

Preparing Schools for Severe Weather

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Fort Worth/Dallas, TX

Introduction

Hazardous weather is no stranger here in Texas. From tornadoes to flash floods, from drought to ice storms, Texas is at the center of one of the most active weather regions in the world. While some of these events are viewed as “inconveniences”, events such as tornadoes, severe thunderstorms, and flash floods can truly be life-threatening events.

The National Weather Service’s primary mission is to protect life and property by issuing warnings, statements, and advisories in advance of potentially hazardous weather. We spend a great deal of effort working with local emergency managers and media outlets to ensure that our severe weather products are disseminated as widely and quickly as possible. We also engage in a safety and preparedness education campaign with local community agencies, so that people will respond correctly when warnings are issued.

Schools pose a particular concern regarding severe weather safety. Schools typically house several dozen to several thousand students and staff, all of whom must quickly be moved to shelter if a storm approaches. Isolated facilities and portable classrooms magnify the potential vulnerability of schools to the effects of severe weather.

This guide is designed to help you evaluate your school’s severe weather preparedness plan. We will discuss the primary severe weather threats we face, and provide some general safety tips to follow when severe weather is in the area. We will then focus on issues specific to the preparedness plan at your school.

Severe Weather Threats

TORNADOES

Although tornadoes occur in many parts of the world, these destructive forces of nature are found most frequently in the United States east of the Rocky Mountains during the spring and summer months. In an average year, 800 tornadoes are reported nationwide, resulting in 80 deaths and over 1,500 injuries. Texas leads the nation with over 120 tornadoes reported each year.

A tornado is defined as a violently rotating column of air extending from a thunderstorm to the ground. The most violent tornadoes are capable of tremendous destruction with wind speeds of 250 mph or more. Damage paths can be in excess of one mile wide and 50 miles long.

WHAT CAUSES TORNADOES?

During the spring in the Plains, thunderstorms frequently develop along a "dryline," which separates warm, moist air to the east from hot, dry air to the west. Thunderstorms may form as the dryline moves east during the afternoon hours. If other favorable conditions exist, these thunderstorms can produce tornadoes.

HOW DO TORNADOES FORM?

Before thunderstorms develop, a change in wind direction and an increase in wind speed with increasing height creates an invisible, horizontal spinning effect in the lower atmosphere.

Rising air within the thunderstorm updraft tilts the rotating air from horizontal to vertical.

An area of rotation, 2-6 miles wide, now extends through much of the storm. Most strong and violent tornadoes form within this area of strong rotation.

TORNADO CLASSIFICATION

Class	% of tornadoes	% of deaths	Lifetime	Wind speed
Weak	80	less than 5	1-10 mins	up to 110 mph
Strong	19	nearly 30	20 mins or more	110 to 205 mph
Violent	1	nearly 70	up to an hour	205 mph +

TORNADO FACTS AND FIGURES

Tornadoes can occur at any time of the year.

In Texas, peak tornado occurrence is in March through May.

A secondary tornado maximum can occur in the fall.

Tornadoes are most likely to occur between 3 and 9 p.m. but have been known to occur at all hours of the day or night.

The average tornado moves from southwest to northeast, but tornadoes can move in any direction.

The average forward speed is 30 mph but may vary from nearly stationary to 70 mph.

Severe Weather Threats

FLASH FLOODS

A flash flood is a life-threatening event. Floods and flash floods are the #1 thunderstorm-related killer, resulting in over 120 fatalities annually. A flash flood is defined as a rapid rise of water, usually during or after a period of heavy rain. Flood waters may rise several feet in just a few minutes. Flash floods can also result from dam or levee failures.

HOW DO FLASH FLOODS OCCUR?

Several factors contribute to flash flooding. The two key elements are rainfall intensity and duration. Intensity is the rate of rainfall, and duration is how long the rain lasts. Topography, soil conditions, and ground cover also play an important role. Most flash flooding is caused by slow-moving thunderstorms, thunderstorms repeatedly moving over the same area, or heavy rains from hurricanes and tropical storms. When this heavy rainfall occurs over an area covered by concrete and pavement, excessive runoff and flooding can occur.

Occasionally, floating debris can accumulate at a natural or man-made obstruction and restrict the flow of water. Water held back by the debris dam can cause flooding upstream. Subsequent flash flooding can occur downstream if the obstruction should suddenly release.

VEHICLE DANGERS

Nearly half of all flash flood fatalities are vehicle-related. In a school bus, truck, or car, look out for flooding at highway dips, bridges, and low areas. Many flash floods occur at night, so be prepared to take quick action.

How can a foot or two of water cost you your life? Water weighs 62.4 lbs. per cubic foot and typically flows downstream at 9 miles an hour. When a vehicle stalls, the water's momentum is transferred to the vehicle. For each foot the water rises, 500 lbs. of lateral force are applied to the vehicle. But, the biggest factor is buoyancy. For each foot the water rises up the side of the vehicle, the vehicle displaces 1,500 lbs. of water. In effect, the vehicle weighs 1,500 lbs. less for each foot the water rises. Two to three feet of water will carry away most vehicles. Trucks and buses with large tires are especially dangerous, because the large tires will actually help float the vehicle off of the road.

Severe Weather Threats

THUNDERSTORM WINDS

The “straight line” wind events from thunderstorms are called downbursts. Downbursts are a small area of rapidly descending air beneath a thunderstorm. They strike the ground and rapidly move out from the impact point. They can cause damaging winds in excess of 100 mph, and may or may not be accompanied by rain. In Texas, downbursts are much more common than tornadoes. Most of the wind damage caused by thunderstorms is actually caused by downbursts. Because of this, the threat posed by “non-tornadic” thunderstorms should be taken as seriously as that posed by tornadoes.

LARGE HAIL

Large hail is the most destructive weather element to affect the United States. Each year, hail causes about \$1 billion damage to vehicles, roofs, crops, livestock, and aircraft. The strong rising currents of air within a storm, called updrafts, carry water droplets to a height where freezing occurs. Ice particles grow in size, finally becoming too heavy to be supported by the updraft and fall to the ground. Hailstones can become as large as softballs and can fall at speeds faster than 100 mph. Although fatalities from hail are rare, they can occur.

LIGHTNING: NATURE’S FIREWORKS

The action of rising and descending air within a thunderstorm separates positive and negative charges. Water and ice particles also affect the distribution of electrical charge. Lightning results from the buildup and discharge of electrical energy between positively and negatively charged areas. Lightning is extremely powerful. The average flash could light a 100-watt light bulb for more than 3 months. The air near a lightning strike is heated to 50,000 degrees F, hotter than the surface of the sun! Your chances of being struck by lightning are estimated to be 1 in 600,000 but could be reduced by following safety rules. Most lightning deaths and injuries occur when people are caught outdoors, and most lightning casualties occur in the summer months and during the afternoon and early evening. The rapid heating and cooling of air near the lightning channel causes a shock wave that results in the thunder we hear.

Preparing for the Storm

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE SEVERE WEATHER PRODUCTS

TORNADO WATCH: Tornadoes are possible in your area. Remain alert for approaching storms.

TORNADO WARNING: A tornado has been sighted or indicated by weather radar. If a tornado warning is issued for your area or the sky becomes threatening, move to your pre-designated place of safety.

FLASH FLOOD WATCH: Flash flooding or flooding is possible within the designated area.

FLASH FLOOD WARNING: Flash flooding has been reported or is imminent. Take necessary precautions at once.

URBAN/SMALL STREAM FLOOD ADVISORY: Flooding of small streams, streets, and low-lying areas, such as railroad underpasses and urban storm drains, is imminent or occurring.

SEVERE THUNDERSTORM WATCH: Severe thunderstorms are possible in your area. Remember, thunderstorms are defined as severe if they produce winds 58 mph or stronger, and/or hail 3/4 inch in diameter or larger.

SEVERE THUNDERSTORM WARNING: Severe thunderstorms are imminent or occurring. Remember, tornadoes occasionally develop in areas in which a severe thunderstorm watch or warning is in effect. Remain alert to signs of an approaching tornado and seek shelter if threatening conditions exist.

Preparing for the Storm

TORNADO SAFETY

In the school, move to the pre-designated shelter area.

If an underground shelter is not available, move to an interior room or hallway on the lowest floor. Crouch down against a wall or get under a sturdy piece of furniture.

Stay away from windows.

Do not try to outrun a tornado in a bus, truck, or car; instead, abandon it for a strong building.

Consider holding buses at the school if severe weather is an imminent threat.

Overpasses offer little protection from tornadoes and should not be used as shelters.

If caught in the open, take cover in a ditch or low spot. Remember, though, that this will not provide the same protection as a solid building.

Portable classrooms, even if tied down, are poor shelters from tornadoes and should be abandoned.

Occasionally, tornadoes develop so rapidly that advance warning is not possible. Remain alert for signs of an approaching tornado. Flying debris from tornadoes causes most deaths and injuries.

Preparing for the Storm

FLOOD SAFETY

Know your flood risk and elevation above flood stage.

Do your local streams or rivers flood easily? If so, be prepared to move to a place of safety.

Make sure that bus drivers are familiar with the flood-prone areas along their routes.

Keep a NOAA Weather Radio, a battery-powered portable radio, and flashlights in working order.

Get out of areas subject to flooding. This includes dips, low spots, canyons, washes, etc.

Avoid already flooded and high velocity flow areas. Do not attempt to cross flowing streams.

If driving, be aware that the road bed may not be intact under flood waters. Turn around and go another way. NEVER drive through flooded roadways!

If the vehicle stalls, leave it immediately and seek higher ground if you can safely. Rapidly rising water may engulf the vehicle and its occupants and sweep them away. Remember, it's better to be wet than dead!

Be especially cautious at night when it is harder to recognize flood dangers.

Preparing for the Storm

THUNDERSTORM AND LIGHTNING SAFETY

Remember: if you can hear thunder, you are close enough to the storm to be struck by lightning. Go to safe shelter immediately! Remain in shelter until 30 MINUTES after the last thunder is heard.

Move to a sturdy building. Do not take shelter in small sheds, under isolated trees, or in convertible automobiles.

If lightning is occurring and a sturdy shelter is not available, get inside a hard top automobile and keep windows up. Beware, though, since vehicles offer poor protection from downburst winds and only fair protection from hail.

Telephone lines and metal pipes can conduct electricity. Unplug appliances not necessary for obtaining weather information. Avoid using the telephone or any electrical appliances. Use phones ONLY in an emergency.

Turn off air conditioners. Power surges from lightning can overload the compressors.

Preparing for the Storm

Review Questions

1. What are the main weather threats which may impact my school?

2. Where are the flood-prone areas near my school?

3. When (time of day and time of year) are tornadoes most likely in my area?

Six Steps to Build Your School's Preparedness Plan

1) DESIGNATE SHELTER AREAS

Interior rooms and hallways provide the best protection from tornadoes or downburst winds. If hallways are used, only use areas which are well clear of external doors or classrooms with windows. Auditoriums, gymnasiums, and other structures with high, wide-span roofs do not offer good protection. Portable buildings are poor shelters and should not be used.

2) PRACTICE REGULARLY

As with fire drills, the severe weather safety plan should be practiced regularly. Regular practice will enable staff members to become more familiar with their duties. In addition, the practices will allow administrators to identify and correct any flaws in the plan (i.e., too long to get people into shelter areas, traffic flow problems in the hallways).

3) HAVE RELIABLE, REDUNDANT MEANS TO RECEIVE WEATHER INFORMATION

If you are in broadcast range, NOAA Weather Radio is the best way to receive information from the National Weather Service. NOAA Weather Radio is a broadcast of weather information which originates directly from our forecast office in Fort Worth. NOAA Weather Radio receivers have an alarm feature which will activate only when watches or warnings are issued for your county. Information on NOAA Weather Radio is available online at <http://www.srh.noaa.gov/fwd/radio.html>

The Emergency Managers Weather Information Network (EMWIN) is another means of receiving NWS products. EMWIN is a nationwide satellite-based system which broadcasts watches, warnings, forecasts, observations, and summaries from NWS offices. EMWIN requires a satellite dish, a signal demodulator, display software, and a Pentium-class PC. The display software features alarming and printing capabilities when specific products are received. Several vendors sell pre-packaged units, including the dish, demodulator, and software. Once the receiving station is established, there are no recurring costs for the data. For more information on EMWIN, point your web browser to <http://iwin.nws.noaa.gov/emwin/index.htm>

Commercial radio, TV, Internet, alphanumeric pagers, and two-way radio systems are all ways of getting information. Have as many of these methods available as possible. Each should have a battery backup, in case the electricity goes out.

Your School's Preparedness Plan

Review Questions

1. Where are the school's designated tornado shelter areas?
2. List the dates of the last 3 "tornado drills" we held.
3. List at least 3 methods we currently have to receive severe weather warnings. Place an asterisk * by those which have battery backup.

Six Steps to Build Your School's Preparedness Plan

4) HAVE RELIABLE, REDUNDANT SYSTEMS TO RELAY INFORMATION WITHIN THE SCHOOL

If severe weather threatens your school, you may have only seconds to activate your plan and get the students and staff to shelter. Utilize as many methods as possible, with battery backup in case of commercial power loss, to get people to shelter. The school intercom, walkie-talkies, cell phones, and a battery-powered bullhorn are all possibilities.

5) ENSURE THAT EACH STAFF MEMBER IS FAMILIAR WITH THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES

This is where some of the tougher questions must be asked. Who in your school is responsible for developing or modifying the severe weather plan? Who will be assigned to monitor conditions during potentially severe weather? Who has the lead role in authorizing/activating the plan? Are backup assignments in place in the event that severe weather strikes while key staff members are absent? Who has the authority to hold buses at the school if severe weather threatens?

6) WHEN SEVERE STORMS THREATEN, ENACT YOUR PLAN IMMEDIATELY!

We at the NWS try to have all tornadoes and severe storms preceded by a warning. However, in some cases, the "lead time" between when the warning is issued and when the storm hits will be quite short. The warnings we issue are typically on a county-by-county basis. If a warning is issued for your county, listen closely to the entire warning message. We will specify precisely where in the county the storm is located, and we will usually list a number of communities near the storm's projected path. If your school is near the path of the storm, enact your plan well in advance of the storm's expected arrival time.

In rare cases, a storm may strike before a warning is issued. It is recommended that one or more of your staff members receive storm spotter training and become familiar with the cloud structures suggestive of severe weather. If a trained spotter observes a potentially tornadic or severe storm approaching the school, then activate the safety plan immediately.

Your School's Preparedness Plan

Review Questions

4. List at least 3 methods we currently have for relaying hazardous weather information within the school.

5. Who is responsible for developing and modifying our severe weather plan?

6. Who is responsible for monitoring the weather developments? Who is their backup?

7. Who is responsible for activating the safety plan? Who is their backup?

8. Who is responsible for holding or releasing buses? Who is their backup?

9. How many of the school staff have attended spotter training within the past 3 years?

Useful Internet Sites:

Fort Worth/Dallas Forecast Office - *warnings, forecasts, and conditions for north Texas*
www.srh.noaa.gov/fwd

National Weather Service Radar Data - *NWS radar pictures from across Texas and the nation*
www.srh.noaa.gov/fwd/radarmain.htm

Online Preparedness Information - *spotter training, safety tips, and downloadable guides*
www.srh.noaa.gov/fwd/skywarn.html

Online Media Guide for North Texas - *NWS products and services*
www.srh.noaa.gov/fwd/media

NWS Southern Region Headquarters - *Links to all forecast offices in the southern U.S.*
www.srh.noaa.gov

NOAA Weather Radio Information - *From the Fort Worth NWS Office*
www.srh.noaa.gov/fwd/radio.html

EMWIN Information - *Satellite broadcast of NWS products*
<http://iwin.nws.noaa.gov/emwin/index.htm>