

An NSPRA Weather-Related Crisis Communication Resource

Tornado Response Information

The most important element of tornado safety in schools is to develop a good tornado safety plan that is *tailored to your building design and ability to move people*. Response plans *must* be adapted to your unique school arrangements! For example, the idea of a relatively safe hallway is now obsolete. Video from the Joplin, Mo., tornado in May 2011 showed hallways are the worst place to seek safety from a storm. Large schools may not have enough time to direct the upper floors into safe areas, or enough “safe space” areas to hold everyone. Evaluating the time, space, traffic flow and coordination needed to direct everyone into safe areas in an organized manner will require a *customized drill*. [Here is a video example](#) from the state of Missouri.

Here are the basics in responding to a storm:

1. EVERY SECOND COUNTS. You will have no more than 2 or 3 minutes to move people to safety before things get very risky! Warnings are not absolutely perfect. You must plan for a *reasonable worst-case scenario* – a tornado is spotted close by, and hits with little warning.
2. FLYING DEBRIS is the biggest tornado hazard. Put as many walls as possible between students and the tornado. Halls with outside windows can turn into a death trap of flying broken glass.
3. BUILDING STRENGTH: It is worth an audit to find the safe places in your school. FEMA has an [online discussion](#) on construction for schools. Seek help from your local emergency manager’s office, and the Warning Coordination Meteorologist (WCM) at [your nearest National Weather Service office](#).
4. PORTABLE CLASSROOMS: The Dallas, Texas tornados that hit April 3, 2012 showed seven ton trailers tossed around in the air like leaves. Portable classrooms can be death traps. Tornado planning must include getting students out of portable classrooms and into a safe area in the main building, as quickly as possible. Consider that students should be evacuated from portable classrooms *before the storm*.
5. DANGER IN GYMS and AUDITORIUMS: Large, open-span areas, such as gymnasiums, auditoriums and most lunchrooms, can be very dangerous even in weak tornadoes, and should not be used for sheltering people.

What to do before the storm strikes

High priority tornado drills must be run several times a year to keep students and staff in good practice. Easy to read maps or [signs](#) with arrows should be posted throughout the hallways directing people to the safe areas. Here are some other tips:

- Have a compressed air horn or megaphone to sound the alert in case of power failure.
- Have a plan for disabled students and those in portable classrooms.
- Make sure someone knows how to turn off electricity and gas in the event the school is damaged.
- Keep children at school beyond regular hours if threatening weather is expected; and inform parents of this policy.
- Lunches or assemblies should be postponed if severe weather is approaching. Cafeterias, and auditoriums offer no meaningful protection from tornado-strength winds.
- Know where your school is located on a map and keep a highway map nearby to follow storm movement from weather bulletins. If the power is out, it helps to have paper maps.
- Have a [NOAA Weather Radio](#). Look for the WRSAME feature when purchasing weather radio units.
- Be aware of the weather! [Outlooks](#), [watches](#) from the [Storm Prediction Center](#), and the news media, can help you be aware of severe weather during the school day.

What to do when tornado sirens sound and a threat is imminent

SECONDS COUNT. Execute the plan you have developed. Lead all students to safe places in a calm, orderly and firm manner. Everyone should then crouch low, head down, protecting the back of the head with the arms. Stay away from windows and large open rooms like gyms and auditoriums.

After the tornado you must keep your head

KEEP STUDENTS TOGETHER IN AN ORDERLY MANNER. Keep away from broken glass and other sharp debris, and away from power lines, puddles containing power lines, and emergency traffic areas. While waiting for emergency personnel to arrive, carefully render aid to those who are injured. Keep everyone out of damaged parts of the school; chunks of debris or even that whole section of the building may fall down. Ensure nobody is using matches or lighters, in case of leaking natural gas pipes or fuel tanks nearby. It is very important for teachers, principals and other adult authority figures to set a calm example for students at the disaster scene, and reassure those who are shaken.

There is no guaranteed safety from a tornado. Strong tornadoes can blow away all but the most intensely fortified structures.

Some information above is taken from “Tornado Preparedness Tips for School Administrators” by [Roger Edwards](#) at the Storm Prediction Center, Norman, Oklahoma.

Special thanks to NSPRA Past President Jim Dunn, APR, for collecting and editing this information.