Occupational Therapy Practitioners: Essential Partners in School Emergency Management Planning

June 24, 2026 at 11:15 am

Jason Snead, JD
&
Dr. Mary Schmitz, OTD, OT/L, ECHM

1

Introductions

Jason Snead, JD

Mary Schmitz, OTD,

2

Learning Objectives

Identify and reflect upon unique opportunities for occupational therapy practitioners in emergency management

Expand knowledge of outside resources to support comprehensive implementation and knowledge translation

Analyze the specific requirements of new laws around emergency operations plans in Arizona

3

Poll Questions

4

Important Legislation

- Minimal Standards Updated for Emergency Response (Operation) Plan
- Must address disability access: Communication & Assistance for students & staff with Access & Functional needs
- Standards developed by the AZ Department of Education (ADE) & the AZ Department of Emergency & Military Affairs (DEMA)

SECTION 15 - 341, ARIZONA REVISED STATUTES

5

Findings Since 2023:

Joint Legislative Audit Committee directed the Auditor General to conduct a multi-year series of audits examining

1. School emergency response plans
2. Emergency response practices
3. School safety infrastructure
4. Compliance with statutory requirements under A.R.S. §15-341

Arizona Auditor General Report 24-212 (December 2024)

6

Emergency Operation Plans (EOPs):

- Of the EOPs reviewed, none fully met state standards
- Of the schools reviewed, none fully tested or implemented their plans
- Found widespread deficiencies in emergency plans and preparations
- Arizona schools lacked effective processes for monitoring compliance with emergency planning standards
- Many displayed insufficient evidence of staff training, drills

Arizona Auditor General Report 24-212 (December 2024)

7

Important Implications Since 2024

Arizona Department of Emergency & Military Affairs (DEMA)

- Coordinate emergency management activities to reduce disaster impact on property and persons
- Evaluate needs for additional guidance, outreach, and training to support schools in planning more effectively for safety in emergencies

Arizona Department of Education (ADE)

- Responsible for supervising and regulating public school conduct for compliance with EOPs
- Monitor school safety-related staffing/teams
- Charter Schools will also be included for EOPs

Per Auditor General - https://www.azauditor.gov/sites/default/files/2024-12/24-212_Report_0.pdf

8

Access and Functional Needs

9

Defined within the School Environment:

- ADE utilizes the federal C-MIST framework (Communication, Maintaining Health, Independence, Support, Transportation), not a static diagnostic category
- Addresses how First Responders & School Personnel will provide assistance & communication
- Ensures whole school community is addressed (students, personnel, visitors, & volunteers)

10

Individualized Emergency Safety Plans

- IESP planning requires a broader multidisciplinary team than an IEP
- Shifts focus from educational access to safety, communication, health, mobility, & emergency response
- Consider inclusion of Community Partners, Transportation personnel, Facilities & Operational personnel, Campus Security

11

Occupational Therapy

12

Why Occupational Therapy?

OT practitioners already possess essential expertise:

- Functional assessment across all domains
- Individualized intervention planning
- Environmental adaptation strategies
- Sensory and behavioral needs understanding
- Communication and assistive technology knowledge
- Trauma-informed positive behavioral strategies
- Bridges the gap between functional needs & emergency preparedness

13

Legislation Supporting Occupational Therapy

- **Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965** (Pub. L. 89-313, 20 U.S.C. §§ 2701–3386) -[As Amended Through P.L. 118-159, Enacted December 23, 2024]
- **No Child Left Behind Act of 2001** (Public Law 107-110)
- **The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Section 300.34, Part B** (Public Law 108-446)
- **Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015** (Public Law 114-95)

14

Keys to Continuous Improvement: Roles in Planning & Evaluating

15

Planning

- Students must be included in drills.
- Parents and teachers may initially need advance notification to assist students with preparing for the drill, but reduce this to prepare for REAL responses
  - This is a temporary reasonable accommodation
  - Allows students to build muscle memory and learn the routine
- Teachers may incorporate safety strategies into the curriculum that will assist students with learning preparedness routines
- As activities in treatment Occupational Therapy Practitioners (OTPs) can address mobility, equipment needs/modification, communication, sensory processing & regulation, behavioral responses/coping strategies, accessibility, comprehension & executive functioning, & mental health

16

Continuous Evaluating

- Check in with students.
- Get feedback from students and staff.
- Identify and document areas for improvement.
- OTPs could debrief following drills (consider the mental health aspect)
- Participate in discussions with classroom personnel any additional needs that may warrant accommodations (iPad, headphones, social stories, personnel training)
- Update plans accordingly

17

Break into small groups

18

Scenarios-

- **1:** Fire Drill during Occupational Therapy
- **2:** School activates lockdown due to a reported threat near campus
- **3:** Following a wildfire evacuation, students are being reunified with families at an alternate location

19

Small Group Scenarios

Answer these questions for each:

- "What unique expertise could OT bring to this emergency planning situation that might otherwise be overlooked?"
- "How does your scenario prompt you to consider any changes to implement in your school district(s)?"

20

Debrief

21

Resources

Access Functional Needs Guidance Documents for Emergency Response Plans

Accessible Public Schools

ADE School/District EOP Self Assessment Checklist 2025

Arizona Minimum Requirements for School Emergency Operations Plans

Be Prepared: Plan for Emergencies Before Starting School

Emergency Operations Planning (EOP)

No Arizona Schools Tested Their Emergency Plans Or Met State Minimum Standards

22

Resources

- Everyday advocacy: Policies supporting OT's role in shaping contexts and environments
- AOTA School Mental Health Toolkit

- **Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965** (Pub. L. 89-313, 20 U.S.C. §§ 2701–3386) -[As Amended Through P.L. 118-159, Enacted December 23, 2024]
- **No Child Left Behind Act of 2001** (Public Law 107-110)
- **The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Section 300.34, Part B** (Public Law 108-446)
- **Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015** (Public Law 114-95)

23

Questions?

24

Contact Information

Jason Snead, JD.

Research and Communication Specialist

Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (ADDPC)

480-486 -6029

jsnead@azdes.gov

Dr. Mary Schmitz, OTD, OT/L, ECHM

ArizOTA Peds' School-Based SIS Chair

AOTA Emergency & Disaster Mgmt CoP Co-Facilitator

Mohave Valley Elementary School District

marypediatricot@gmail.com

25

Thank You

Access Attitude IHD InclUSion 2026 EVIDENCE FOR SUCCESS Disability Conference

26