School Safety Plans that guides LAUSD schools to develop Safe School Plans in compliance with SEMS, NIMS, and the California Education Code. Without the template, it would have been difficult and time-consuming for individual schools to ensure their plan followed all the applicable regulations. Details concerning evacuation routes, meeting points, and role designation for specific staff members, were left to school administrators and faculty.

Safe School Plans for LAUSD schools are divided into three volumes:

1. **Coordinated Safe and Healthy School Plan**, which evaluates the effectiveness of existing school policies in creating a safe and positive environment for students.
2. **Emergency Procedures**, which develops the school's emergency response protocols and establishes a plan for training personnel.
3. **Intervention and Recovery**, which identifies the resources a school will need to achieve post-disaster recovery.

Each school must establish a Safe School Committee in charge of reviewing and updating its Safe School Plan. In LAUSD, Safe School Committees must include the principal, the United Teachers Los Angeles Chapter Chair, one non-teaching staff member, one student representative if the plan is for a high school, one parent representative of a current student, and one local law enforcement officer. In addition to mandatory members, LAUSD Office of Emergency Services encourages schools to recruit staff members with diverse training backgrounds for the committee (Office of Environmental Health & Safety, 2009).

LAUSD schools must also establish a School Site Crisis team, composed of staff members assigned specific emergency roles and a backup member for each role. An incomplete list of emergency roles includes:

- **Incident Commander**, usually the principal, who oversees overall crisis response and communication with the school district during an emergency.
- **Crisis Team Leader**, who coordinates all crisis team responders.
- **Communications/Media Manager**, who provides parents and media with situation updates.
- **Crisis Counselor**, who provides counseling to students and staff who require emotional support.

The Safe School Committee must also establish two or more Search and Rescue teams, each comprised of at least four trained faculty members (LAUSD Office of Emergency Services, 2016).

The LAUSD Office of Emergency Services requires that schools have a copy of their Safe School Plan in the main office of the school for public reference, in the head administrator's office, in the school's emergency supply bin, and in the main faculty lounge. Safe School Plans are not available online for security reasons; however, parents and others can visit the main office of the school and sign in to review its plan.

To further engage LAUSD students and staff in emergency planning, the LAUSD Office of Emergency Services released two smart phone apps that are based on the district's Safe School Plan template. The LAUSD Staff/Responder Emergency Plan app is available to all district employees and first responders and describes response protocols for 21 different categories of emergencies. The LAUSD Community Emergency Plan app, which students, parents, and community members can download in English and Spanish, describes LAUSD emergency plans and protocols, including parent notification and reunification procedures.

In response to a 2012 school shooting, in which 20 children were killed, the national Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) released a document titled *Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plan*. This planning document guides school districts in developing and formatting emergency plans, as well as plans for the prevention and mitigation of emergencies (FEMA, 2013). The LAUSD has changed its Safe School Plans guidance document to align with these federal guidelines.

## Practicing Emergency Plans and Drills

Safe School Plans address various emergency scenarios that ideally will not come to pass. However, emergency drills, described in each school's Safe School Plan and mandated under the Katz Act, offer staff and students the opportunity to practice what to do in emergency scenarios.

The LAUSD Office of Emergency Services provides an emergency drill reference guide to all district schools. The guide describes both drill procedure and frequency. Earthquake "drop, cover, and hold on" drills must be conducted on a monthly basis; fire drills must be conducted monthly in elementary and middle schools and twice a year in high schools; lock-downs, shelter-in-place, and take cover procedures must also be practiced twice a year in all schools (LAUSD Office of Emergency Services, 2012).

***“Without the template, it would be difficult and time-consuming for individual schools to ensure their plan followed all the applicable regulations...”***

### **Major Impacts:**

- All LAUSD schools a standardised Safe School Plan.
- All LAUSD schools practice regular earthquake and other emergency drills.

### **Greatest Insights:**

- Safe School Plans are reviewed annually.
- Students practice in regular emergency drills from elementary school through high school.

### **What's Next:**

- Safe School Plans for the 2017–2018 school year will align with FEMA guidelines for the planning and formatting of school emergency plans.

In March 2017, a LAUSD high school fully activated their ICS and emergency plan after receiving a bomb threat by telephone. School staff safely evacuated their students at both the threatened school and another school in the vicinity while police conducted a full search of the school grounds. Though no threat was found, successful implementation of the school's emergency procedures demonstrated the effectiveness of having emergency plans in place and practicing them during drills.

In addition to periodic drills, all LAUSD schools participate in California's annual Great Shakeout drill in October – a massive community earthquake drill organised by the Earthquake Country Alliance. In 2016, the Great Shakeout included 55 million participants from around the world. The LAUSD coordinates with the fire department and MySafe:LA, a fire and life safety organisation, to help facilitate and participate in the drill. The community drill involves schools, businesses, government institutions, and the broader community in a “drop, cover, and hold” drill slightly after 10am on the third Thursday of October, a date and time that ensures schools can participate. Participants also practice their respective emergency plans on the same day.

During the “drop, cover, and hold” drill, students and staff find shelter and if none is available find an area without windows. They remain in a position that protects their heads and vital organs. After the “shaking” ends, the staff member in each classroom asks if anyone is injured and offers treatment or arranges transportation accordingly. Staff also make note of damage or exposure of hazardous materials resulting from the “shaking”. The staff member then checks if neighbouring classrooms require assistance. Finally, the staff member leads students out of the building and to a safe area outdoors in an orderly manner, leaving a mark on the classroom indicating that students have evacuated, and that no hazardous materials or bodies are inside the classroom (Petal & Green, 2009).

Previous expert observation of the first Great Shakeout drill at one LAUSD high school revealed that a rote memorisation approach to emergency procedures could leave students in danger. For example, students already located outside during the drill did not think to move away from outdoor hazards, such as adjacent buildings or light posts. Similarly, students in an open dance studio were unsure of how to behave during the drill (Petal & Green, 2009). Students needed to think through individual scenarios that may arise for them and how to react to an earthquake safely in a variety of locations.

## **Policy-Enabling Factors and Remaining Challenges**

Overall, the LAUSD Office of Emergency Services provides an excellent model of how a large school district or local government can guide schools in planning for emergencies. It is important to note that the LAUSD Office of Emergency Services emergency planning policy is strongly supported by California state law, and what is arguably a proactive hazard planning culture in California, evidenced through extensive participation in the statewide annual Great Shakeout earthquake drill. Students benefit not only from the existence of emergency plans in school, but from hazard and emergency response education, as is provided through periodic school drills and the availability of emergency planning apps.

Emergency plans, emergency response protocols, and school drills should be based upon guiding principles developed from research on major causes of injury and death from past earthquakes (for example, see Johnston, Standring, Ronan, et al., 2014; Petal, 2011). Students and staff need to understand the principles behind protective actions practiced in drills so they can apply these principles in potentially novel situations during actual earthquakes.

Despite the LAUSD Office of Emergency Services impressive work in emergency planning and hazard mitigation, significant challenges remain. One of the greatest obstacles to managing the development and maintenance of Safe School Plans in the LAUSD is the size of the district relative to the number of managers monitoring school plans. Though the use of a template ensures that Safe School Plans will follow an approved format and contain all local, state, and national requirements, the LAUSD Office of Emergency Services must review over 1,000 plans to ensure that school inputs are both safe and realistic.

One of the ways the LAUSD Office of Emergency Services addresses this disparate ratio is by relying upon district Operations Coordinators. These coordinators act as liaisons between the LAUSD and schools for non-instructional issues and can support schools when they need help developing Safe School Plans. The coordinators can also report plan discrepancies to district authorities. Another remaining challenge is promoting flexible drilling and evacuation procedures; Paci-Green et al. (2015) identified unintended consequences of drills done in a rote-like fashion. The LAUSD Office of Emergency Services supports disaster management policy in which school staff, students, and other community members actively engage in emergency planning, fostering resilient school communities.



Comprehensive School Safety (CSS) is a framework for advocacy and action aligning policies and plans across education and disaster management sectors at all level. It uses child-centred all-hazards risk assessment and context analysis as the evidence base for action in three overlapping areas: Safe Learning Facilities, School Disaster Management, and Risk Reduction and Resilience Education. For more information, see <http://www.gadrrres.net/>

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