

Trial by Fire: When the Emergency Preparedness Plan Meets Reality at Murray High School

We've all seen our Emergency Preparedness Plans sitting in their binders, meticulously organized, color-coded, and ready for the "what if." Recently, at Murray High, "what if" became "what now" when a fire broke out in our building. For any administrator, this is the ultimate test of leadership and system integrity.

If there is one thing a real emergency teaches you, it's where your plan is paper-thin. Our evacuation was a success, but it was also a masterclass in identifying gaps. One of our biggest hurdles? The human variable. On the day of the fire, we had 11 substitute teachers in the building due to a district professional development day. While our staff knows the exit routes by heart, our guests were relying entirely on the folders in their hands. This highlighted an immediate need to refine our sub-folders and guest-teacher training to ensure that anyone, regardless of their familiarity with the halls, can lead a group to safety without hesitation.

The transition to remote learning wasn't just about moving to Zoom; it was a test of our school's adaptability. Pivoting a high school of our size overnight requires more than just tech—it requires a culture of trust. Our staff took the "Spartan Way" into their living rooms, ensuring that the academic momentum wasn't lost in the smoke.

Perhaps the most inspiring part of this journey was the response of our Special Education Team. Recognizing that "remote learning" is often an inadequate solution for students with significant needs, our SPED educators didn't just brainstorm; they innovated.

Understanding that consistency is a lifeline for their students, the team coordinated a "satellite" service model. Our SPED teachers and paraprofessionals were housed across the district at various junior highs and elementary schools. This allowed them to meet with students for IEPs, evaluations, and direct services in person, minimizing the disruption to their routines. This level of critical thinking ensured that our most vulnerable Spartans were not left behind during the displacement.

If I could share one piece of advice with my peers at UASSP, it's this: audit your plan for the "outsider." We often plan for our best days with our best staff, but emergencies rarely choose those moments. Our fire was a trial, but it was also a testament to the resilience of our people. We are rebuilding, we are learning, and more importantly, we are finding that the strength of a school isn't in its bricks, but in the collaborative leadership of its team.

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