

Family Reunification Guide

Table of Contents

Introduction, Definitions, and Acronyms 3
Family Reunification Annex 4
Hotwash/Area of Improvements 9
Family Reunifications Policy 10

This document will explain the function of important components of developing a Family Reunification policy, annex, and making improvements for an Emergency Operation Plan for PreK-12 schools in Ohio. The use of EOP acronym will be used throughout this document for Emergency Operation Plan.

Introduction:

Reunifying students with their parents/guardians after an emergency are a top priority for schools. Circumstances may occur that require parents/guardians to pick up their students in a controlled release environment. This process is called reunification and may be necessary due to weather, power outages, or other hazards that occur at a school that prevents a normal dismissal. The reunification may occur at other locations other than the school the student attends. This document will give details of items found in a family reunification policy and annex.

Functional annexes are plans organized around the performance of a broad task. Each annex focuses on one of the critical emergency functions that the jurisdiction will perform in response to an emergency or incident.

Family Reunification policies are guidelines that have been adapted by the school, shared with stakeholders, and parents/guardians prior to a family reunification incident.

Acronyms

Emergency Management Agency (EMA)

Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

Emergency Operation Plan (EOP)

Family Reunification Annex

The Ohio School Safety Centers Sample Emergency Operation Plan document has a Family Reunification Annex. The Family Reunification can be found on page 24 of the sample plan.

Part #1 of the annex has the title "Family Renunciation" and a brief definition.

Family Reunification

Family Reunification is the process of reuniting students and parents/guardians. This process includes a formal transfer of custody, involving an identification verification of the parent/guardian prior to the release of a student.

Part #2 of the annex has the most common applicable hazards that family reunification could be used for during an incident. This list could be adjusted based off the individual schools need. An example could be dam failure being removed because the school is not near a dam.

Applicable to Below Hazards

Active Shooter
Bomb Threat
Bus Accident
Chemical Accident
Civil Disturbance
Dam Failure
Earthquake
Explosion
Fire
Flood
Gas Leak/Outage
Hostage
Nuclear Incident
Power Outage
Severe Storm/Tornado
Terrorism
Water Outage/Restriction
Winter Storm/Ice Storm

Part #3 of the annex is the family reunification procedure. This includes getting information from a student's parents/guardians regarding custody rights at the beginning of each school year for reunification purposes. It is important to obtain this information early, before an emergency. In the sample EOP, the areas highlighted in yellow will be filled in for the individual school's information. This includes the primary reunification site, street address, and the direction to the site from the school. The three distinct areas needing established by each school include (1) student staging, (2) identification verification, and (3) student pickup. Remember the three areas need to be out of sight from each other to ensure students can be accounted for and signed out by their verified parent/guardian.

Family Reunification Procedures

Before an Emergency

Student records should include custody information for emergency reunification purposes. This should be provided by a parent/guardian with custody rights at the beginning of each school year. Additional first responder and county EMA resources are likely to be needed to manage media, security, first responder resource management, access control, etc.; and should be planned for in county EMA plans.

Primary Reunification Site

Primary Site: [Insert site name]
Street address: [Insert street address]
Directions to the site: [provide directions, as appropriate]

Establish three (3) distinct areas that are not within sight of each other:

- Student staging- place where uninjured students are held until a parent/guardian pick them up. Counseling services should be available in a separate, private area. The structure of the environment should be adjusted to meet the students' needs
- Identification verification- outside of view of the student staging area and the public view. Records of emergency information must be available at this location for verification purposes.
- Student pickup- location where student/parent reunification occurs and family is released.

This information included in the sample EOP is the minimum needed. Additional procedures can be added based off the school's individual need.

Things to consider when selecting a reunification site:

- Where is the reunification site compared to the school? Will there be enough distance from the emergency (i.e., fire, active shooter, bomb threat)?
- How will communication be affected at the reunification site? Can I still communicate with the teachers and staff? Can I communicate with first responders? Can I communicate with parents/guardians?
- Will there be enough ingress and egress for school transportation, parent/guardian pick up, first responders? How will traffic be affected in the area? Will a transportation and traffic control plan need to be created?
- How can the reunification site be accommodated for the access and functional needs population? For special need students?

Part #4 of the annex will be the way identification takes place during an emergency and how parents/guardians will be notified.

During Emergency

Identify injured and deceased and where they have been transported. Coordinate notifications with law enforcement and/or medical personnel.

- Notify, in-person, parents/guardians of fatalities
- Notify, in-person, parents/guardians of injured
- Notify, via automated message, all parents. The message should state that if they have not received a personal message that their child is safe. Do not send message until **ALL** parents of injured/deceased are notified.

Provide information about reunification process

- Location
- Traffic pattern for entrance
- Required identification documents
- What parent should do if sending an alternate to pick up their child

Things to consider when notifying and communicating with parents/guardians:

- Have pre-planned and prepared templates that can be edited and used to send to parents/guardians.
- Provide clear and precise directions and instructions.
- Ensure the message is accurate before sending. It is important the information is clear and direct and able to be understood during an emergency.

Example Message Template – Student Pick Up

"The SCHOOL has been evacuated. Students can be picked up at LOCATION at TIME. You must bring a photo ID to pick up your student(s). Enter from DIRECTIONS."

Please review the "Family Reunification Best Practices" guide for other ideas.

Part #5 of the annex is the process of reunification. This is the actual process of verifying parent/guardian identities and signing out students into their custody.

Process of Reunification

Get the students to the site (see Functional Content Area: Evacuation)

- Separate students from parent/guardian verification area
- Have student records, relating to emergency release of students, readily available
- Verify parent identification
- Send parent/guardian to a private area away from public eye to pick up their student. Students may only be released to parents/guardians who have custody rights.
- Instruct student to report to parent/guardian pick-up area.
- Students that cannot be picked-up will be released to law enforcement.

Consider the following:

Family Reunification Card

- How will the accurate information of custodial information be accessed and organized at the reunification site?
- How will parents/guardians be verified to pick up their student? What will that process look like?

Student Rosters

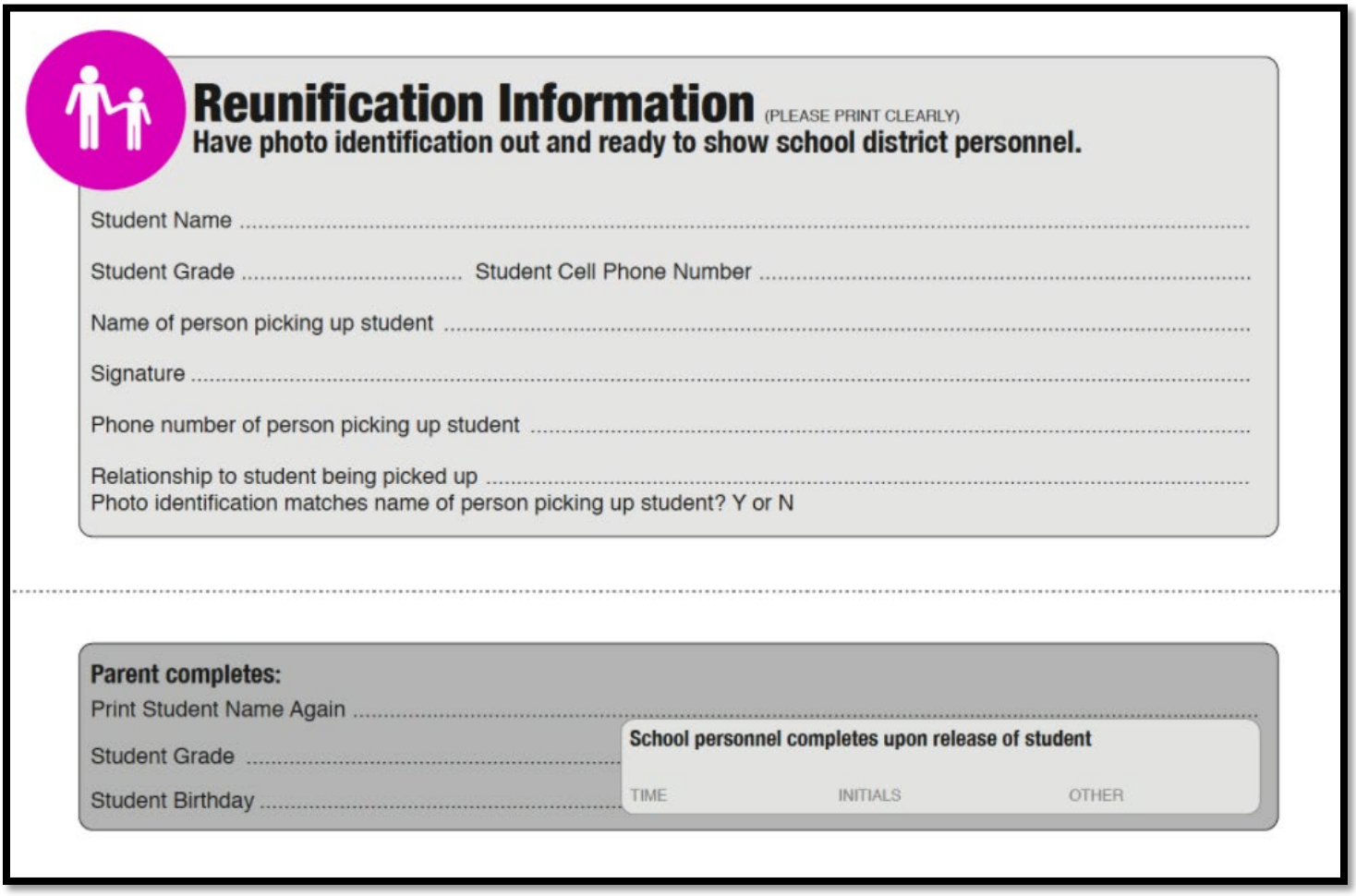
- Ensure accuracy of who was present at the school prior to evacuation.
- Obtain attendance at the reunification site.
- Have procedures for locating missing
- Have procedures for tracking injured students.

Reunification Cards

- Consider having perforated cards or carbon copy for duplicate information to ensure the school retains a record of student pick up information.
- Schools should have reunification cards even if they use a computer system to match parents to students. In cases of power outages or other incidents the computer system might not be available.

Reunification Cards should include information containing: student name, grade, person picking up student and their relationship to student, phone numbers, and students date of birth.

Example Reunification Card- from I love you guys foundation. To download free resources, click here.



Reunification Information (PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY)
Have photo identification out and ready to show school district personnel.

Student Name .....

Student Grade ..... Student Cell Phone Number .....

Name of person picking up student .....

Signature .....

Phone number of person picking up student .....

Relationship to student being picked up .....
Photo identification matches name of person picking up student? Y or N

Parent completes:

Print Student Name Again .....

Student Grade .....

Student Birthday .....

School personnel completes upon release of student

TIME INITIALS OTHER

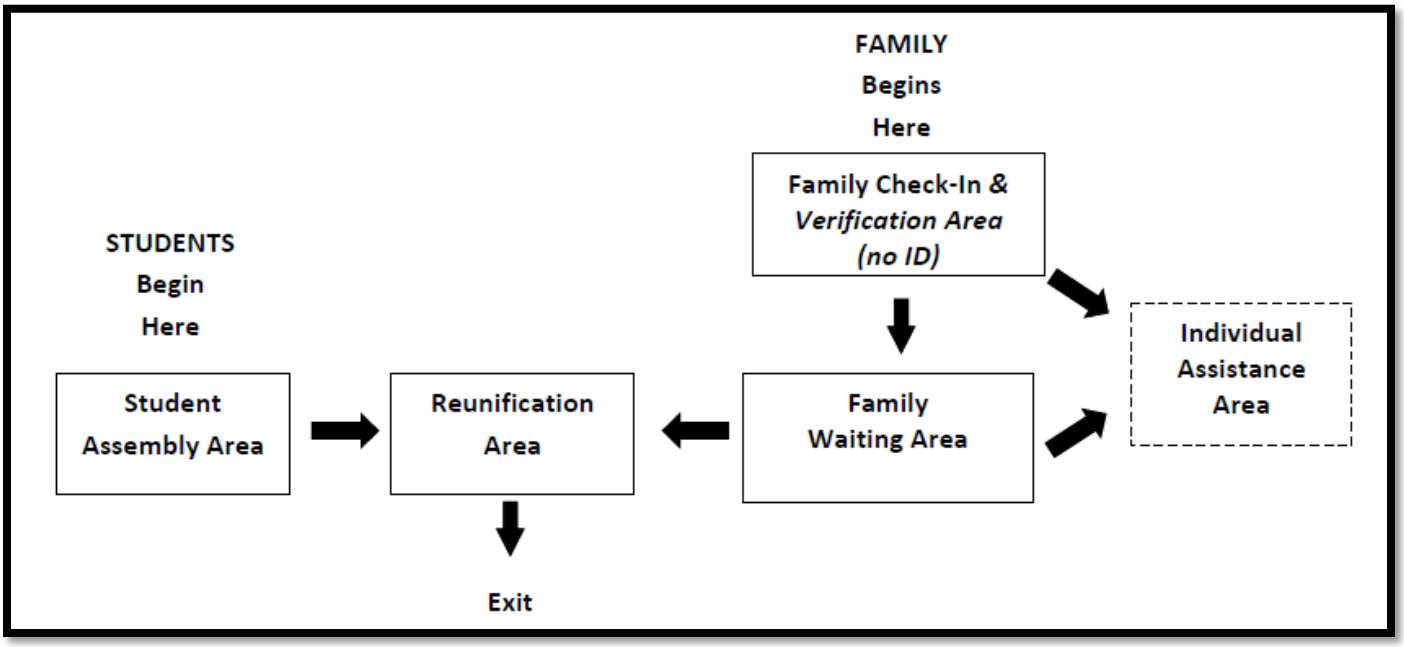
Crisis Intervention / Mental Health

- School counseling staff and trained crisis counselors should be present for students, staff, and parents/guardians at the reunification site and after the incident.
- Have prepared hand-outs with crisis help info to pass out.
- Have prepared and template messaging in case of injured, missing, deceased students and staff.

Release Process

- Students should be gathered "out of sight" from parents/guardians in an organized fashion.
- Parent should arrive separate from Parent & Student departure.
- Prepare a procedure for notifying parents/guardians of injured, missing, deceased students. This should be in a quiet, private area with counseling staff available.

Release Process Flow Chart Example



Please review the "Family Reunification Best Practices" guide for other ideas.

Hotwash/Areas for Improvement:

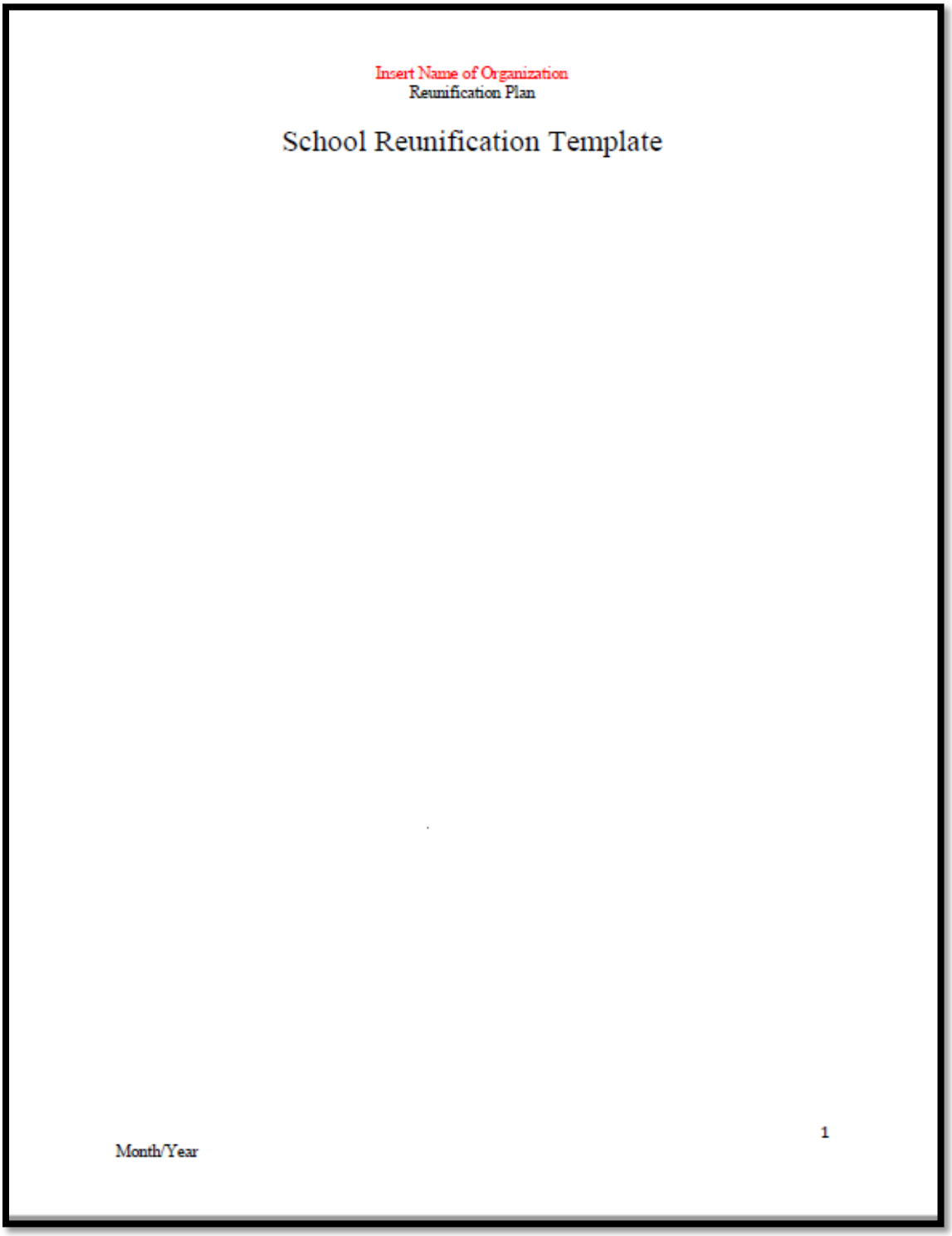
After the incident has ended (usually within a month), consider having a hotwash discussion with staff members, first responders, trusted parents, selected students, etc. who were involved with the reunification process. This is important as it will allow for discussion and documentation on items that went well, that could be improved, changes, or adjusted to help future reunification processes.

You can also aide in this discovery by conducting exercises (Emergency Management Tests) on the family reunification process.

Family Reunification Policy

The Ohio School Safety Center (OSSC) has a sample Family Reunification Policy on the OSSC website. It was developed in cooperation with by the Union County Emergency Management Agency. It can be easily adapted to fit the needs of a school.

Part #1 of the family reunification policy is the title page. This is where a school would place their school's name and date when the plan was approved.



Insert Name of Organization
Reunification Plan

School Reunification Template

Month/Year

1

Part # 2 of the family reunification policy gives instructions of the red text and includes **Section I.** Purpose. The red text throughout the document indicates where school specific language is needed

**All text in red provides information, guidance, or alerts to necessary insertions. Please delete this text after reading and taking the requested actions. Text not in red should be edited to meet needs or individual writing style.

This Family Reunification Plan Template is simply a tool to introduce organizations to planning concepts in order to create a Family Reunification Plan. Organizations should use what fits their needs.

I. Purpose

This plan provides guidance and direction to the Insert Name of Organization and its staff to create an effective and efficient parent/guardian and student reunification process in the event of a natural disaster, man-made emergency or other large-scale traumatic incident which creates the need for reunification.

Part # 3 of the family reunification policy is **section II** Situation and Scope. This gives an explanation of the situation and scope.

II. Situation and Scope

A. Situation

A process that would allow for reconnecting displaced or separated family members. Family Reunification Centers are used when, for a variety of reasons, schools need to relocate their students to another facility and then accommodate or orchestrate the releasing of children to their parents, guardians, or representatives.

Events that may prompt the need for a family reunification center include, but are not limited to, storms, active aggressor events, improvised explosive events, natural gas leaks, partial building collapses, law enforcement activity or issues within close proximity to the school.

A family reunification center needs to be able to offer the following;

- A process for receiving children and tracking their release
- Access to school district records both manually and remotely
- A process for receiving adults and appropriately matching them to a child that they have the right to retrieve
- A facility that can provide for the basic needs of waiting adults and children, ample parking areas, and adequate safety and security.
- Depending on the event, the inclusion of a family support unit

B. Scope

This plan applies to insert name of Organization and all departments and staff. Include any other parts of your organization. This plan applies to reunification events when an emergency occurs that demands that students are evacuated from their school to a secondary location and must be physically returned to their parents/guardians. Insert other instances when this plan may be used.

Part #4 of the reunification policy is **section III** capability assessment**.** This gives detailed information on current school/district/community capabilities in regards to communication, transportation resources, reunification sites, and school resource officer (SRO) information.

III. Capability Assessment

Insert information concerning communication abilities/public information/parent education/infrastructure safety/etc.

Insert information concerning transportation resources.

Insert information concerning reunification sites already picked, resources and how to access the site.

Insert information concerning SROs and their abilities and resources

Part #5 of the reunification policy is **section IV** Direction and Control. This section discusses the importance of common language and the importance of the Incident Command Structure during emergency response. You can learned the basics by taking FEMA Independent Study courses 100 and 700.

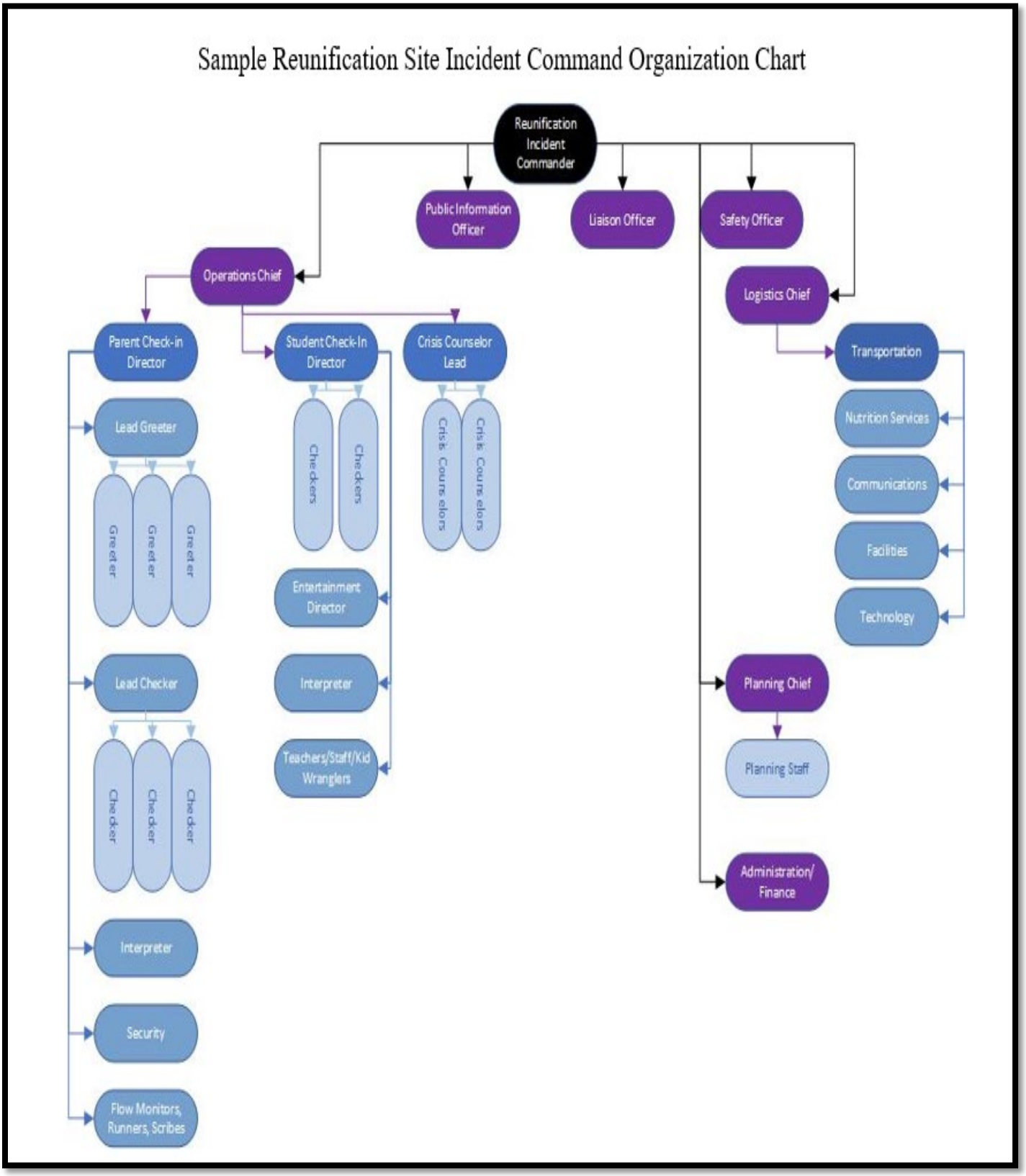
IV. Direction and Control

Whether it is a man-made or a natural crisis, law enforcement, fire and emergency medical teams will be involved in the release process. Learning to understand and "speak their language" as well as being familiar with their procedures is imperative to a successful outcome. With that in mind district/school safety teams and other staff who will be interacting with first responders should consider taking classes in the Incident Command System (ICS), if they have not already done so. IS 100.c and IS 700.b are the basic minimum courses that should be taken.

Please consider that if teachers are to be used as command staff, they usually have classroom assignments and responsibilities that might prevent them from acting in a primary ICS role, unless someone else takes over their classroom duties, which may be unmanageable. Consequently, ICS is typically populated by administrative staff, district staff, or mutual aid staff.

As an incident evolves, school officials may become part of a unified command with first responders (the incident commander from the school incident command may become part of the first responder's incident command structure)

Part # 6 is the sample reunification site incident command organization cart. One will need to be developed for the specific needs and structure of your school. It is important to have some staff predesignated in these roles to allow for role familiarity before a reunification event occurs. Creating job aids for each role can also be helpful.



A. Incident Command Staff

1. Reunification Incident Commander (IC) – Coordinates priorities, objectives, strategies and tactics for an accountable, easy reunification of students with parents. In charge of implementing the plan at the reunification site.
2. Public Information Officer (PIO) – May or may not be at the reunification site. Lead PIO for the incident controls all public information for the incident. PIO at the site is in charge of messaging in and out of the site. Should work with Lead PIO if different than the individual at the site.
3. Safety Officer – Observes the site and remedies safety concerns immediately
4. Liaison Officer – Communicates between school and other agencies at the site.
5. Operations Chief – Establishes and manages the operational staff. Operations staff includes Greeters, Parent and Student check-in and assembly, Interpreters, Crisis Counselors, Reunification Desk, flow monitors, etc.
6. Planning Chief – Establishes and manages the planning staff. Planners would be planning for contingencies (with the hospital, with Job and Family Services, with Red Cross, etc.)
7. Finance/Administration Chief – Establishes and manages the administrative and finance staff, this may not be necessary depending on the size of the incident. This may not be handled on site depending on the size of the incident.
8. Logistics Chief – Establishes and manages the logistics staff – Logistics staff includes transportation, nutrition, communications, facilities, technology, etc.
9. Scribe (Optional) –Used to record all events and timelines for future plan improvement.

Part #7 of the reunification policy is **section V** Concept of Operations. The Concept of Operations section explains in broad terms the intent of the policy. The Concept of Operations presents a clear picture of the sequence and scope of the planned emergency response, what should happen, when, and at whose direction.

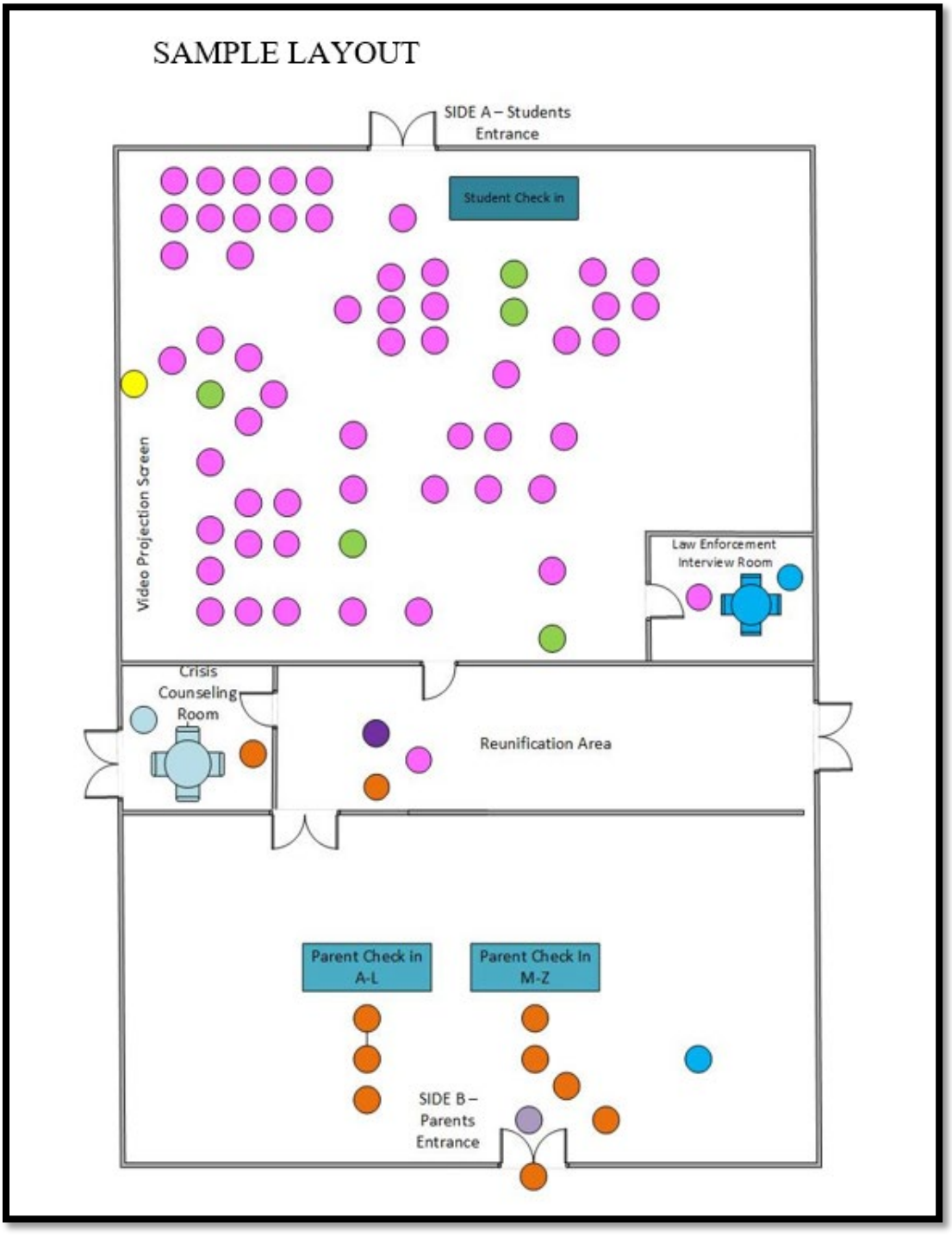
V. Concept of Operations

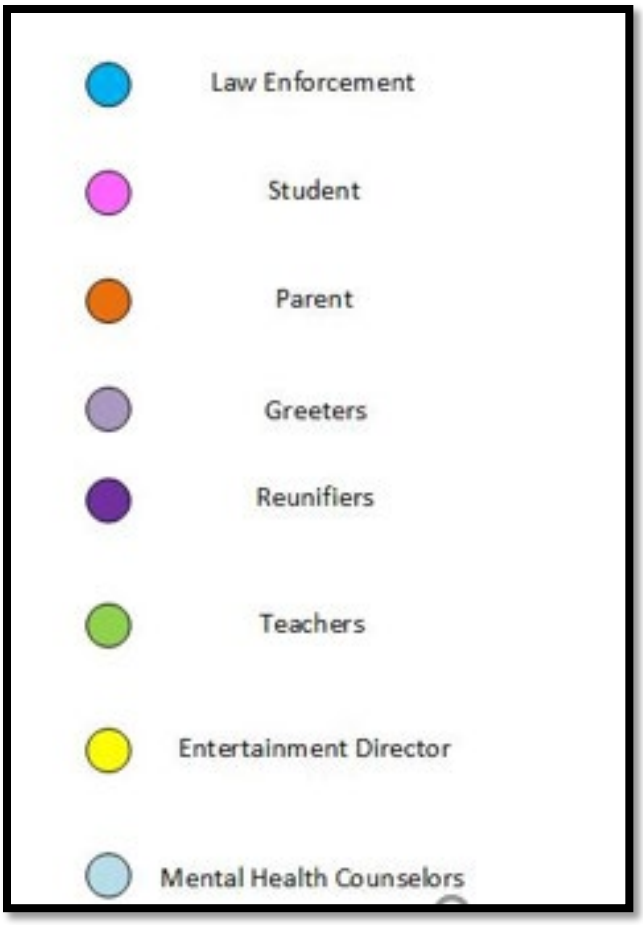
A controlled release reunification typically occurs because of a crisis or emergency. Consequently, not just students but parents/guardians are trying to function at extraordinary stress levels. Staff and first responders are also feeling the strain. By having a defined process with signage, Emergency Medical cards, branding, procedures and protocols, the school presents an organized, calm face to all involved. Fear or uncertainty often results from the unknown. By adopting, communicating and practicing a "known" procedure, the school removes some of the uncertainty. As a result, better decisions occur leading to successful reunification. It is recommended that reunification staff at the site are 1 reunification staff per 100 students + 5 additional staff. (This does not include the staff that come with the students and are with the students in the assembly area)

Sample Steps of the Process

1. Students are unloaded at side A of the building. Security/traffic control should be present at student drop-off to prevent parents from going directly to this area.
2. Parents will arrive at side B of the building – a mass notification has been sent out that an evacuation has occurred, and parents are to bring ID to pick up their children at reunification location.
3. Students have been accounted for and all but 2 are accounted for (those two were injured and are on the way to the hospital per ambulance) One parent has been notified the other parent has not been reached.
4. Students assemble in the Student assembly area and are watching Finding Nemo
5. Parents have begun arriving.
6. Parents go through check in line where ID is compared to Emergency Medical Cards/System. IDs are matched. If name is not on EMC then child is not handed over. Security should be present in the area.
7. Insert the process if Parent does not have an ID.
8. Insert the process if Parent does not have Guardianship.
9. Parent is then escorted to a reunification room. A runner brings the student to the parent. Child can be released to the custody of Law Enforcement for further action.
10. Parent(s) of injured child arrives at reunification center to pick up child. When he/she checks in they are escorted to a Counseling room where they are told their child is injured and asked if they are is okay to drive to the hospital. If needed, Staff arrange a ride to the hospital.
11. All other children are picked up by their parents or guardian.
12. If a child was not picked up that child would be left with school staff for a period of time and then assisted by children services while attempting to reach parents and family. Insert other instructions for children not picked up.

Part #8 of the reunification policy is the sample layout of the reunification site. This will be site specific based of the area used for reunification. Having a sample layout of the reunification site will allow for quicker set up time. Consider including area cards that contain example set ups, equipment needed, etc. for more efficient set up times. Also include a legend to explain all content on the layout.




Law Enforcement
Student
Parent
Greeters
Reunifiers
Teachers
Entertainment Director
Mental Health Counselors

Part #9 of the family reunification policy is the general job and area descriptions. This section assigns the primary, secondary and optimally tertiary assignments for each of the incident command roles. It is important to not only have an idea of the layout of the reunification site to pre-designate the areas, but also have the staff and volunteer pre-designated for their assigned jobs.

Below are some general job and area descriptions. The plan should have primary, secondary, and optimally tertiary assignments for each of the incident command roles. Please use job titles and not individual names when assigning roles and responsibilities. Teachers should stay with their students in the student assembly area.

A. Set Up/Reunification Go Kit/Resources

1. This team may be made up of other staff positions. They will set up the tables and chairs, signage, and office supplies. This group if at all possible, should arrive prior to the rest of the staff and the students.
2. See Appendix 1 for list of set up resources.

B. Greeters/Explanation of system

1. Greeters – Help organize parent lines, help them fill out any necessary registration materials (Even if registration materials are not necessary giving parents forms to fill out gives them something to do while waiting. This keeps the stress down.) Greeters are there to explain the process of what is going to happen.

C. Parent Check In/Parent Assembly Area

The parent assembly area and the student assembly area should not be able to view each other. Screening or other mechanisms can be used to break line of sight.

1. Parent Check In Director – Establishes and manages the check in process
2. Verification Checkers -- Verifies the Parents IDs and custody rights of parents and guardians. Directs parents to a runner who will take them to the reunification area or to meet with a crisis counselor.
3. Runners – Escorts parents to the reunification or counseling area.

D. Student Check In/Student Assembly Area

The student assembly area and the parent assembly area should not be able to view each other. Screening or other mechanisms can be used to break line of sight. Teachers should stay with their students on the buses and in the student assembly area.

1. Student Assembly Director – Establishes and manages the student assembly area. This person also works closely with the Reunification Desk Director once all the children in the assembly are have been accounted for.
2. Entertainment Director -- deploying a video projector and screen can reduce student stress.
3. Teachers and Staff – "kid wranglers" arrive with the students and remain in the student assembly area to manage the students. Depending on the circumstances of the emergency, more staff may need to be assigned to this posting.
4. Runners – Escort children to the reunification area

E. Law Enforcement Interview Area

Depending on the type of incident there may need to be time allowed for certain students and/or their parents to be interviewed at the reunification site prior to being allowed to leave. A quiet, private area needs to be set aside for this if at all possible, so that interviews do not have to be completed at another location. But these should only be completed if they can be done on location in private.

F. Reunification Area

1. Reunification Desk Director/Reunifiers – Matches accounted for students with checked in parents.

G. Crisis Counseling Area

1. Mental Health counselors – To assist with next steps for parents whose students are deceased, injured or unaccounted for. Counselors are also needed to assist with staff who are overcome.

H. Media Staging Area – The media will be present. An area needs to be made available for them. No matter how hard you try you will not keep them away from the scene.

I. Miscellaneous Staff

1. Scribes – to assist incident command positions, document events, and others where documentation is needed
2. Nutrition services – depending on the length of the emergency, snacks and water may be necessary.
3. Leads and Assts. – Depending on span of control, additional staff may be necessary.
4. Flow Monitors – Ensure that the flow of people keeps moving, no bottlenecks. One step below security.
5. Communications Lead – Responsible for handing our radios when necessary, controlling radio channels (if multiple channels are necessary), handing out batteries and charges batteries as that becomes necessary.
6. Interpreters – necessary to communicate with parents that would need assistance communicating (this includes foreign language, as well as speech and visual interpreters)
7. Facilities Director – Coordinate any building needs – Restroom facilities, climate control, lights, etc.

Part #10 of the family reunification policy is **section VI** Assignment of Roles and Responsibilities. This includes name of school district, specific staff roles, mental health organizations, law enforcement agencies, fire, EMS, EMA, etc.

Some of the role assignments for the reunification site could include front desk greeters, front desk reporting point contact, front desk supervisor, holding area staff, outside greeter, release point staff, and runners. For more information on roles, definitions, and responsibilities click here.

VI. Assignment of Roles and Responsibilities

A. Name of School District

1.

2.

3.

B. Insert Mental Health Organization

1. Mental Health Org. will provide mental health counselors to the reunification site
2. Mental Health Org. will provide mental health counselors to the hospital
3. Mental Health Org will provide to additional sites?

C. Law Enforcement Agencies

1. Law enforcement with jurisdiction and others through mutual aid to provide security at the reunification site
2. Law enforcement to provide traffic control

D. Fire/EMS Departments

1. Emergency Medical response as necessary at the reunification site

E. Emergency Management Agency

1. EMA will provide volunteers if available for traffic control
2. EMA will provide necessary available resources when needed, if EMA does not have resources locally, EMA director or designee will contact Ohio EMA to request state or federal resources.

Part #11 of the family reunification policy is **section VII** Administration and Finance. This would inform on the availability of quick approval of expenses that might occur and the administration to handle any injury, lost or damaged items. The administration section is optional.

VII. Administration and Finance

A. Finance

The finance section would be able to approve quickly any necessary expenses that might occur.

B. Administration

District Administration may also wish to have a representative there in order to handle any claims immediately for injuries, lost or damaged items. This is optional and may not be necessary.

Pat #12 of the family reunification policy is **section VIII** Training and Exercise. It is important to regular exercise or test policies. This ensures the information in the policy is current and actually works for the school's needs. Creating an exercise schedule of when this policy is evaluated could be helpful and using the building block approach of tabletops, functional, and full-scale exercises allow different aspects of the policy to be tested and evaluated.

VIII. Training and Exercise

School staff and first responders together regularly through tabletops, functional and full-scale exercises. All staff and personnel are trained on their role in this plan and exercise the plan every other year in one of the above-mentioned exercise formats.

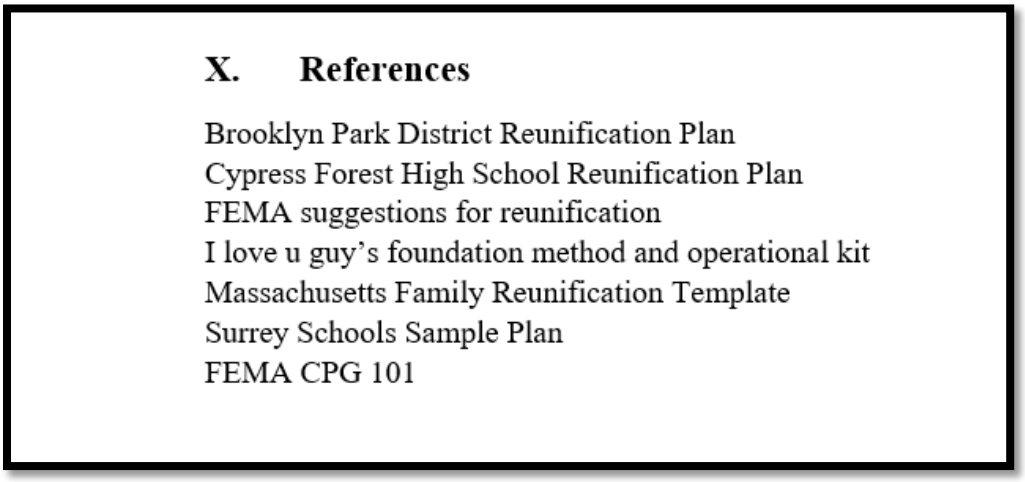
Part #13 of the family reunification policy is **section IX** Plan Development and Maintenance. This section outlines who is responsible for creating and maintaining the policy, including updates to the school, staff, or after gaps are identified in exercises or real-world events.

IX. Plan Development and Maintenance

Insert School District is responsible for the development, review and updating of this reunification plan. Revisions will be made when deficiencies are identified through exercises, actual occurrences or a change in recommended practices as recommended by district administration, staff, or partner agencies and agreed to by the planning committee.

The School District will make any changes then publish and distribute the plan to all appropriate partner organizations.

Part #14 of the family reunification policy is **section X** References. This will be a section to place any references of material utilized to make the family reunification policy. This is helpful when updates to the policy are needed.



X. References

Brooklyn Park District Reunification Plan
Cypress Forest High School Reunification Plan
FEMA suggestions for reunification
I love u guy's foundation method and operational kit
Massachusetts Family Reunification Template
Surrey Schools Sample Plan
FEMA CPG 101

Part #15 of the family reunification policy is **Appendix 1: Supplies**. This gives the items and count of each item needed in the event the family reunification policy is activated. It is important to have thought through what supplies are needed for the family reunification process. Have the pre-identified items in an easy to grab location at the school or stored at the reunification site.

Appendix 1: Supplies

Item	Count	Responsibility Assigned	Storage Location
Parent Check In Sign	1		
Bungee cords	12		
Folding Tables	2		
Folding Chairs	6		
Pens	24		
Directional Signs	10		
Bull Horn	1		
Flashlights	8		
Safety Vests	24		
Alphabet signage A-Z	1		
Grade Signage	1		
Duct Tape	2		
Gaffer/Painters Tape	2		
Tissues	4		
Insert other resources			
Emergency Contact Forms/other vital records			
Plastic Bins	# to hold resources		
First Aid Kit			
Student Medication			