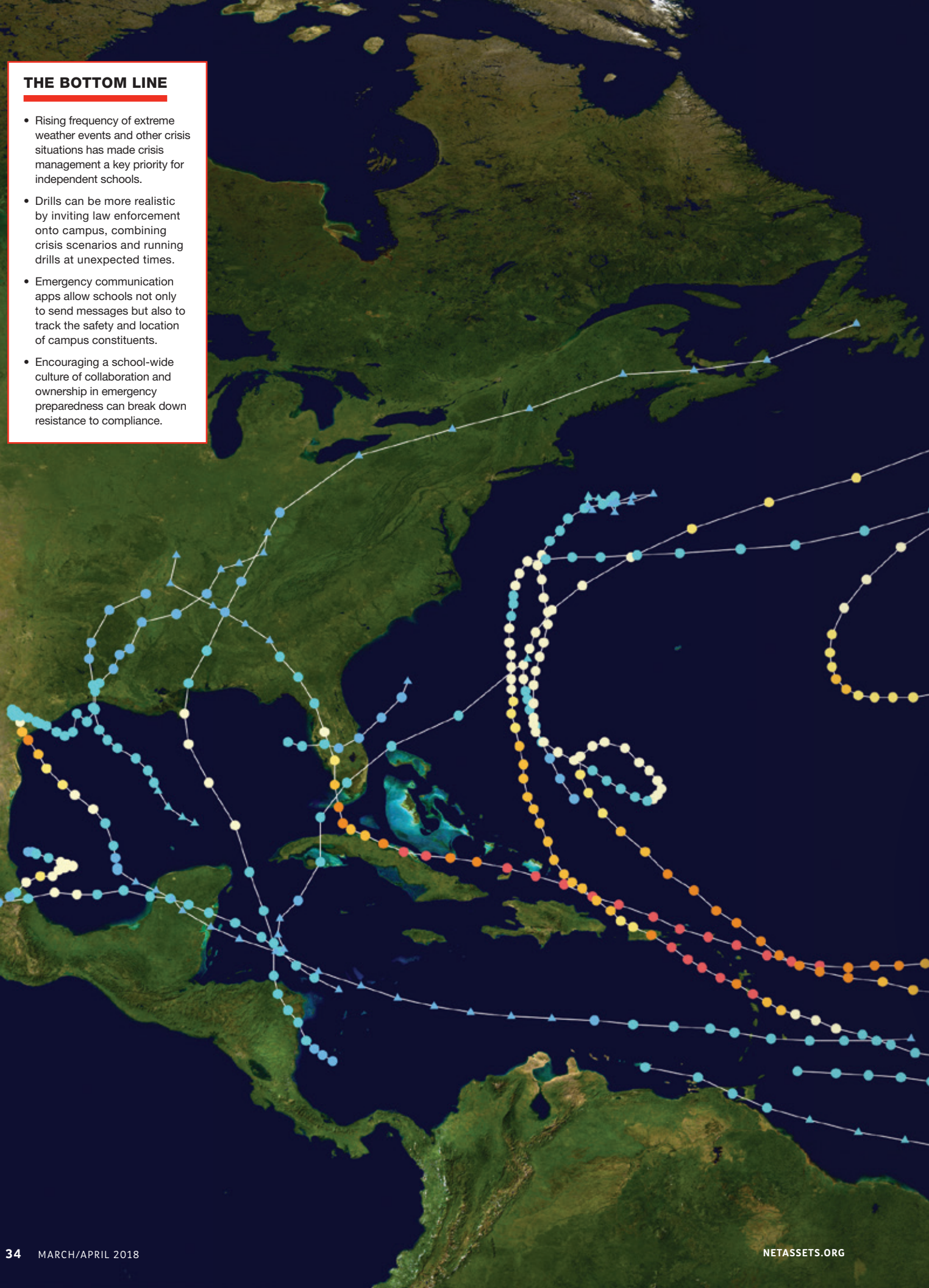


THE BOTTOM LINE

- Rising frequency of extreme weather events and other crisis situations has made crisis management a key priority for independent schools.
- Drills can be more realistic by inviting law enforcement onto campus, combining crisis scenarios and running drills at unexpected times.
- Emergency communication apps allow schools not only to send messages but also to track the safety and location of campus constituents.
- Encouraging a school-wide culture of collaboration and ownership in emergency preparedness can break down resistance to compliance.



READY FOR ANYTHING:

PREPARING FOR CAMPUS EMERGENCIES

Following a year of widespread natural disasters, independent schools update their crisis management plans.

By Cecily Garber

Hurricane Irma was the strongest storm to hit the U.S. since Katrina, with winds reaching 185 miles per hour. Peak intensity lasted 37 hours. Unlike other hurricanes, it threatened both sides of the Florida peninsula and drove the largest evacuation in the state's history. Yet Bolles School, a preK–12 day/boarding school with four campuses in Jacksonville, determined it was safer to ride out the storm than leave. Buses were fueled and ready, but “in the end we decided that for this situation, it would be better to stay put,” said Nancy Greene, the school's chief financial officer and chief operating officer. The school was prepared.

Irma arrived in Florida on Sunday, September 10, 2017, and departed the state a day later. Bolles did not escape unscathed. “Our entire road along the river was underwater,” said Greene, “and the sea wall suffered significant damage.” The storm had washed two dock systems out to sea and flooded the school's marine science labs, boathouse and riverside classrooms, all of which would require a complete rebuild.

Yet the school was nearly ready to reopen just two days later, the following Wednesday. It lacked only power, which was restored Wednesday evening, and Bolles reopened on Thursday morning.

In 2017, 17 tropical storms, including six major hurricanes, crossed the Atlantic and caused a record-setting \$292 billion in damages — double the previous high, set in 2005. Image credit: NASA and Cyclonebiskit.



COMMON BLIND SPOTS

When it comes to safety and security, “you can always come up with more and more different situations and how they could be handled,” said David Marcus, business manager at de Toledo High School. The nature of blind spots is that they’re difficult to see. Here are a few worth noting.

- “One thing that keeps me up at night is lack of duplication,” said Liz LeBlanc, chief financial officer at St. Mary’s Episcopal Day School. “What if one of our employees gets hurt in a crisis or isn’t at school when it happens, and we can’t access their accounts?” With school records and systems now being almost universally electronic, **access to user names and passwords** is crucial to recovering vital data. Schools must balance restricting access to maintain tight cybersecurity with opening access to backup staff members in case of emergency. Martha Ambros, association director at Cal-ISBOA, said access to school software was imperative for schools in California that quickly evacuated due to the 2017 wildfires. “We’ve moved from a physical ‘go-bag’ that one would grab in an emergency to a mental go-bag — how you can access information and locate each other if electricity and cell service goes down,” she explained. “The cloud is a good thing, but people need to be able to get to it. It’s only recently that we’ve become so completely automated, and many schools haven’t thought through this.”
- The most commonly missing element in independent school’s crisis management protocols is **a recovery plan**, according to Cheryl McDowell, vice president at the insurance broker Bolton & Company. Schools that are good at planning how to get through an event safely might not have planned how they will reopen and stay in operation following a crisis. This might include everything from contracting with a disaster recovery vendor, like the one that helped Bolles reopen after Hurricane Irma, to managing crisis communications with the community and media.
- Developing an extensive **preventative maintenance program** and dedicating appropriate funds can make recovery from a natural disaster quicker and smoother, said Nancy Greene, CFO and COO at Bolles School, which was hit by Hurricane Irma. “Keep trees trimmed, building roofs repaired, gutters clear of debris, drains clear — the list goes on,” she recommends. “Our dedication to ongoing care saved us from larger exposure.”

How did Bolles do it? Well beforehand, the school had secured emergency supplies, including generators, fuel, water, food and satellite phones. Bolles had also notified the electric company that the school enrolled boarders and ensured its campuses were on the priority grid list for recovery, following critical care facilities. And the school had contracted a storm recovery company that could supply replacement classrooms, additional generators and other supplies as their need became apparent.

Bolles cancelled classes the Thursday and Friday before the storm, and everyone on faculty and staff helped prepare by moving items away from windows and off floors, securing outside furniture or moving it inside, and cleaning gutters and drains.

When Irma arrived, Greene was quick to draw on all the resources at the school’s disposal. “The storm had not even left the area yet, and I had called our insurance company to let them know what damage we already saw,” Greene reported. And the day after Irma abated, the storm recovery

Parents “aren’t just asking, ‘Can you get my child into Harvard?’ Now it’s also ‘Can you keep my child safe?’ Schools have to have a better answer than, ‘Nothing has ever happened here before.’”

**—Peter Crabbe
Chameleon Associates**

company arrived with teams and equipment and power supply while Greene and the adjuster walked the campuses.

More lead time than usual helped Bolles’ administrators prepare, but a well-developed emergency plan and well-practiced protocols were essential to getting the school back up and running so quickly. “These measures helped us minimize our loss extensively,” said Greene.

While each school’s crisis management plan should be specific to its context, independent schools can learn plenty

from their peers. Nine out of 10 school administrators have communicated with parents about a school safety emergency, but only three in five say their ability to handle safety threats is “somewhat strong” or “strong,” according to a 2014 SchoolDude survey. After three major hurricanes from Texas to Florida and wildfires in both northern and southern California, insurance claims from natural disasters in 2017 are now the costliest on record. Schools need to be prepared for the worst.

Furthermore, well-honed safety protocols may now be a factor in a family’s decision to enroll. “In the past, I saw this more at Jewish schools, where there is an expectation to do emergency drills often and in a comprehensive way,” said Peter Crabbe, senior consultant and trainer at Chameleon Associates, a security consulting company. “If you weren’t doing something, parents would ask, why aren’t you?” But recently Crabbe has seen “a fundamental change in a broader range of parents who come to an independent school,” he said. “They aren’t just asking, ‘Can you get my child into Harvard?’ anymore. Now it’s also, ‘Can you keep my child safe?’ Schools have to have a better answer than, ‘Nothing has ever happened here before.’”

STAYING CURRENT: STAFF TRAINING

Rather than invest in security devices, Crabbe recommends extensive training: “The human factor drives the greater percentage of success — who is running the ship and the people around it.” Some ideas:

- **Tabletop exercises:** Key players in campus security read through an emergency scenario and discuss how they would respond. Cheryl McDowell, vice president at the insurance broker Bolton & Company, said these exercises “give staff an opportunity to make mistakes and correct them before an actual event occurs.” Crabbe noted that tabletop exercises are also a cost-effective way to prepare: “You can go further and further into the emergency, repeatedly asking, ‘Now what would you do? Who would be in charge of this? What would you say here?’” The exercises can be expanded too: Ken Wilkins, vice president for business and finance at Roseman University in Las Vegas, who previously served as a business officer at three independent schools, contracts a security company to lead tabletop exercises on

campus every year. Sixty staff members participate in an all-day event, which also features a speaker from law enforcement. The day not only helps staff prepare for a crisis, but also “really helps bring us together and build relationships,” Wilkins said. “I couldn’t recommend it more.”

• **Risk management committees:**

For instance, a board-level committee to track big-picture issues and a staff-level committee to address day-to-day concerns and action items. Regular meetings are “the best way to keep a plan updated,” said McDowell. Greene said the risk management committee at Bolles reviews its plans every year. “We are constantly looking for best practices and what we can learn from others,” she said. “We are integrally involved with our insurance program and ensure we have an understanding of what they will and will not cover.” Bolles conducts appraisals every five years and external reviews for campus safety and security issues every year.

• **“Red teams”:** In this practice, security personnel from an external company are trained to bluff their way onto campus



Officers perform a lock-down drill at de Toledo High School in West Hills, California.

and challenge campus security. “I’ve had campus security officers deal with someone they were thinking was a red team, but they weren’t,” said Crabbe. Repeated practice made the real response run like clockwork.

• **Employee handbook:** Monitor how quickly employees sign it. Liz LeBlanc, chief financial officer at St. Mary’s Episcopal Day School in Tampa, Florida, takes note if a staff member returns an

acknowledgement signature minutes after receiving the handbook. She asks the employee’s supervisor to address the issue because the supervisor has a stronger relationship with the new employee. “It’s not just checking a box,” LeBlanc said. “It’s children’s lives. The nice thing is that with teachers, this really resonates. They’re the ones who will be uncomfortable if they haven’t read the handbook.”



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KEEPING IT REAL: CAMPUS TRAINING

For those who are reluctant to read through emergency manuals and protocols, practice is essential. Gone are the days when an occasional fire drill sufficed to prepare staff and students for a campus crisis. A silver lining of school tragedies in recent years is that both teachers and students take drills seriously. “In the past, kids took fire drills as a break, but now in the back of everyone’s mind is that something really could happen,” noted Gary Whitwell, head of school at Trinity School of Texas in Longview, Texas.

Most independent schools undertake multiple types of drills: lockdown, active shooter, tornadoes or earthquakes, as the region dictates. Three ways to make them more realistic and beneficial:

- **Use campus as a base for training:**

Crabbe urges schools to allow local law enforcement, such as SWAT teams, police officers and fire fighters, to run drills on campus. David Marcus, business manager at de Toledo High School in West Hills, California, brings in not only different law enforcement agencies to mimic an

“In the past, kids took fire drills as a break, but now in the back of everyone’s mind is that something really could happen.”

**—Gary Whitwell
Trinity School of Texas**

emergency, but also administrators from area schools to observe the drills and contribute an outside perspective. The entire school community — staff, students and visitors — debriefs in the gymnasium, where everyone is encouraged to express concerns, and then a risk committee convenes to determine action items. Drilling this way requires significant coordination, but people are grateful, by and large, according to Crabbe. “de Toledo benefits the most. If anything real happens, these guys [law enforcement] know the lay of the land, what’s around every corner and how to move through the building.” (See Strategies, page 8, for Marcus on training school security officers.)

In December 2017, Cate School, a grades 9–12 boarding/day school in Carpinteria, California, saw real benefits to allowing firefighters to use its campus as a base for fighting backcountry fires. (See “Town and Gown and Common Ground,” page 24.) Fires in Santa Barbara County grew rapidly and eventually encircled the campus. This had never happened in the school’s 100 years of existence. Yet Cate was safer than most places in the immediate area, with additional water lines and helicopter landing pads installed by the firefighters for training operations. Coincidentally, Cate was in the process of developing an emergency evacuation plan as required to renew the school’s conditional use permit. That plan was put into place before the school had a chance to practice a complete evacuation drill, but within 45 minutes of deciding to evacuate, Sandi Pierce, the school’s assistant head for finance and operations, had found safe homes for all 250 students.

- **Change up drills:** Brandon Perry, director of facilities services at Phoenix Country Day School, puts up signs by certain exits

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Photo courtesy of de Toledo High School.

that state, “Fire here — cannot exit.” He also runs combination drills, tying together a campus evacuation drill with a fire drill, for example. Trinity School of Texas runs drills between classes, when students are outside and not in classrooms. At St. Mary’s in Tampa, LeBlanc added drills during

after-school programming and makes sure after-school program administrators understand safety and security procedures.

- **Make time to debrief:** “We always learn something from a drill,” said Steve Csotty, human resource generalist of Community School of Naples in Naples, Florida. CSN

classrooms are built in pods of four, for example, and when during one drill a classroom was empty, it became clear that teachers needed to secure not only their own classrooms but ensure the others in the pod were secure too.

BETTER ACCESS TO INFORMATION: IMPROVED APPS

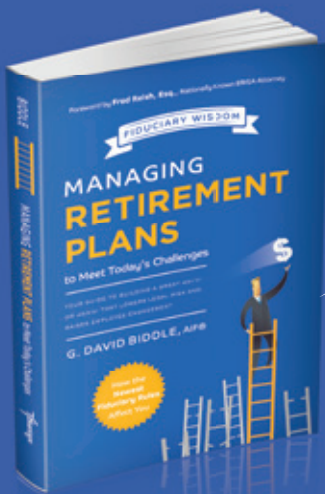
Most schools use some kind of software to notify staff, faculty, students and parents of campus emergencies, but the most up-to-date programs enable schools to track the whereabouts and safety of campus constituents in real time and access critical information quickly.

• **Emergency communication apps:**

These programs message to campus constituents in times of emergency, distinct from the usual campus communication system. Roseman University’s Wilkins has seen emergency communication evolve from emails, which “students now rarely read,” to social media postings, which “students are looking at all the time,” to simultaneous text, voice and email messages sent

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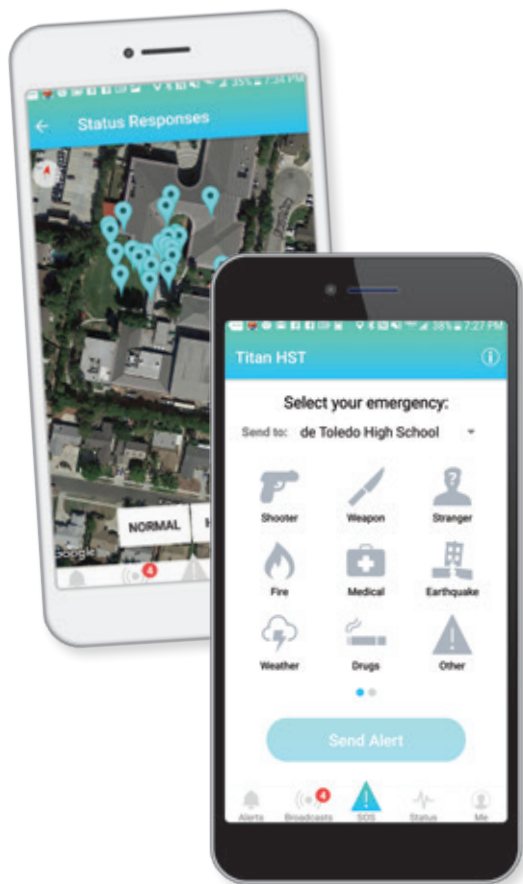


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via interactive app. The last helped the health sciences college respond nimbly in the aftermath of the nearby Mandalay Bay shooting. Roseman uses Everbridge, which not only sends constituents information but asks them to indicate whether they are safe or need assistance. Administrators were able to map everyone across three campuses and around the city, and then quickly send 200 faculty and mature nursing and pharmacy students to local hospitals overwhelmed by patients.

de Toledo High School uses Titan HST, which, like Everbridge, enables recipients to tell administrators if they are safe or not and reports on their location. The school can send different messages to different subgroups and select which types of messages it wants to send (text, voice, email or a combination). “All this is done extremely quickly anywhere you have access to a computer or smartphone,” said Marcus. Another benefit: the app reads the school’s database every night



de Toledo High School uses the Titan HST app during a campus crisis to send messages and to track the location of constituents and collect information about their safety.



Photo courtesy of de Toledo High School.

and automatically updates contact information that has changed. Because this kind of app requires cellular service, a contingency plan is necessary.

- **Handbook apps:** These transfer emergency protocols from print to digital. de Toledo uses SchoolDude’s Crisis Manager. “Its purpose is to get protocols off the bookshelf, out of the binder and into more people’s hands,” said Marcus. The digital format also provides links to resources, forms, checklists and emergency numbers. Perhaps best of all, he said, updates to protocols are easily and cost-effectively distributed.

POOLING RESOURCES, BUILDING COMMUNITY

One of the best ways to prepare for and recover from a school emergency is to build a strong community, both on campus and outside it.

- **School culture:** Encouraging participation of and ownership by the entire school community helps St. Mary’s Episcopal Day strengthen its preparedness, said LeBlanc. “It’s not just one person in charge of crisis management,” she said. “We are constantly in dialogue and unafraid to ask a question that might step on someone else’s toes. In our school culture, people feel not like they’re being scolded but rather collaborative.”
- **Local government agencies:** Communicating with police, fire and other local departments pays dividends. If, for example, a pipeline ruptured

and Trinity School of Texas needed to evacuate, the city government would send public buses, explained Whitwell.

- **Regional connections:** Southern California schools threatened by the December wildfires learned from their northern counterparts that had been through wildfires just two months before. Cal-ISBOA (the California Independent Schools Business Officers Association) convened webinars for independent schools nearly every day and sometimes twice a day to connect business officers with each other and school safety experts. The online meetings helped schools assess dangers, decide to remain open or close, and determine how to make campuses safe upon return. The webinars also eased the isolation of administrators at schools that had closed and offered a platform to share concerns. **N**

Nancy Greene serves on the NBOA Board of Directors.



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