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Virginia Early Childhood Policy Center

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## **Are Lockdown Drills in Virginia's Early Childhood Classrooms the Only Answer to School Safety? Policy, Recommendations, and What Research Supports**

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*January 2020*

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# Are Lockdown Drills in Virginia's Early Childhood Classrooms the Only Answer to School Safety?

## Policy, Recommendations, and What Research Supports

Virginia, like many states, is not immune to the horror of mass shootings occurring on school sites with two tragic occurrences at the Appalachian School of Law in 2002 and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 2007. While these occurrences took place on higher education campuses, this report will explore the implications of mass shootings and associated safety practices for Virginia's early childhood age children. Across elementary and secondary schools throughout the United States, the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* reports that there have been 37 active shooter incidents in elementary and secondary schools in the United States between 2000 and 2017.<sup>1</sup> These events are highly publicized and, in an effort to respond to the public safety concerns, state policy makers and school-level personnel have implemented school-based safety procedures that lack empirical support.<sup>2 3 4 5</sup> According to data reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, school sites have one of the lowest homicide rates compared to other social settings.<sup>6</sup> Active shooter events occurring on school sites incidents are a rarity and represent a small rate of school-based violence.<sup>7 8</sup>

### *School Sites and Homicide Rates*

School sites have one of the lowest homicide rates when compared to other social settings - homicides are 10 times more likely to occur in restaurants and 200 times more likely in residences. For every one homicide in a school, there are 1,600 homicides outside of schools.<sup>6</sup>

Following the Columbine, Colorado school shooting in 1999 and, more recently, the school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012, there has been a rise in public elementary, middle, and secondary school sites implementing active-shooter related safety procedures across the nation. At present, there are only eight states and the District of Columbia without mandated state-level requirements for a school safety drill requirement related to school safety and security.<sup>9</sup> Thirty-nine states have specified policies requiring lockdown, active-shooter or similar safety drills while the remaining states have less explicit requirements or direct the decision making to the purview of the local educational agency (LEA).<sup>10</sup> All schools in Virginia have comprehensive all-hazards Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) and state code requires that Virginia's schools conduct lockdown drills in addition to other safety drills during each academic year.

§ Va. Code Ann. § 22.1-137.2 §

**Lockdown Drill**  
(Four Annually – Two lockdown drills shall be conducted within the first twenty days of the school year.)

## Required and Recommended Safety Drills in Virginia

Drill (Required/Recommended)	Policy	Number of Times Annually
<b>Required</b>	<p>Fire/Evacuation Drill</p> <p><i>Code of Virginia</i> § 22.1-137 and the Board of Education's Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia (SOA) (8 VAC 20-131-260) require that every public school conduct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A fire drill at least twice during the first 20 days of school and</li> <li>-At least two additional fire drills during the remainder of the school year.</li> </ul> <p>The Virginia Statewide Fire Prevention Code (SFPC) (Sections 403.5.1, 404.2.1, 404.2.2, 405.1, and 405.2) requires that schools conduct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A fire drill within the first 10 days of school and</li> <li>-At least one fire drill per month.</li> </ul>	<p>To be in compliance with the Code of Virginia, the SFPS, and the SOA, schools must conduct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-An initial fire drill within the first 10 days of the school year,</li> <li>-Another fire drill within the first 20 days of the school year, and</li> <li>-At least one fire drill per month for the remainder of the school year.</li> </ul>
	<p>Intruder/Lockdown Drill</p> <p><i>Code of Virginia</i> § 22.1-137.2. Lock-down drills</p> <p>Lock-down plans and drills shall be in compliance with the Statewide Fire Prevention Code (SFPC) Section 404.2.3</p>	<p>Drills will be held at least twice during the first 20 days of each school session and at least two additional drills during the remainder of the school session (Minimum 4 drills per year)</p>
	<p>School Bus Evacuation Drill</p>	<p>Minimum of 2 drills per year, each during the first 30 instructional days of each of the 2 semesters</p>
	<p>Tornado Drill/ Duck and Cover</p>	<p>Minimum of 1 drill per year</p>
<b>Recommended</b>	<p>Earthquake</p>	<p>1 drill annually</p>
	<p>Reverse Evacuation</p>	<p>Minimum 1 drill per year</p>
	<p>Shelter-in-Place</p>	<p>Minimum 1 drill per year</p>

**Please note:** House Bill 1279 also amended Code of Virginia § 22.1-137.2 to require that every public school hold a lock-down drill at least twice during the first 20 days of school and hold at least two additional lock-down drills during the remainder of the school year. Further, Section 8VAC20-131-260 of the Standards of Accreditation requires that every public school conduct at least two simulated lock-down drills and crisis emergency evacuation activities each school year, one in September and one in January. To comply with both the Code of Virginia and the Standards of Accreditation, every public school must conduct two lock-down drills during the first 20 days of school – one occurring in September – and two additional lock-down drills during the remainder of the school year with one required to occur in January.

Virginia's current policy requires public school sites to hold four annual lockdown specific drills with two of those drills occurring within the first twenty days of the school year. During the 2016 General Assembly session, the Virginia Code was amended to require every elementary, middle, and secondary public school to hold a lockdown drill at least twice during the first 20 school days of each new academic year and at least two additional lockdown drills at some point during the remainder of the academic year. The Code of Virginia mandates separate and distinct codes for a fire evacuation drill from a lockdown drill [Statewide Fire Prevention Code (SFPC) Section 404.2.3]. While lockdown drills hold the potential to guide on-site procedures and save lives, without proper caution and considerations for faculty and students they can risk causing harm to participants. The remainder of this brief addresses such concerns, considerations, and potential additional procedures that could allow for a more deliberative preparation approach.

### **Lockdown Drills in Early Childhood Classrooms**

Across all states with state or LEA specified requirements, policy variations exist in both the scope and the frequency of drill requirements throughout the academic year.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that in the wake of recent mass shooting incidents on school grounds these state policies have been drafted, mandated, and then implemented at the school-site level with little research-based evidence informing either the planning, implementation, and debriefing practices surrounding lockdown practices specific to intruder in the building or active-shooter drills. Concerns over the use of non-empirically supported safety practices have emerged noting that such practices are challenging to investigate, due to the potential risk to children, especially those with a history of prior violence, anxiety, and trauma.<sup>12</sup> With the absence of empirical data to support Virginia's current lockdown requirements, it is important to consider the implications that lockdown drills may have on our youngest students as many of Virginia's elementary school sites house classrooms for children as young as four years of age through the Virginia Preschool Initiative.

As implemented, lockdown-only procedures require students and staff to stay where they were, securing the classroom or school space as able, and not to enter or exit their classroom or the school building. Concurrently, law enforcement are to be contacted to locate and stop the intruder as quickly as possible. Within school sites, lockdown-only procedures offer particular concerns in and of themselves as potentially requiring staff and students to stay in harm's way due to non-secure interior doors and windows as well as large community rooms that are easily compromised such as multi-purpose rooms, libraries, and cafeterias. The 2019 Virginia Educator's Guide for Planning and Conducting School Emergency Drills recommends the following practices to prepare students for implemented drills:

Prior to each drill, students should be given specific instructions in *developmentally appropriate language* regarding:

- ✓ A review about the importance of emergency drills
- ✓ The type, purpose and objective of the drill, i.e., to evacuate the building should there be a fire or other reason the building is deemed unsafe
- ✓ Their roles and the specific behavior(s) they are expected to display, e.g., walking silently in single file, how to duck and cover for a tornado
- ✓ A review of the checklist of action responses in creating the directions to be given for who ... should do what... to what standard

- ✓ An explanation as to why they may not be told exactly what has prompted the drill or call for emergency action responses
- ✓ Special provisions for individuals with special needs<sup>13</sup>

While this 2019 Guide offers helpful and supportive suggestions, what remains in Virginia are mandated lockdown drill requirements which may not best serve all students and school sites. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) have developed a guidance document outlining school-based best practice considerations for active shooter drills.<sup>14</sup> They suggest that students and staff will benefit from alternative preparations to lockdown-only practices. Alternative preparations include information-sharing discussions designed to prepare students and staff to respond to violent threats on school grounds without actually hiding under desks and tables or in closets and bathroom faculties. In particular, NASP/NASRO<sup>15</sup> recommend instituting a hierarchy of safety education and training where LEAs and school sites slowly build-up to student involvement in a full simulation drill through a series of discussion-based exercises, instructional media, and in-person introductions to first-responders. These small-scale preparations are suggested to lead up to a school's decision to implement or not implement a full-scale drill based upon the school's knowledge of their students. Should the decision to implement a full-scale drill occur, site administrators would then carefully consider supports for student and staff response. NASP/NASRO<sup>16</sup> also strongly recommend that opt-out provisions be in place for schools using simulation drills involving simulated movement or even gunfire. However, it is important to note that in some states with mandatory drill legislation, there is no opportunity for school sites to choose to opt-out of such drills<sup>17</sup> as is the case in Virginia.

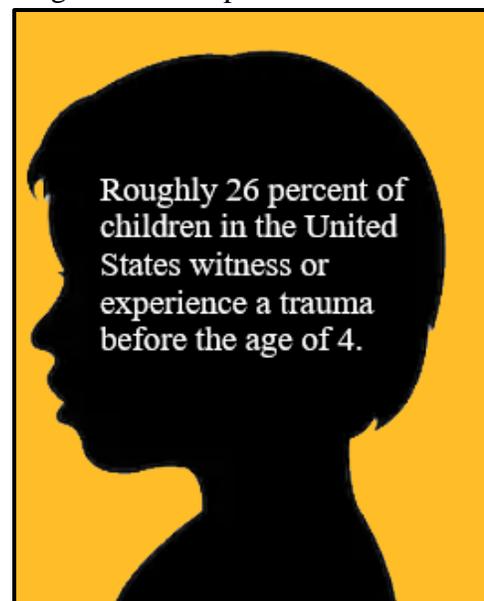
#### **IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONDUCTING SAFE, EFFECTIVE, AND APPROPRIATE DRILLS (NASP/NASRO, 2017)**

1. Create a school safety team (including an administrator, a school mental health professional, a school nurse; security personnel, teachers, and parents) that also coordinates with local law enforcement and emergency responders.
2. Conduct a needs assessment of the school community.
3. Implement a cost-benefit analysis that considers all emergency preparedness needs and options.
4. Tailor drills to the context of the school environment.
5. Create a plan of progression that builds from simplest, lowest-cost training; identifies obstacles and goals; and establishes a timeline.
6. Prepare for drill logistics that ensure physical and psychological safety as well as skills and knowledge acquisition.
7. Develop a communications plan that gives all participants advance warning and the ability to opt out and/or provide feedback.
8. Establish a long-term follow-up plan to support sustainability that includes assessing ongoing and/or changing preparedness training needs.

Particular to young children in early childhood classrooms (preschool through grade 3), questions remain as to what constitutes a developmentally appropriate approach to active-shooter or lockdown safety practices due to a common belief that children are too young to understand

the danger associated with lockdown procedures. Recent research confirms that children as young as age three are able to apply certain basic abilities that help them negotiate understandings between reality and fantasy and also hold the potential to form both correct or incorrect judgements about the reality status of entities and events<sup>18</sup>. As such, young children may be capable of understanding the potential danger behind the need for a school lockdown and their understandings must be accounted for during drill planning, implementation, and debriefing practices. While more research is needed to ascertain a robust account of children's understandings of school violence and approaches to school safety protocols, it is certain that assuming that young children lack the cognitive and emotive capabilities to bring some understanding of personal danger and concern to a lockdown experience puts the children at risk for increased fear and anxiety during the school day.

Considerations of young children's developing understandings of reality and fantasy as applied to safety during school hours must also take into account the high rates of exposure to violence-related experiences for many of America's young children. Roughly 26 percent of children in the United States witness or experience a violent trauma before the age of 4.<sup>19</sup> Many variations of trauma can undermine children's abilities to learn, create healthy attachments, form supportive relationships, and follow classroom expectations.<sup>20</sup> Childhood trauma is also understood to have negative behavioral, emotional, neurobiological, and developmental impacts for children in the present and on into their future lives.<sup>21 22</sup> When children experience trauma leading to chronic stress or fear in the early childhood years they are more vulnerable to behaviors associated with anxiety which can also inhibit their ability to engage higher-level thinking.<sup>23</sup> It is imperative that as Virginia's schools work to implement trauma informed practices, considerations of the potential impacts of lockdown procedures for vulnerable children should be carefully weighed in light of the absence of research supporting the effectiveness of such drills.



### **Considerations for Virginia Policy:**

#### **Expanding to an Options-Based, Reflexive Approach to Preparing Students & Support for Increased Funding for PreK-Grade 12 School Counselors**

#### **Options-based approach to lockdown and active shooter safety protocols:**

In 2013 the U.S. Department of Education recommended expanding the lockdown-only approach for schools to include an options-based approach that would support individual schools and school staff in making self-regulatory decisions about lockdown or active-shooter safety protocols and actualized threat incidents based upon their school site and the evolving circumstances during an actual incident (US Dept of Education, Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans June 2013 edition). As noted earlier, the language in some state policies require lockdown-only drill procedures while others have more inclusive

language reflective of an options-based approach. In further support for options-based drill practices and protocols, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 makes provisions for school safety and funding opportunities for schools and districts to implement specified elements of comprehensive school safety as outlined in the National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP) A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools.<sup>24</sup> The NASP framework outlines a comprehensive approach to school safety through an intentional balance of student physical and psychological safety with protocols and practices providing trauma-sensitive student supports. Similarly, the National Education Association (NEA) developed a school crisis guide that asserts that approaches to preventing a school crisis must be developed in concert with a central, guiding focus on positive school climate structures.<sup>25</sup>

### **Support for increased funding to support increased numbers of on-site school counselors working in elementary, middle, and secondary sites:**

In partnership to supporting an options-based approach, Virginia must consider increasing funding and support for on-site school counselors to support the emotional needs of all students. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends one full-time counselor for every 250 students regardless of grade level. However, the state currently funds one full-time elementary counselor per 500 students, one full-time counselor per 540 middle school students,

and one full-time counselor per 350 high school students. Individual localities across Virginia can choose to supplement these numbers by funding additional counselor positions. In response, in December of 2019 Governor Northam proposed an additional \$99.3 million expenditure over two years to bring the number of school counselors in Virginia closer to alignment with the national recommendations of 1:250. Children who have survived trauma or are experiencing traumatic experiences within the school site need knowledgeable practitioners to both advocate for their physical and psychosocial safety and help support them during stressful experiences. Even when previous trauma has been experienced, young children's brains can reorganize in response to

supportive experiences; therefore, ensuring healthy and consistent interactions during school can have positive impacts on brain development and children's ability to engage successfully in early learning.<sup>26</sup>

When considering the alternatives within an options-based approach, is imperative that Virginia make efforts to fund the minimum number of school counselors outlined by ASCA and fully fund the Governor's proposed budget, to best provide Virginia's children with preparations and supports that support their emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development and safety.

## Endnotes

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