

EARTHQUAKE PREPAREDNESS FROM A SCHOOL'S PERSPECTIVE

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Why teach earthquake safety in schools? What better place to start than the place where statistics show that children spend the majority of their waking hours? Many advocate that we should build our hotels, shopping malls, and resorts more earthquake resistant. What about the buildings that house the future of America - our children? On a recent episode of the television show "Our House," they showed a family that exercised a great deal of common sense action in dealing with a potentially devastating earthquake. The truths that come from this two-part episode are frightening. First is the social apathy that allows a square box in our houses to teach us what our parents don't have time to teach. The second truth is the already bulging curricula of our schools which do not allow them the opportunity to incorporate earthquake safety education. We have been piloting earthquake safety curricula for many years and are still debating what should be incorporated. Meanwhile, earthquakes continue and many die.

What did our pilot study in Summerville bring to light? It showed that there are similarities between earthquakes, tornadoes, and fire drills. All deserve equal time and planning. The problem is exemplified by Xenia, Ohio which was leveled by a tornado while children were in school. The devastation caused massive drilling and planning for the new few years. But as the memory faded, the awareness also waned.

Our safety search revealed that there were many hazardous conditions in classrooms and buildings. There were many objects in classrooms that were not bolted down and could fall on children during a quake: book cases, cabinets, shelves, cubbyholes, light fixtures, and wall partitions. The air conditioners are located on the roof and could potentially crash through and block all exits. There were no battery-powered safety lights in the hallways or the bathrooms. The water cut-offs were outside the building and were stripped to the point that few could turn them. The safety assembly areas outside the building were located directly over 440-volt power lines which could be brought out of the ground during afterquakes.

Separated families and their attempts to communicate presents another kind of problem. Attempts by hundreds of students to contact their parents and attempts by those parents to reach their children or even to learn of their welfare could result in panic. Panic increases the intensity of an already catastrophic event.

The real question yet to be answered by all of those in attendance at this conference is "What is our plan of action?" Who will be in charge? What can we do in advance in terms of preparedness for any, if not all, emergencies? From my perspective as a parent of three children, I would like to know the answer to one question: are my children going to be safe? If I can say "yes" by our proactive planning, then the parents of the other 13,000 students in Summerville can rest easier. You don't have time not to plan.

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Mr. Karl Naugle has taught elementary school, been an assistant principal of an elementary school, and is currently Computer Coordinator for Dorchester School District #2, in South Carolina. He has been a team leader for the development of an Earthquake Preparedness Pilot Curriculum at Newington Elementary School in South Carolina, one of 2 sites chosen in the U.S., and a member of the FEMA 5-year Earthquake Preparedness Committee.